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In Annual Speech, Vermont Governor Shifts Focus to Drug Abuse

By: KATHARINE Q. SEELYE JAN. 8, 2014

MONTPELIER, Vt. — In a sign of how drastic the epidemic of drug addiction here has become, Gov. Peter Shumlin on Wednesday devoted his entire State of the State Message to what he said was “a full-blown heroin crisis” gripping Vermont.

“In every corner of our state, heroin and opiate drug addiction threatens us,” he said. He said he wanted to reframe the public debate to encourage officials to respond to addiction as a chronic disease, with treatment and support, rather than with only punishment and incarceration.

“The time has come for us to stop quietly averting our eyes from the growing heroin addiction in our front yards,” Governor Shumlin said, “while we fear and fight treatment facilities in our backyards.”

Last year, he said, nearly twice as many people here died from heroin overdoses as the year before. Since 2000, Vermont has seen an increase of more than 770 percent in treatment for opiate addictions, up to 4,300 people in 2012.

Governor Shumlin, a Democrat now in his second term, used his State of the State Message last year to focus almost entirely on education. This year, he appears to be one of the first, if not the only, governor to use his message, all 34 minutes of it, to focus exclusively on drug addiction and detail its costs, in dollars and lives.

Such speeches mark the opening of a legislative session and traditionally feature some pomp and back-patting as governors lay out their broad agendas for the year to come. Here, the mood in the packed House chamber of the Statehouse was somber as lawmakers considered the scope of the drug problem.

While it may be acute in Vermont, it is not isolated. In the past few years, officials have reported a surge in the use of heroin in New England, with a sharp rise in overdoses and deaths, as well as robberies and other crimes common among addicts. Those same statistics are being replicated across the country. Lawmakers in virtually every state are introducing legislation in response to what is rapidly being perceived as a public health crisis.

“The Centers for Disease Control and most national experts agree there’s an epidemic of drug overdose deaths in America,” Dr. Harry L. Chen, Vermont’s health commissioner, said in an interview. He said the rate of overdose deaths across the country had tripled since 1990.

“Nationwide, more people die of drug overdoses than from motor vehicle crashes,” he said.

Dr. Chen said the highest rates of substance abuse were found in New England and the Northeast. No one really knows why, he said, except that the region is a wide-open market for dealers with easy access from New York, Boston and Philadelphia. Law enforcement can be spotty in the rural areas up here, and users are willing to pay top prices.

A \$6 bag of heroin in New York City fetches \$10 in southern New England and up to \$30 or \$40 in northern New England, law enforcement officials said. The dealer gets a tremendous profit margin, while the addict pays half of what he might have to pay for prescription painkillers, which have become harder to obtain.

Democrats, who control both houses of the Legislature, lauded the governor's single-minded focus.

"He hit it absolutely right," said Senator Richard Sears, chairman of the Judiciary Committee. "I've been dealing with addicted folks for years and have seen the increase in crime related to this addiction problem."

Republicans were not impressed, saying that Governor Shumlin should have made room for other big issues confronting the state, especially problems with the rollout of its health care exchange.

"We do have to tackle addiction, but people day after day are asking me about health care," said Representative Heidi Scheuermann, a Republican from Stowe.

She said that the governor's proposal for what would be the nation's first single-payer health insurance plan had also caused considerable confusion and controversy and that the speech was both "a missed opportunity" to address it and "a way to change the subject."

Regardless, the picture Mr. Shumlin painted was grim. Every week, he said, more than \$2 million worth of heroin and other opiates are trafficked into Vermont. And nearly 80 percent of inmates in the state are jailed on drug-related charges.

The governor made a plea for more money for treatment programs, noting that incarcerating a person for a week costs the state \$1,120, while a week of treatment at a state-financed center costs \$123. He asked for money to expand treatment centers, where more than 500 addicts are on waiting lists. He also called for rapid intervention programs so that addicts could be directed to treatment as soon as they see the blue lights flashing from police cars — supposedly the moment when they are most likely to accept help. To discourage high-volume dealers from coming into the state, he is seeking tougher laws.

During his speech, Mr. Shumlin singled out specially invited guests. They included Bess O'Brien, director of "The Hungry Heart," a documentary about drug addiction in Vermont; Dustin Machia, a recovering addict who appeared in the movie and stole more than \$20,000 worth of farm equipment from his parents to support his habit; and Dr. Fred Holmes, Mr. Machia's physician. They sat in the chamber's balcony and drew standing ovations.

Mr. Shumlin also wants to encourage discussions on ways to prevent addiction in the first place. He is providing a grant for an entourage from "The Hungry Heart" to visit every high school in the state.

The group will include Skip Gates of Skowhegan, Me., whose son Will, a science major at the University of Vermont and a ski racer, died of a heroin overdose in 2009. "I never knew any human being could feel this much pain," Mr. Gates says in the movie of his son's death. "It has redefined the rest of my life."

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