

Legislative path to preventing heroin deaths paved with tears

By Sarah T. Williams | 04/23/14



Lexi Reed Holtum, left, whose late fiancé is the (tragic) inspiration behind Steve's Law, spoke with the bill's author, state Sen. Chris Eaton, before a community forum on heroin-related deaths last week in Brooklyn Park.

The 911 Good Samaritan + Naloxone bill — a.k.a. Steve's Law — has made steady progress through both Minnesota House and Senate committees since it was introduced at the 2014 session's start. Last week, the Senate gave it a unanimous thumbs-up, and its next stop is a House floor vote.

The Senate endorsement was a bittersweet victory for chief author Sen. Chris Eaton, DFL-Brooklyn Center, whose daughter's fatal heroin overdose is one of many tragedies that form the bill's backdrop.

Ariel Eaton-Willson, just 23 when she died in on May 29, 2007, was with someone when she overdosed and stopped breathing — someone who was too busy hiding the stash and too worried about getting busted to call 911. Alert police officers intervened, and an ambulance was called, but by the time the heroin antidote naloxone (brand-name Narcan) could be administered it was too late to save Eaton-Willson's life.

One witness after another has tearfully disclosed stories very much like Eaton's. They include Lexi Reed Holtum, whose fiancé Steve Rummeler (for whom the bill is named)

died of a heroin overdose on July 1, 2011. Like Ariel, he was with someone when he died, someone who did not call 911 for fear of the consequences. Holtum, vice president of the Steve Rummeler Hope Foundation, has worked closely (and tirelessly) with Eaton and State Rep. Dan Schoen, DFL-St. Paul Park, to secure the bill's passage.

Steve's Law (S.F. 1900/H.F. 2307) would do two things: grant limited immunity to those who call 911 in good faith to save a life, and make naloxone (an antidote not only to heroin but also to opioid painkillers) more widely available to first responders, physicians, care-providers and even families with loved ones who are heroin addicts.

The proposed law has created unease among some law-enforcement officials and others who don't want to let users (and maybe even dealers) off the hook. Arguments include unduly burdening already overwhelmed first responders, precluding officers from fully investigating crime scenes, interfering with child-protection protocols and skirting medical oversight.

Arguments for the bill are simple: It saves lives. Furthermore, Holtum argues, states that have passed similar laws find that heroin overdose survivors are providing law-enforcement officers with dealer information and "building relationships where there were none."

'I don't like it'

An audiotape of a House Civil Law Committee hearing last month captures one of the most pivotal and raw moments in the debate (at least on the House side).

Rep. Jim Newberger, R-Becker, a paramedic who said he has "pushed gallons of Narcan in the course of my career," said that while the bill had his support, he was nevertheless aghast at the need for it.

“It needs to be said that if you have to choose between letting your friend die and not going to jail, well, anyone who would enter that into the equation of their thought process is a pretty sick individual,” he said at the March 19 hearing.

“If all you care about is, ‘Oh my gosh ... I’m not going to call 911 because my sister or my brother or my best friend is overdosing ... because I don’t want to get in trouble,’ that’s a pure reflection on someone with a very broken moral character. Anyone who’s not willing to make the minimal sacrifice to say, ‘You know, I might get in trouble, but my buddy’s going to live,’ I’ve got a huge issue with that.

“Now that I’ve had my rant, I will support this, but I don’t like it.”

‘One little thing’

About 45 minutes later, after witnesses had had their say and some fine points of the law had been discussed, Rep. Mary Liz Holberg, R-Lakeville, took on her colleague from Becker. “I’m sorry, I’m going to get choked up,” she said. And then she did.

“Representative Newberger, people that are in the throes of chemical dependency and have the highest moral character make really bad decisions because of their illness,” Holberg said through tears. “Probably because this issue is very close to me, the comments that you made I found very offensive. Parents that have kids with these problems, the ability to have just one little tool when you feel so helpless ... is huge.”

Having someone with addiction in the family, she said, is “like ‘Alice in Wonderland.’ You cannot believe all the crazy stuff that goes down. As somebody that attended a group for parents, we used to say that if parents of ‘normal kids’ ever heard us talk about the things that went on in our homes and our families, they wouldn’t believe it. But if you lived it, it’s not an issue of moral character, and it’s not an issue of making good decisions. It is a nasty, horrible illness with consequences that are beyond prediction. And the ability to have one little thing to hang onto I think is huge.”

Hoping for some good

Shortly thereafter, the committee voted to send the bill to the House floor, complete with the immunity clause. More tinkering could be in the works. Eaton said in an interview last week that she has worked out a deal with law enforcement that would exclude first- and second-degree felony offenders from the immunity provisions.

She’ll be glad, she said, when the work is over.

“I’m hoping that ... we get [the bill] passed and start saving lives, so that there’s at least some purpose in Ariel’s death, that there’s something good that comes out of it — other than my tears. And I’m looking forward to not having to talk about it every day. That’s what I’ve done for a year now, and it’s been therapeutic and cathartic in a way, but at the same time it always dredges up [the loss], so it’s always in the forefront of my mind. Ariel died on May 29th, so we’re coming up on the seventh anniversary of her death. And her birthday was April 1st. So this is kind of a crappy time of year for me.”