

Senate Passes Legislation to Increase Routine HIV Screening

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BOSTON – The Senate on Thursday passed a bill that will provide greater access to routine HIV screenings for residents across the Commonwealth. The legislation calls for reducing HIV testing barriers by eliminating the need for doctors to obtain written consent from patients, Senate President Therese Murray (D-Plymouth) announced.

“With more than 5,000 Massachusetts residents unaware they are living with HIV, increased access to routine screening will encourage patients to seek care and stop further transmission,” Murray said.

“While we have made great progress reducing the HIV infection rate in Massachusetts, it is still crucial that we do more to reverse the spread of the HIV virus.”

“This bill is the result of collaboration among many groups, including doctors and advocates for those living with HIV,” said Senator Patricia Jehlen (D-Somerville), lead sponsor of the bill. “A large number of doctors have told us in no uncertain terms that this small but significant change will enable them to get many more patients tested. This is particularly significant for pregnant women who, if not tested, can transmit the disease to their children. With early detection and treatment, risk of transmission can be virtually eliminated.”

Since 2006, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recommended that HIV testing become more standard, similar to those for blood sugar or cholesterol. However, Massachusetts is currently one of only two states in the country requiring written consent to get an HIV test.

The bill requires doctors to only obtain verbal consent before testing patients for HIV. It also states that physicians, health care providers, institutions and laboratories will not be held liable in criminal or civil actions as a result of sharing HIV information with the Department of Public Health.

According to the CDC, there are approximately one million people infected with HIV in the United States, with as many as 17,000 known to be living with the virus in Massachusetts. Because of state investments in prevention and care, there has been a 59 percent reduction in new cases of HIV in the Massachusetts between 1999 and 2008, and a 37 percent reduction since 2005. No other state has achieved such a dramatic reduction.

The bill now goes to the House of Representatives.

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