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Activists Urge Warren to Support Health Care Bill

By Felice J. Freyer Globe Staff December 01, 2016

Advocates for addiction treatment in Massachusetts on Wednesday launched a campaign to persuade Senator Elizabeth Warren to reverse her opposition to a bill known as the 21st Century Cures Act, saying the state needs money for addiction treatment that the legislation could provide.

Warren, who worked on the bill for two years and wrote parts of it, turned against it Monday, saying it had been rewritten to benefit pharmaceutical companies at the expense of consumers. The bill, which passed the House on Wednesday evening, is intended to promote cancer research and other biomedical research, and includes \$1 billion to combat the opioid crisis.

Vic DiGravio, president of the Association for Behavioral Healthcare, a trade group of mental health and addiction treatment organizations in Massachusetts, e-mailed an “action alert” Wednesday morning to 3,600 people, including treatment professionals, activists, people in recovery, and relatives of addicts.

The letter urges people to call Warren’s office to say “Massachusetts desperately needs” the money to fight the epidemic of opioid abuse.

Meanwhile, Boston teaching hospitals continue to support the bill, according to John Erwin, executive director of the [Conference of Boston Teaching Hospitals](#). That remains the case even though additional money for the National Institutes of Health contained in earlier versions of the legislation now requires further congressional action.

“It may be as good as it gets for now,” Erwin said. “It has momentum right now, and if we don’t grab the opportunity, we may not have another opportunity soon.”

DiGravio, the addiction treatment advocate, said in an interview he was not familiar with every part of the complex legislation but felt the funding to address the opioid crisis was critical. He said he believes the bill would provide \$20 million to help pay for treatment and recovery services in Massachusetts.

“We just don’t want anybody to lose sight of the fact that there’s a billion dollars for addiction treatment,” DiGravio said. “Our members are struggling every day to meet the demand for treatment.”

A Warren aide said Wednesday even if the 21st Century Cures Act passes, money for addiction treatment would still require additional congressional action.

But Giselle Barry, an aide to Senator Edward Markey, said if the Cures Act is approved, the money for addiction services is likely to be disbursed. The first \$500 million would be contained in the bill that will fund the federal government, likely to pass before the end of the year. The

second \$500 million would require additional congressional action, but the money can only be used on the opioid crisis, so Congress would have no incentive to leave it unspent, Barry said.

Markey is still reviewing the 900-page bill and has not decided whether to support it, Barry said.

Maryanne Frangules, executive director of the Massachusetts Organization for Addiction Recovery, said she intended to contact Warren's office to plead for addiction funding.

"I definitely will be asking for her to reconsider," Frangules said. "We'd also love to get her viewpoint because we respect her very much."

In a speech and blog post this week, Warren raised objections to several aspects of the latest version of the legislation.

The bill would make it easier for pharmaceutical companies to market drugs for uses not approved by the US Food and Drug Administration. It also would allow drug companies to sell adult stem cell therapies before they have been proven safe and effective.

"This bill started out as a good idea and then it got hijacked," Warren said Wednesday in an interview with the Globe.

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