State battles heroin and opioid addiction

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, heroin and opioid overdose are the leading causes of accidental deaths, killing more Pennsylvanians than those involved in deadly crashes. This epidemic crosses all social, geographic and political lines. Pennsylvania has taken several important steps to combat the heroin and opioid crisis. Dr. Rachel Levine, the physical general, signed a standing order for naloxone for when they arrive first on the scene of a drug overdose. This life-saving drug is also available free in public high schools. Pennsylvania has developed a prescription drug monitoring program to help detect and prevent prescription fraud and abuse.

Gov. Tom Wolf has been hosting roundtable discussions with state lawmakers, local officials, law enforcement, emergency responders and health care professionals to discuss ways to work together to combat the opioid abuse and heroin use epidemic.

In June, he also announced that he intends to call a special session of the General Assembly later this year that will focus on combating the opioid crisis facing Pennsylvania communities.

State Rep. W. Curtis Thomas said he conferred with Governor Wolf for his leadership on the issue and looked forward to joining his colleagues – Democrat and Republican – in continuing working on a way to address the crisis head-on.

Thomas noted that he was pleased Gov. Wolf’s leadership on this issue resulted in two Centers of Excellence coordinate-care facilities to be established within the 181st Legislative District. These centers at Wedge Medical Center and Temple University, which are among 20 such centers throughout the state, are intended to assist people with opioid-related substance use disorder stay in treatment to receive follow-up care. The centers coordinate care their patients with Medicaid, and treatment is team-based and “whole person” focused, with the explicit goal of integrating behavioral health and primary care.

The 2016-17 state budget includes $15 million – with an additional $5 million from the federal government – that will be spent on addressing the opioid addiction crisis that is devastating families across Pennsylvania.

Unfortunately, this public health problem has no boundaries. It is affecting cities and suburbs as well as rural areas throughout the state. This funding for emergency addiction treatment and behavioral health services will help to continue the efforts that have been made during the past two years to address the crisis.

Dear Neighbors,

I hope you and your family have been staying cool and enjoying the summer season. The past few months have been busy, and I wanted to ensure you were updated about what has been occurring in Harrisburg and throughout the district.

In the district, my staff and I have been focused on facilitating programs focused on job training, employment opportunities and entrepreneurs. This initiative has resulted in multiple events across the district including job fairs and workshops. The events have been very well received and I intend to continue this effort to ensure everyone in the district is aware of the opportunities available to them.

Over the summer, my work in Harrisburg has focused on the passage of a state budget that funds education at record levels, without a broad-based tax increase. While the spending plan that passed in July is far from perfect, it is a solid step in the right direction especially for our students.

As always, if you need any assistance with state-related programs and/or services, please do not hesitate to contact my office at (215) 560-3261 or visit my office at 1415 N. Broad St., Suite 226A in Philadelphia, PA.

My staff and I are happy to help.

Sincerely,

W. Curtis Thomas

State Representative

181st Legislative District

Medical marijuana legal in Pennsylvania

With the signing of Senate Bill 3 by Gov. Tom Wolf in April, Pennsylvania became the 24th state in the country to legalize medical marijuana.

Once the regulations are in place, doctors will be able to prescribe certain forms of cannabis to meet the proper requirements and suffer from one of the approved medical conditions. Under the new law, medical marijuana cannot be smoked, but can be prescribed in pill, oil, topical or liquid form.

Legalizing medical marijuana is a commonsense way to help all of those people who are suffering in their daily lives – from children who are experiencing daily seizures, to veterans enduring post-traumatic stress disorder and many others who need this medication to relieve their pain.

Statistics show that states that have legalized medical marijuana have seen a decrease of nearly 25 percent in annual prescription drug overdose deaths. The statistics also show that there have been zero overdose deaths from marijuana.

State Rep. W. Curtis Thomas said this was an easy vote to make because at its very basic core, it’s about helping people.

The Pennsylvania Department of Health is in the process of developing the regulations and infrastructure for the program, a process the governor said could take approximately 18-24 months.

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New state budget increases Philly school funding, avoids repeat of impasse

For the first time in 10 years, state Rep. W. Curtis Thomas voted for the state budget. Thomas said he was willing to support the spending plan because of increased education funding it will provide and because it puts the state on the right path moving forward.

The new budget takes a major step toward restoring the four years of Corbett-Republican cuts. It includes $250 million more for K-12 education. The largest part of that is a $200 million increase in the basic education subsidy that will deliver a $47 million increase to Philadelphia schools. This 4.6 percent increase for Philadelphia is higher than the state average because new funding is being allocated based on the new fair funding formula.

Thomas noted another positive area is the new budget’s 2.5 percent increase in funding for higher education, including Temple University and two historically black universities in Pennsylvania, Cheyney and Lincoln, both located in the Philadelphia region.

(continued on page 2)

Thomas advocates on behalf of the 181st Legislative District

During budget negotiations, state Rep. W. Curtis Thomas signed multiple letters of support to inform legislative leaders in the House and Senate and Gov. Tom Wolf about the priorities and concerns of the 181st Legislative District.

Thomas signed his name to a letter from the Keystone Alliance for Public Charter Schools to Gov. Wolf concerning inequity between traditional students and those at one of Philadelphia’s charter schools due to proposed budget measures. Additionally, Thomas stood in support of the Community College of Philadelphia as it sought an increase to this year’s appropriation for community college operation, which it received.

Thomas also recently wrote to the Philadelphia Parking Authority to ensure funds from the Philadelphia Parking Authority’s Red Light Photo Enforcement Program was being properly transferred to the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation Motor License Commission, as required by law. He received assurance from the PPA in March that the funds were being transferred appropriately, but he vowed to continue watching the transfers closely.
To ensure the budget was balanced, Thomas said new revenue was needed but he was also glad the General Assembly was able to avoid broad-based tax increases. The new revenue will come from various sources, including:

- A $1-a-pack increase in the cigarette tax, raising the rate to $2.60 a pack;
- New taxes on loose leaf and smokeless tobacco and e-cigarettes;
- Income tax on lottery winnings over $600; and
- Imposing the state’s 6 percent sales tax on digital downloads, including music, movies, books and apps.

**Pa. ABLE savings program will help families with disabilities**

In April, Gov. Tom Wolf signed Act 17 of 2016 into law. Known as the ABLE Act, which stands for Achieving a Better Life Experience, this new program will allow families to ensure family members with a disability are taken care of by providing them with a savings account without jeopardizing eligibility for important programs that their loved ones depend on.

State Rep. W. Curtis Thomas said he was proud to vote for this legislation, which allows the savings accounts to be used for a wide range of disability-related expenses including health care, housing and transportation. The ABLE Act will foster independence, community-based support and employment opportunities for people with disabilities, while at the same time helping put at ease the minds of family members who worry about caring for them.

The ABLE Program will be administered by the Pennsylvania Treasury, which also administers the Pennsylvania 529 College Savings Program. Under this new law, benefits of the program include:

- Savings of up to $14,000 per year;
- Tax-free growth;
- Use of the account to pay for a wide range of disability-related expenses;
- Federal and state income tax-free withdrawals when used for qualified disability expenses;
- Exemption from Pennsylvania inheritance tax.

One of the most vital aspects of the ABLE Program is that savings are excluded from eligibility determinations for many government-related benefits. This means Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medical Assistance and other disability and health benefits cannot be taken away because of ABLE savings.

For more information, please visit www.PA529.com/ABLE or contact Thomas’ office. The goal is to have the ABLE Program up and running by the end of 2016.

**‘Stop and go’ stores pose a continued threat to our community**

Gov. Tom Wolf signed a bill the House passed in June allowing wine sales in some restaurants and grocery stores, and making wine and liquor sales more convenient for Pennsylvania consumers.

Act 39 of 2016 will give the Liquor Control Board more flexibility to set competitive prices, offer discounts and set state liquor store hours in ways that are better and more convenient for consumers. It also will permit the direct shipment of wine by licensed producers to consumers at their homes.

Unfortunately, state Rep. W. Curtis Thomas said he was unable to vote for the legislation due to his serious concerns about the unintended consequences it would create with the numerous “stop and go” stores throughout Philadelphia.

Due to previous legislation, these stores have been able to acquire restaurant licenses, despite the fact that many sell little more than candy and chips. This new law will allow these stores to sell even more alcohol with hardly any additional oversight. Additionally, Thomas said the law committed insufficient enforcement resources to solve this complicated issue.

Thomas said he was supportive of efforts to modernize the state store system, he could not support the bill when it came up for a vote in the House. He vowed to continue to work with my colleagues in the General Assembly and city officials to seek a solution to the “stop and go” issue that threatens the safety and well-being of communities throughout Philadelphia.
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NEW STATE BUDGET (continued from page 1)
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