Illinois faces a critical public health challenge with the opioid crisis, marked by an escalating number of opioid-related overdoses and deaths. The crisis has not only strained our healthcare system, but it has also deeply affected countless families and communities across the state. In 2022 alone, Illinois reported 3,261 opioid overdose fatalities—more than twice the number of fatal motor vehicle accidents and more than twice the number of homicides—thus highlighting an urgent need for innovative and effective interventions.

What Does HB5529/SB3779 Do?

- Expands the scope of the Social Work Practice Act to permit licensed social workers, particularly those serving as 911 crisis responders, the ability to possess and apply opioid antagonists like naloxone.
- Establishes a voluntary framework under which social workers can opt to carry and administer opioid antagonists, contingent on completing requisite training and adhering to safe storage guidelines.
- Introduces legal safeguards for licensed social workers who, in their professional roles, choose to carry and/or dispense an opioid antagonist, ensuring their liability protection during such interventions.

Why Is It Needed?

Recently Illinois has experienced a significant evolution in its emergency response strategies, progressively integrating social workers into established 911 first responder teams. Given that these teams already possess the necessary authorizations and protections, this bill logically extends that coverage to include social workers who are also participants in these emergency responses using the same authorizations.

Social workers receive comprehensive training in behavioral health, equipping them to effectively recognize symptoms of an opioid overdose. Their specialized knowledge enables a response that is not only compassionate but also efficient, a crucial advantage in situations where timing is vital to saving a life. This skill set is particularly valuable in settings such as community behavioral health centers and VA medical centers where social workers are frequently the first point of contact for individuals experiencing an overdose.

Data from the Illinois Department of Public Health illustrates a troubling trend—opioid overdoses have risen 8.2% in the last year, reflecting a nationwide epidemic that has hit Illinois hard. This data underscores the pressing need for accessible, immediate interventions that can be delivered by trusted community members like social workers.

For questions, contact Kyle Hillman, Director of Legislative Affairs, NASW-Illinois Chapter

khillman.naswil@socialworkers.org