

During opioid epidemic, Alabama cracked down on treatment centers



A device measures a dose of methadone at a clinic in Alabama. The state set limits on methadone clinics after a three-year moratorium expired that limits where they can be built.



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Bobby Waldrep is willing to drive a long way to get the medicine that "saved his life," but he would really prefer not to.

The Dadeville resident has been taking methadone for 12 years, and every week he travels 120 miles round trip to a clinic in Clanton to get his doses. Each comes in small bottle, sealed to prevent tampering. As soon as he gets home, Waldrep locks them in a safe.

He would like to get his medicine in nearby Opelika, 20 minutes from his home, where two companies are competing for the right to open a methadone clinic. It would be the first to open in Alabama since a three-year moratorium expired in 2015.

It could also be the last methadone treatment clinic to open in the state – if it ever happens.

Plans for a Lee County clinic face stiff opposition from local politicians and the hospital. Regulators could choose between the two companies seeking permission to open in Opelika, Florida-based Colonial Management Group or Alabama-based Auburn Treatment Center, said Alva Lambert, executive director of the State Health Planning and Development Agency.

"Or they could deny both," he said.

Alabama has 24 opioid treatment centers, according to the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, but not all of them provide long-term maintenance therapy. Some only provide detoxification for patients who want to stop using opioids under medical supervision.

Methadone has a long and successful track record as a treatment for opioid addiction, but studies have shown that it works best as a long term, and even lifelong treatment. In the eyes of many treatment professionals, Waldrep would be considered a success.

But members of the Alabama board that approves methadone clinics instead decided that long-time patients like Waldrep illustrate the failures of maintenance therapy. Lambert said board members imposed the moratorium to determine whether

clinics were doing enough to wean patients off methadone.

"The CON review board had questions on the quality of services provided by methadone clinics," Lambert said. "They wanted to see better outcomes, specifically, how many people were becoming opiate-free."

Waldrep said he tried to wean himself off methadone once.

"After I went off it, I couldn't sleep," he said. "I was nervous, had depression, anxiety, my muscles started hurting, my back was hurting. So I went back to methadone."

Waldrep started abusing painkillers in 1999, mostly OxyContin, which he first used as a patient suffering from severe back pain. He became part of the first wave of opioid addicts, hooked soon after the blockbuster painkiller hit the market in 1996 with an unprecedented marketing blitz.

He shopped for doctors who would prescribe the pills, which he crushed and injected. He abused fentanyl, the same drug that killed Prince, until he nodded off behind the wheel and totaled his car.

Opioid overdose deaths have skyrocketed since then, quadrupling in more than 16 years since Waldrep swallowed his first pill, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"There's no need for more methadone clinics," Lambert said. "There's a saturation of coverage in the state."

President Barack Obama responded by announcing plans to increase access to maintenance therapies such as methadone and buprenorphine, pills that can be prescribed by specially-certified doctors outside of methadone clinics.

Instead of increasing access, Alabama has cracked down on methadone clinics. The Alabama Department of Mental Health devised a new formula that prevents new methadone clinics from opening within 50 miles of an existing clinic – ruling out new facilities in every county outside of Lee.

Meanwhile, the number of pain clinics – physician offices that advertise pain control or prescribe a large number of controlled substances – has grown to 496, according to Larry Dixon, executive director of the Alabama Board of Medical Examiners. Alabama had 1.2 opioid prescriptions per capita in 2015 – the highest rate in the nation, according to the New York Times.

Methadone is a treatment for opioid addiction, but it can also be abused, and overdose death rates associated with the drug have also risen in the last decade and a half.

Roy Smith works in healthcare and has seen the devastation of addiction in Prichard, Ala., near Mobile. He formed a company to open a methadone clinic, but has run into problems with the 50-mile rule.

"You have pharmacies that are right across the street from each other," Smith said. "But you're telling me that a methadone clinic, where people can come to get help and speak to someone who's trained in their time and need and crisis – that can't open within 50 miles?"

The new guidelines lay out exceptions to the 50-mile distance rule, if the operator can prove that drug overdose deaths or hospitalizations are higher than the national average. Unfortunately, the Alabama Department of Public Health doesn't keep those statistics.

"The information is not there that they're asking for, or you have to write to Congress to get it," Smith said. "It's just an uphill battle."

Lambert said most providers are happy with the current limits, and he hasn't heard any complaints about clinics becoming swamped with too many patients.

"There's no need for more methadone clinics," he said. "There's a saturation of coverage in the state."

David Belser, the attorney who represents the owners of the Auburn Treatment Center, said his clients have been trying to open the Lee County clinic since 2012. They had to start from scratch last year after the state enacted the new regulations.

It is typical to face opposition from the community, Belser said.

"People think that if you open up a clinic, the addicts will start coming," he said. "But the addicts are already there. This just

provides them with treatment."

Even if a clinic opens in Opelika, some addicts in Alabama may have to keep driving for treatment – and that may last a very long time. The intent of the new regulations is clear, Belser said.

"If you read the whole thing, it sounds like there will never be another methadone clinic in Alabama outside of Lee County," Belser said.

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