

Florida governor seeks to kill drug database that would combat pill mills

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Source: The Miami Herald) MIAMI _ Florida Gov. Rick Scott wants to eliminate a [computer](#) system aimed at curbing the illegal sale of prescription drugs at storefront pain clinics, a move that alarmed narcotics investigators, drug-treatment advocates and some lawmakers.

Just two years ago, state legislators approved the creation of a prescription drug-monitoring program that would allow doctors to review the drug purchases of their patients, to prevent patients from seeking narcotics from multiple doctors _ a practice known as "doctor shopping."

The Legislature approved the measure in response to an explosion of storefront pain clinics across South Florida, making the region the main supplier of black-market pills across Appalachia and the East Coast.

Now the governor wants to erase the database before it even gets off the ground. A proposed bill included in the budget package the governor unveiled on Monday would eliminate the database _ even though it won't be financed with state money.

The governor's office did not respond to a request for comment on the proposal.

The prescription database costs nothing in the state budget because lawmakers earmarked no funding for the program when they approved it in 2009. State officials must pay for the database with federal grants and private donations. The database is expected to cost about \$1.2 million to assemble, and \$500,000 a year to maintain.

The governor also wants to eliminate the Office of Drug Control, the office charged with raising the private money for the database. Scott dismissed the head of that office, Bruce Grant, last month.

Scott's proposal stunned those who fought for the database in an effort to curb drug trafficking and overdoses. From 2006 to 2009, the number of overdose deaths from the narcotic oxycodone more than doubled statewide, to 1,185 deaths in 2009, state records show.

Just last week, Attorney General Pam Bondi said the governor had signed off on new rules imposing tougher rules on doctors dispensing and prescribing narcotics from storefront clinics.

"It is beyond my comprehension," Sen. Mike Fasano, a New Port Richey Republican, said of the governor's plan for the prescription database. "Without this important program, Florida will take a step back 10 years or more into the past."

"It's disappointing from a law enforcement standpoint," said Broward County Sheriff Al Lamberti. The database "was probably the best tool that we potentially could have" to curb illegal drug sales from pain clinics.

Florida's prescription database is not yet operable. It was supposed to be up and running by Dec. 1, but it was stalled in a bidding dispute among potential contractors.

According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, 34 states have monitoring programs to track prescription drug sales, and six other states are planning to start them. Florida is the largest state without such a database.

The state's relaxed laws have allowed hundreds of storefront pain clinics to flourish in recent years with little oversight from state regulators. These clinics attract car-loads of drug buyers and dealers from Kentucky, West Virginia and other states who use bogus injuries to score drugs such as oxycodone and resell them back [home](#).

Broward County has become the nation's pill-mill capital, with 130 pain clinics now operating. In Broward alone, more than 1 million oxycodone tablets are prescribed every month, Lamberti said.

On Tuesday, the DEA, Broward deputies and other narcotics agents raided a Deerfield Beach pain clinic suspected of illegal drug sales.

"There's a reason that people come to Florida," Lamberti said. "There's a reason that we are ground zero."

To erase the database, Scott must get the approval of the Legislature. But Fasano said he will fight any such attempt.

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