

## Michigan Legislature crafts opioid bills to stem addiction

By: Michael Gerstein, Associated Press

People addicted to drugs in the remote Upper Peninsula city of Escanaba have a rare group of people to turn to for treatment: the police.

The opioid epidemic sweeping Michigan has only recently hit the isolated community of about 12,000 people, where the problem is now so desperate that the city's soon-to-be police director Lt. Robert LaMarche says they're "finding needles all over the city." In response, Escanaba police have agreed to not arrest people who enter the station voluntarily seeking addiction treatment if drug possession is their only crime; police have helped six people since the ANGEL Volunteer Program started in February.

The program is one new tactic to combat the widespread and intractable epidemic that has worsened over the past decade. The Legislature has its own plans to stymie the problem, the biggest push so far being a \$2.5 million overhaul of the state's prescription tracking database. Supporters of the measure, which the House approved last month, say a big part of the problem is unreliable prescription statistics for doctors. The legislation also could make it easier for family members to get drugs that could rescue someone overdosing.

In Michigan, opioid-related overdose deaths have tripled since 1999, and more than 1,700 people died in 2014 — a year with more drug overdoses nationwide than any previous year on record, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. Police say many heroin addicts first become addicted to pain pills and switch to heroin because it's much cheaper to buy on the street. Lawmakers and some doctors say a push in the late 1990s and early 2000s to treat pain more effectively may have contributed to the epidemic, and police agree.

Data from the Michigan Automated Prescription System shows that more than 21 million prescriptions for controlled substances were written in 2014, about four million more prescriptions than were written in 2007. The bill sponsor, Republican state Rep. Anthony Forlini, said the prescription database leaves doctors with stale information that isn't updated in real time.

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Changing the state's prescription tracking system is the "centerpiece" of more than two-

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**Coalition Against Insurance Fraud**

dozen recommendations in a report from an opioid addiction task force created last year by Gov. Rick Snyder, according to Lt. Gov. Brian Calley, who leads the task force.

"It can't happen too soon," Calley said. "Basically doctors are asked today to practice blind. You would think in this day and age that a doctor that is evaluating a patient for pain management would be able to look on a system and be able to tell whether or not that patient received a similar prescription in the next emergency room over. But the truth is, they can't."

The House recently approved legislation that would expand a 2015 law to allow anyone to report an overdose from a controlled substance without fear of legal consequences.

In 2015, Michigan State police seized 8,221 grams of heroin — nearly double the amount in the year prior, according to Det. First Lt. Frank Keck, the narcotics section commander for the state police. He said one gram is enough to shoot up ten times.

While lawmakers in Lansing craft plans to curtail the addiction problem, Christine Gagnon, who was once addicted to pain pills and methamphetamine, volunteers at the Escanaba