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Mayor uses study to seek funds for drug

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Mayor Sheila Dixon is using academic research to support the city's request for expanded drug treatment, including \$5 million in Gov. Martin O'Malley's proposed budget to improve access to buprenorphine, a prescription drug that requires less monitoring than methadone and also weans addicts off heroin.

Quoting research by the University of Maryland, Baltimore County that Medicaid patients receiving drug treatment were "four times less likely" to be hospitalized than those without treatment, Dixon is urging legislators to back the governor's budget and legislation that would increase the state's cigarette tax by \$1 a pack, revenue that could provide treatment for an additional 7,000 city residents annually.

"This study underscores the need to protect and expand investments in drug treatment," Dixon said in her letter, which was sent yesterday, along with the UMBC study, to the heads of both legislative chambers and to the chairs of several budget committees.

The academic study, the first of as many as four that have been commissioned by the city and funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, also found that Medicaid patients who receive drug treatment were "substantially" less likely to visit area emergency rooms, but that if they did they stayed about eight days less than those without treatment.

The study also found that health care for those with treatment was \$2,755 per person per year, compared with \$11,286 for those without treatment

City Health Commissioner Dr. Joshua Sharfstein has worked to expand access to buprenorphine, in part through a program that covers the cost to doctors to be certified to prescribe the drug.

Scharfstein said the city needs additional funds to make the drug available to large groups of addicts. More drug addicts in the city are treated with methadone, an addictive drug that requires close monitoring to guard against misuse.

"People who have heroin addiction are extremely costly, and when they get treatment for their addiction they are much less costly," said the commissioner, who worked with the Center for Health Program Development and Management at UMBC to come up with the study series.

City officials are closely watching the governor's budget and the cigarette tax bill.

The two legislative chambers have yet to agree on how to fund buprenorphine treatment in the city.

A version of the cigarette tax bill in the House of Delegates does not earmark \$30 million for drug treatment statewide, which city officials said could diminish their chances of getting money for expanded treatment slots.

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