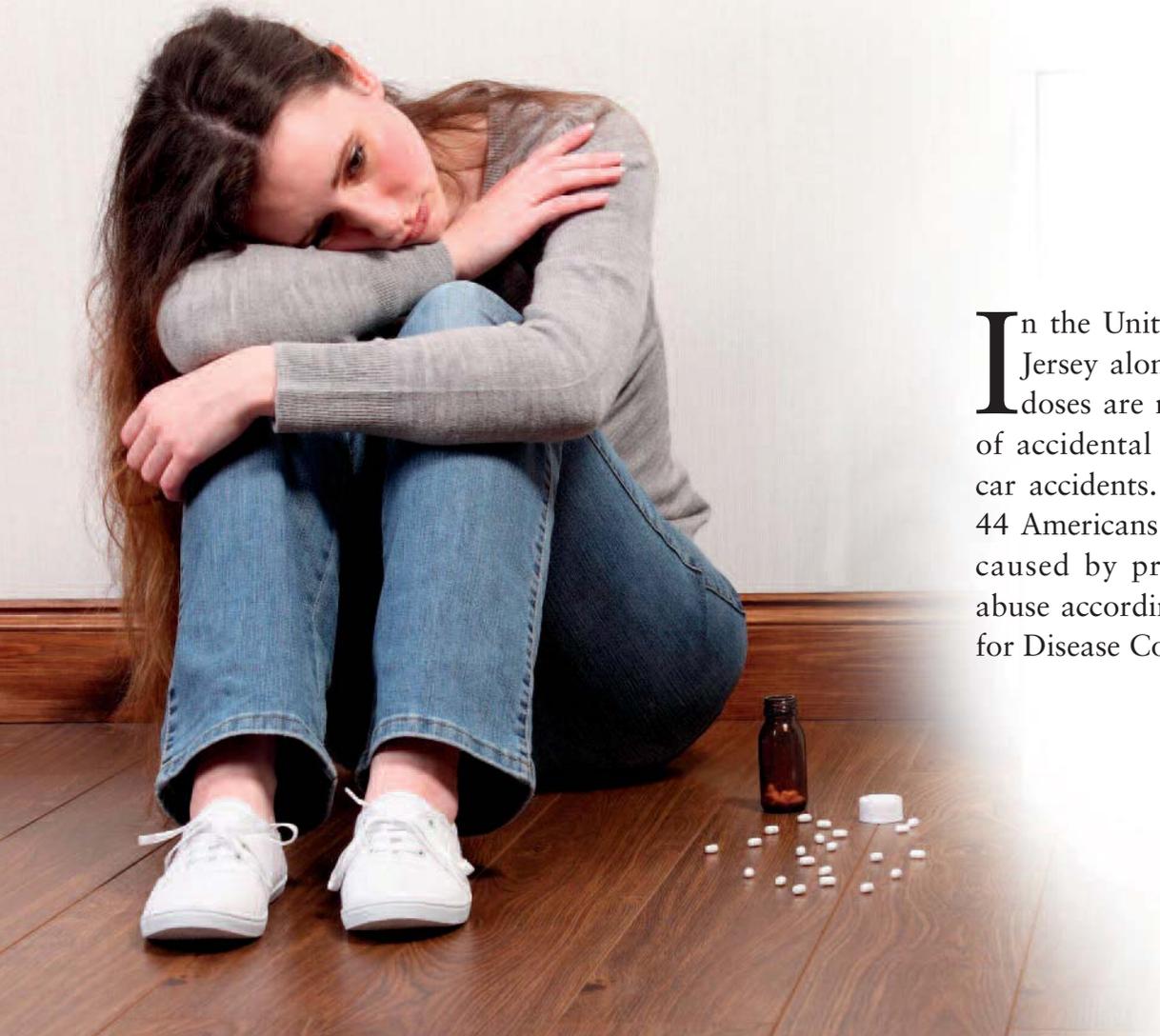


# Breaking the Grip of Opiate Addiction

Proposed legislation prescribes better education on the risks and improved access to treatment

By Joseph F. Vitale,  
State Senator



In the United States and in New Jersey alone, drug-induced overdoses are now the leading cause of accidental death, far surpassing car accidents. Each day on average 44 Americans die from an overdose caused by prescription painkiller abuse according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

According to the Office of the State Medical Examiner, there were 1,294 drug-related accidental overdose deaths in New Jersey in 2012, the most recent year for which figures are available. Approximately two-thirds of those deaths involved prescription drugs rather than solely illicit drugs.

The numbers are alarming, and the implications for New Jersey's future are far graver if we stand idly by and allow more of our children to succumb to the disease of addiction.

The stark reality is that prescription drug abuse is prevalent in all parts of New Jersey; it crosses racial, geographic and socioeconomic lines leaving no family or community immune.

We know that opiate addiction often starts with legally prescribed pain medication. The pills that were meant to alleviate pain following an operation or injury too often become the gateway to heroin, which costs less, is easier to access and delivers a stronger high.

For years, opiate and drug abuse prevention efforts have focused on law enforcement, prisons, healthcare programs and schools. But the war on drugs and the “just say no” approach has failed to curb the problem. It has only grown worse.

Only a collaborative strategy that addresses all aspects of addiction will succeed.

Conversations with our children about drugs are exceedingly outdated. Young people need not travel beyond their medicine cabinets at home to access prescription painkillers. And misconceptions exist about the safety of prescription drugs versus street or illegal drugs among youth.

According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, two in five teenagers believe prescription drugs are “much safer” than illegal drugs, and three in 10 teens mistakenly believe prescription painkillers are not addictive (Governor’s Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse: 2014 Report - New Jersey’s New Drug Problem: A Strategic Action Plan to Address the Burgeoning Heroin/Opiate Epidemic Among Adolescents and Young Adults).

Additionally, drug treatment centers and programs are beyond capacity. Each year, more than 50,000 New Jersey residents who want treatment for a substance use disorder are denied. Sadly, only six percent of New Jersey young people who need treatment for chemical dependence receive it.

We also cannot ignore the inextricable correlation between substance abuse and crime. Addicted individuals in the criminal justice system often lack the insurance to afford treatment. Following release from prison, they quickly relapse.

Our goal is not to punish those who are already suffering, but to seek solutions that address the problem at its root and support recovery.

While numerous efforts are underway to fight this battle at every stage, only a collaborative strategy that addresses all aspects of addiction will succeed.

That is why I am spearheading a bipartisan effort to take a four-pronged approach that focuses on education, prevention, treatment and recovery. By educating parents and families on the risks

of prescription medications and ensuring treatment for those who need it, we can begin to loosen the grip of opiate addiction in our state.

Although there is more work to do, we have made significant progress. To date, the Governor has signed several bills that were included in a comprehensive package proposed to address the issue,

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## Opiate Addiction

and a number of others are still moving through the legislative process. 📌

Senator Joseph F. Vitale is the Chairman of the Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee. A Democrat, he represents the 19th Legislative District in the State Senate which includes Carteret, Perth Amboy, Sayreville, South Amboy and Woodbridge.

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## Bill Highlights

With respect to maximize the effectiveness of the proposed legislation to fight this epidemic, an old adage holds true—"the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." While the bills individually address targeted issues, the overall impact will far greater.

Too many lives have been lost to prescription painkiller and heroin addiction. As citizens of New Jersey, we have a responsibility to protect our children and families. By collectively improving the pathways to evidence-based education, prevention, treatment, and recovery efforts, we can effect positive change for the residents of New Jersey.

The package of 21 bills aims to:

- Ensure that patients and parents are aware of the addiction risks of painkillers before they are prescribed so that they can make better decisions about their use.
- Task the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services with ensuring that our schools' core curriculum requirements on drug prevention are up-to-date and include information on the misuse of prescription drugs. The departments will also develop strategies on how to promote meaningful and relevant conversations with students of all ages.
- Halt the abuse and diversion of prescription drugs by requiring prescribers and pharmacists to use a statewide database, the New Jersey Prescription Monitoring Program (NJMPMP). The NJMPMP collects prescription data on Controlled Dangerous Substances dispensed in outpatient settings in New Jersey in an effort to identify addicts who are "doctor shopping" for opiates and prescribers who operate "pill mills" in our state.
- Increase "Project Medicine Drop" locations throughout the state and ensure the public knows how and where to properly dispose of unused prescription drugs.
- Help connect those suffering from drug addiction, including those in the criminal justice system, with evidence-based treatment that works.
- Expand access for Medicaid patients to doctors and treatment facilities, and increase the Medicaid reimbursement rate for behavioral health care.
- Support college students recovering from drug and alcohol addiction by expanding substance abuse recovery housing at colleges and universities across the state.
- Expand the Overdose Prevention Act to authorize the use of opioid-overdose antidotes by professionals who come into contact with susceptible individuals.
- Require drug treatment programs to publish annual performance reports about their effectiveness to help those seeking treatment to make informed decisions.
- Ensure that state-owned correctional facility inmates are receiving mental health and substance abuse disorder services from licensed providers, and enroll eligible individuals in pre-trial treatment programs covered by Medicaid.
- Allow individuals to graduate from special probation drug court programs with medication-assisted treatments.
- Authorize the Attorney General to coordinate a statewide anti-opioid-abuse effort and create a Statewide Opioid Law Enforcement Task Force.