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AL lawmaker's controversial tweet sheds more light on opioid epidemic

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By Lindsey Rogers, Reporter [CONNECT](#)

MONTGOMERY, AL (WSFA) - A Montgomery senator's comments about the opioid crisis are striking a nerve with some Alabamians.

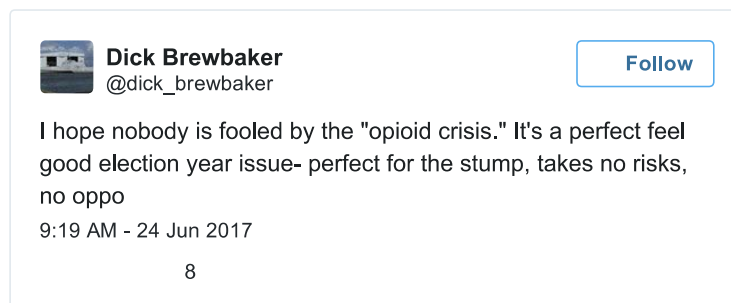
Sen. Dick Brewbaker said the "crisis" is a distraction from other problems facing the state.

Jim Perdue says recent statements made by Brewbaker have only helped shed more light on the opioid epidemic gripping Alabama and the rest of the nation.

"It's raised awareness of substance abuse and created a whole new level of discussion on the issue," Perdue said.

Perdue is the commissioner for the Alabama Department of Mental Health and a personal friend of Brewbaker.

The state senator posted a tweet stating: "I hope nobody is fooled by the 'opioid crisis.' It's a perfect feel good election year issue- perfect for the stump, takes no risks, no oppo."



Brewbaker's concern centers around other issues in the state. [He said in an interview](#) that prisons and the education system are both more immediate crises than opioids. Brewbaker said they could go unaddressed because they are harder to solve.

"In every election year there is a crisis and it is always a good safe crisis that no one has to take any risks on," Brewbaker said.

It rubbed some the wrong way, many feeling that Brewbaker minimized a very real problem.

Perdue thinks the senator was pointing to the inaction of politicians.

"His concern is that there were opportunities for legislators to pass a bill concerning the regulation and punishment of those people that are trafficking drugs and they didn't. I don't think he was saying anything against the treatment of people that are struggling in this crisis," Perdue said.

Opioid legislation was a big talker in this last legislative session.

Lawmakers will be looking for a fix in the next session because they didn't get it done this time around.

A bill failed to pass on the last day that would have created harsher penalties for heroin and fentanyl dealers, smugglers and traffickers.

The opioid crisis has claimed more than half a million lives since 2010 and the death toll continues to rise.

"Starting July 1, we will likely lose more people to overdose deaths than were killed in Vietnam in the next year," Perdue said.

More than half the drugs involved in the national crisis come from people's medicine cabinets.

"They come from people who live down the street from you and may give them a drug that you don't need that's leftover in your house. Or they come visit you and they raid your medicine cabinet," Perdue explained.

Many users migrate to an alternative to pain killers which is cheaper and more powerful, heroin. Heroin can be laced with other deadly opioids like fentanyl and carfentanil.

A dose as big as the head of a pen of carfentanil can put someone into immediate respiratory and cardiac arrest.

Authorities will be targeting certain "hot spots" in the state, including Walker, Winston, Fayette and Marion Counties.

"What we need to do is attack the places where we have problems," Perdue said.

The Department of Mental Health will continue public education on drug addiction and reducing the stigmas attached to it.

This summer, the agency will be doing town halls across the state. One of those meetings will be held at the Auburn Rotary Club at noon on July 26.

"Drug addiction is not a moral failure. It's a biological addiction. We've got to have a community of care. We need people in churches, faith-based organizations to help us help themselves," Perdue added. "The people who are addicted could be the athlete down the street who hurt his knee and was prescribed pain pills. Or it could be the elderly woman who became addicted to pain pills after back surgery."

The commissioner wants to see the opiate overdose antidote medicine Narcan available to first responders who could come into contact with fentanyl or carfentanil.

Grants will help with those initiatives.

There are also adjacent problems in those areas, like HIV and Hepatitis C from needle use.

The Department of Mental Health treats substance abuse, mental illness, and individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Those things are very important, pressing issues in Alabama, right up there with things like prison reform and education, Perdue says.

"I have three hospitals in Tuscaloosa that are busting at the seams because we don't have enough beds. We have a lot of important issues," Perdue said. "There's no easy way to address the problems that we have in mental health but we're tackling each one of them individually."

The commissioner says he is resetting the council that the governor has appointed to address the issue to refocus their efforts. Subcommittees are working on data collection and Narcan treatment.

"It's a community problem. It's a blight on where people live, and it's a drain and strain on our economy. It's more than just a social issue. It's an economic issue," Perdue said.

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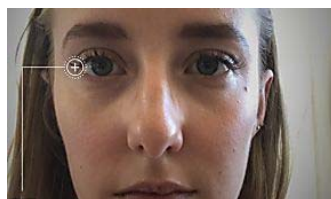
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