

Bangor Daily News

Maine's drug problem needs more than just law enforcement

November 13, 2015

A special legislative session dealing with Maine's drug abuse epidemic, as Gov. Paul LePage called for last week, could be a good thing — if the time were used to discuss multiple means of addressing the pervasive problem and finding the money to fund them. If it's just another opportunity for the governor to demand more money for law enforcement, it would be a waste of time.

The governor has long favored increasing the ranks of law enforcement and using the National Guard, with the aim of reducing the supply of illegal drugs, particularly heroin, over increasing support for treatment. In June, LePage vetoed the Legislature's two-year budget, saying it was soft on drug traffickers. The budget that passed over his objections cut his initial request of seven more Maine Drug Enforcement Agency agents and four judges to four agents and two prosecutors. It also included funding for two judges and two clerks to handle more drug cases. It also allows the MDEA to use \$200,000 in federal money at its discretion to hire more staff or begin new programs. LePage did not ask for funding for 14 new drug enforcement agents, as he now claims.

Since the budget's passage, LePage has repeatedly denigrated lawmakers for not giving him more drug enforcement agents.

He made an unexpected appearance before the Legislature's Appropriations Committee last Thursday, saying he planned to contact legislative leaders to encourage them to approve more spending for law enforcement to combat drug use. In his usual way, however, he gave them an ultimatum: "You either work with me and give me some agents, or I will call the Guard up," he told the committee. He reiterated that threat in a letter to legislative leaders on Tuesday.

LePage also told committee members that Maine should have 10 more drug agents — not the seven he initially requested — plus more prosecutors and judges, for which he pegged the likely cost at \$5 million to \$6 million.

Will it work? Given the country's long war on drugs and the fact that drug addiction remains a crushing problem, the evidence suggests it won't. The U.S. already has the highest incarceration

rate in the world. Yet heroin addiction is on the rise around the country. In Maine, 105 people died of drug overdoses in the first six months of this year — of those, 37 were attributable to heroin.

Even New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, a close political ally of LePage, touts the need for treatment, not just arrests.

At a recent town hall meeting in New Hampshire, Christie spoke passionately about a law school classmate who injured his back and became addicted to painkillers. After 10 years of seeking treatment, his friend was found dead in a motel room with a bottle of pills and a bottle of vodka. “He’s a drug addict and he couldn’t get help and he’s dead,” Christie said of his 52-year-old friend, who “had everything” — a great education, a successful law career, a beautiful wife and daughters, big house, fancy car, plenty of money. “It can happen to anyone.”

“We need to start treating people in this country, not jailing them,” Christie said. “We need to give them the tools they need to recover because every life is precious.”

Portugal turned this idea into action by decriminalizing drug use in 2001. The number of deaths because of opiates dropped significantly, and drug use in Portugal was lower than in other European countries, a 2009 report by the Cato Institute found. Without fear of prosecution, drug addicts in Portugal are more likely to seek treatment and the money that was spent prosecuting and imprisoning drug addicts is now available for treatment programs.

In Maine, two addiction treatment centers closed earlier this year. At the start of last year, hundreds of people in treatment for addictions lost their MaineCare coverage, essentially eliminating their access to treatment. Providers share numerous stories of addicts seeking treatment being turned away because there is not space in their programs.

Maine’s leaders have much to talk about regarding the state’s drug epidemic and how best to address it. The governor and his staff could play a productive role to play in that discussion, if only their solutions went beyond increased law enforcement.