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Law to rescue overdose victims goes into effect

OLYMPIA – A new law aimed at saving lives by encouraging people who witness drug overdoses to call 911 goes into effect Thursday. The “911 Good Samaritan” law provides immunity from drug possession charges to people who seek medical assistance in drug overdose situations.

“This legislation is about saving lives, nothing more – nothing less,” Sen. Rosa Franklin said. Franklin sponsored the bill, SB 5516, during the 2010 Legislative session. Rep. Roger Goodman sponsored similar legislation in the House.

By removing a common obstacle to seeking help in overdose situations – fear of police involvement – the law encourages witnesses to call for help. Immunity is also given to overdose victims.

“What it came down to for us is that if it can save a few lives, it’s worth it,” said Don Pierce, executive director of the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs.

“If people are aware that they can call 911 to report an overdose without fear of arrest on drug possession charges, lives will be spared,” said John Gahagan, board member of the Science and Management of Addictions Foundation and the parent of an overdose victim. “Fewer families will have to endure the devastating loss that my family still experiences every day.”

In 2008, 794 people died from drug overdose in Washington – more than two per day on average. Health officials attribute the increase in deaths to a rise in the abuse of prescription pain pills.

“Drug overdoses are the number one cause of accidental death in Washington, ahead of motor vehicles, falls, and firearms,” Attorney General Rob McKenna said. “If you suspect that someone you know is having an overdose, there’s no reason to delay. Call 911 immediately.”

Symptoms of a drug overdose may include skin, fingertips, or lips turning blue; inability to wake the person up; very slow breathing or none at all; confusion; abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea; chest pain; shortness of breath; or skin that is either cool and sweaty or hot and dry.

“With an overdose, the faster we can intervene, the better our chances of saving that life,” said Dr. William Hurley, Medical Director of the Washington Poison Center.

The law also expands access to naloxone, a powerful antidote that reverses overdoses from opiates such as opiate pain medications and heroin within moments of administration.

“The next step in helping someone who survives an overdose, and preventing another one, is to get them into treatment,” said David Dickinson, director of the state Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery. “Treatment works, saves lives, and state funding is available for those who qualify.”

The Washington state Attorney General, University of Washington Alcohol and Drug Abuse Institute, and other organizations concerned about public health and safety are collaborating to make Washington residents aware of the new law.

“The ACLU of Washington was pleased to work with Sen. Franklin, Rep. Goodman, and representatives from the law enforcement, public health, and medical fields to pass a measure that treats drug abuse primarily as a health issue rather than a crime,” said Alison Holcomb, Drug Policy Director for the ACLU of Washington. “Now we need to help get the word out so lives can be saved.”

Evaluation of the implementation and outcomes of the law will be conducted by Caleb Banta-Green, a researcher at the University of Washington’s Alcohol and Drug Abuse Institute.

For more information, please visit [**http://StopOverdose.org**](http://StopOverdose.org).