



Letter to the Editor: Boost state funding to fight heroin epidemic

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Along with other states, Illinois is faced with a heroin epidemic. We should be grateful to Kathie Kane Willis and her students at the Illinois Consortium of Drug Policy at Roosevelt University for their report of June 11 documenting the dramatic increase in heroin use even as the state cuts treatment services that could address the crisis.

Prescription pain killers can lead to heroin addiction. We need increased state-funded treatment for heroin and opioid use disorders. Medicaid should cover this in Illinois as it does in other states. We should make naloxone and methadone available to reduce the number of overdose deaths.

Last February, Gov. Bruce Rauner created a special commission to advise him on how to address mass incarceration by reducing the state prison population by 25 percent within 10 years. The members of this commission should pay close attention to the Illinois Drug Consortium Report. Providing methadone for just 2,500 people could save the state at least \$80 million "in reduced crime and health care consequences" and "reduce the prison population among class 4 offenders by approximately 1,000 cases per year."

There's a problem. This, and other recommendations in the report, call for an upfront investment in drug treatment and other social services. Sadly, this is precisely kind of expenditure that the governor is holding hostage in the current budget deadlock.

It is critical that the Governor's Commission not be bound by a short-term mentality. The members must be willing to recommend measures that may seem inconsistent with the Governor's current budget positions. They must have the courage to challenge the governor to invest in services that will address drug use addiction as a health rather than a criminal justice issue.

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