

Governor Baker signs opioid bill



PAT GREEN HOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Governor Charlie Baker embraced Chris Herren, a former Celtics player and recovering addict.

By [Joshua Miller](#) | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 14, 2016

In an emotional ceremony, Governor Charlie Baker on Monday signed into law a measure that places tighter state control on opioids, in an effort to stanch the supply of the addictive drugs.

Baker trumpeted the bipartisan legislation as “the most comprehensive

the heartbreaking losses families have endured.

Voice wavering, he offered a simple supplication: “May today’s bill passage signal to you that the Commonwealth is listening and we will keep fighting for all of you.”

The law, which comes as Massachusetts grapples with a deadly drug crisis that claims about 100 lives per month, will immediately limit initial opioid prescriptions to a seven-day supply.

Starting in July, the state will mandate that hospitals administer a substance-abuse evaluation to anyone who shows up in an emergency room believed to be suffering from an opioid overdose. And the new law will eventually require schools to conduct verbal screenings of students for substance abuse.

It also requires, starting in October, practitioners check a prescription monitoring program before prescribing drugs that have relatively high potential for abuse. That’s an effort to stop doctor-shopping — addicts going from physician to physician looking for opioid drugs, such as OxyContin, Percocet, and Vicodin.

And the law allows patients to voluntarily reduce the amount of opioids they receive from a pharmacist, getting, say, 10 pills even if their doctor’s prescription is for 15.

While the law is notably weaker than the bill Baker originally proposed — he wanted a three-day initial prescription limit rather than seven, for example — the governor said Monday he signed it happily.

Baker had originally proposed allowing hospitals to hold addicts who pose a danger to themselves or others against their will for three days, evaluate them, and decide whether to seek legal permission for longer commitments.

The idea was to divert people who might leave the hospital and immediately start using drugs again and allow them to break the cycle of addiction.

But the Legislature balked at the provision, instead putting forward the more modest emergency room substance-abuse evaluation requirement that is now law.

The new law's provisions includes several exemptions. For examples, initial opioid prescriptions for chronic pain, cancer pain, and for palliative care can be for more than a seven-day supply. And students, parents, and schools can opt out of the mandatory verbal substance abuse screening.

Baker said the law is just one of many steps to combat the pills and heroin crisis that has hit families across the state, and he fully expects future legislative acts to also address the scourge.

At the ceremony, several top officials hailed the new act. They included the Legislature's top two leaders, Senate President Stanley C. Rosenberg and House Speaker Robert A. DeLeo; the state's top law enforcement official, Attorney General Maura Healey; and Mayor Martin J. Walsh of Boston, a longtime advocate for those struggling with addiction.

Rosenberg heralded the act as enshrining the right way of looking at addiction into law. "I'm proud that here in Massachusetts, we have turned a very big corner. This problem used to be seen as a crime. It's now understood to be a



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Janis McGrory got a hug from her daughter, Amy LeFort. McGrory's daughter, Liz, died of an overdose.

disease.”

DeLeo said the new law is one of many steps to address the problem: “Our battle, our fight against substance abuse continues and it’s going to continue for some time. This isn’t the end.”

And Healey, who grew emotional, had a message for families.

“To those who have lost loved ones, to those who have loved ones who are hurting, who are struggling, who are in pain, I recognize, we all recognize, that this legislation will not bring your loved ones back,” she said, voice wavering.

But, Healey said, she hopes that they will find some measure of comfort that there is a law that is going to change the course of other families and other individuals in this state.

From a political perspective, the praise Democratic officials lavished on Baker, a Republican likely to run for reelection in 2018, was notable.

Walsh gave “a special thank you” to the governor and framed him as a bold leader who took a tough stand for an important issue.

“When the governor said ‘I’m putting together these very aggressive pieces in my bill,’ I said, ‘I love them all.’ . . . He said, ‘I’m going to [be] bold here, and I’m going to take some chances.’ He said, ‘Will you stand with me?’ I said, ‘Absolutely, governor.’ And then he turned to the attorney general, and he said, ‘Will you stand with me?’ and she said, ‘Absolutely, governor,’ ” Walsh said.

“*May today’s bill passage signal to you that the Commonwealth is listening and we will keep fighting for all of you.*”

Governor Charlie Baker, after signing bill on opioids

But beyond the political ramifications, Walsh emphasized a simple point. If this law helps one family and one addict, the mayor said, it has done its job.

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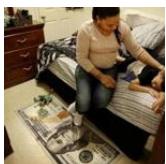
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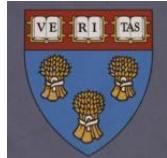
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