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OPINION: For Georgia lawmaker fighting overdoses, they're all her kids



Credit: BEN GRAY / AJC

200225-Atlanta-Rep. Sharon Cooper (R-Marietta) chairs the House Health and Human Services committee before presenting her senior care bill and answers questions Tuesday afternoon February 25, 2020.

BenGray.com / Special

By Patricia Murphy

1 hour ago



State Rep. [Sharon Cooper](#) still remembers sitting in the den of her East Cobb home on a Sunday afternoon a decade ago to meet with a group of grieving parents. They had all lost their children to drug overdoses and were asking her to help change Georgia’s laws to save other people’s children from the same fate.

“They brought pictures, framed pictures of their children, and talked about how they died,” the veteran Republican lawmaker said during an interview in her state Capitol office this week. “They had all gotten into trouble being with friends. And when they got into trouble, everybody absconded and left them alone.” Afraid of getting into trouble themselves if they called for help, Cooper explained, nobody did.

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Within two days, Cooper and her staff had written the state’s “Good Samaritan” law, which protects people from prosecution if they called police to report an overdose and stay until help arrives.

A former pediatric nursing professor who went on to become the top Republican in the state House overseeing health care policy, Cooper now chairs the House Public Health Committee, where she’s still pushing her colleagues to pass legislation on once-taboo topics, including drug overdose prevention.

“I still hear, ‘Well, aren’t you encouraging drug use?’” she said. “Maybe, but at least if you’re alive, there’s a chance of getting you off drugs. If you’re dead, there’s no hope. One life saved

is worth taking that chance.”

Justin Leef was a former intern in Cooper’s office when he introduced her to the families of overdose victims 10 years ago. One of those victims had been his best friend from high school.

“When she met with them, she took notes, remembered all their names, and talked to each parent individually,” he said. “She just was like a parent. She was like a grandparent, and she was visibly upset.”



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After deciding to draft a bill, he said her instruction to legislative staff was, “I want this to be flawless.”

After passing the Good Samaritan bill, Cooper then worked to make Narcan, an opioid-reversal drug, available over the counter without a prescription.

Her latest bill, [HB 1035](#), passed the state House last week and would make naloxone, the generic form of Narcan, more easily available through vending machines, including on college campuses. Advocates also asked that the law be changed to counter the increasingly

lethal and long-lasting opioids that are flooding the United States, especially those illegally laced with fentanyl.

The vending machine bill came through a request from Emory Healthcare, which already provides naloxone at no cost through a vending machine at the Emory Addiction Center. The Cooper bill is meant to make that possible in more places across the state.

Dr. Justine Welsh, the Director of Addiction Services at Emory Healthcare said the cost of the reversal medications puts them out of reach for many of the people who need them most, including students.

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And she said medical providers are seeing significant increases in overdoses in Georgia across all age groups, from adolescents to young adults and older adults.

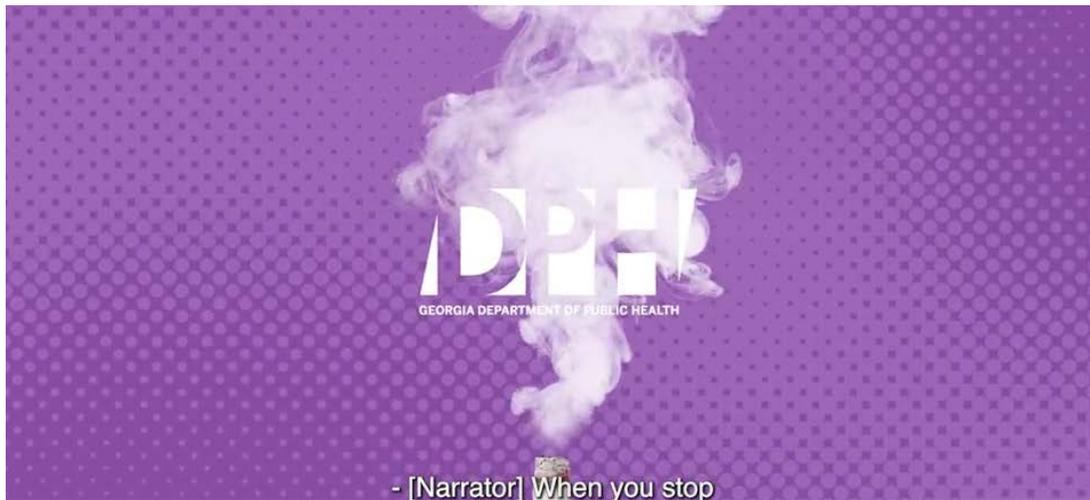
“I recommend everybody have naloxone in their households and their cars in case they encounter someone who’s recently overdosed,” she said. “Multiple of my staff members have used naloxone to reverse overdoses in the community just leaving work.”

Funding for the vending machine is made possible by an endowment from Dr. Steve Waronker, an anesthesiologist at Emory whose son, Brian, died from an accidental overdose at 24. He said Brian had been in recovery for five years when he went with friends to watch a UGA football game against the University of Oklahoma in December of 2017.

“He got a hold of what he thought was Percocet that turned out, even six years ago, to be laced with fentanyl,” Waronker said. “And he did not wake up when his brother went to pick him up to go the airport.”

From his expertise as a physician and experience as a grieving father, Waronker said making naloxone --and the fentanyl test strip it comes with-- easily available can save lives like Brian's. "These people don't want or plan to die," he said. Educating Georgians and adding funding, especially from state settlements with opioid makers, should be the next step, he said. And maybe it will be. But first things first.

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Although the House has passed Rep. Cooper's vending machine bill, the state Senate needs to pass it in the next 20 days of this legislative session for it to become law.

For all of the hair-brained, industry-driven legislation that comes through the state Capitol, the naloxone vending machine bill and the others championed earlier by Cooper stand apart for the bipartisan support they've gotten and the number of lives they have the potential to save.

Justin Leef said Cooper's work to prevent drug overdoses has not only saved tens of thousands of young Georgians, it has also changed the conversation at the state Capitol about the issue, especially among the most conservative members.

"I think what Sharon has done within the Republican Party is make overdose prevention not be a partisan issue, but a people issue," he said. "And that speaks to just who she is."

Cooper is now in her twenty-eighth year in the state House. Her Capitol office is a homey space, with pink and red tulips on the desk and a Valentine's balloon floating overhead. She

and her late husband, Dr. Tom Cooper, didn't have children of their own, but much of her work has focused on kids' health and well being.

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"I'm not the typical politician," Cooper said. "I don't drink and I don't like having my picture taken. But I love kids and if they're down here at the Capitol you'll find me with them....I'll do anything to help them if I can."



Credit: Natrice Miller/AJC

Rep. Sharon Cooper (R-Marietta) speaks in the House chambers on day 25 of the legislative session on Tuesday, February 28, 2023. (Natrice Miller/ Natrice.miller@ajc.com)

About the Author



Patricia Murphy



Patricia Murphy joined the AJC in 2020 from CQ Roll Call, where she was a nationally syndicated political columnist. She previously covered politics for the Daily Beast and Politics Daily, and wrote for The Washington Post and Garden & Gun. She graduated from Vanderbilt University and holds a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University.

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