

Schimmel defends decision not to join lawsuit targeting drug manufacturers

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AG Brad Schimmel is again defending his decision not to sign onto a lawsuit targeting drug manufacturers, saying the state's participation in a probe of the pharmaceutical industry would produce faster results.

The former Waukesha County DA, who's previously said he's made combating the opioid epidemic his No. 1 priority after taking office in 2015, has faced criticism from Dems for not suing drugmakers.

But Schimmel at a WisPolitics.com luncheon in Madison yesterday said Wisconsin's involvement in the multi-state investigation of opioid producers was his preferred path — at least for now.

"I'd prefer to go the route we're going, because once you file a lawsuit, now you start all the legal manipulations, and lawsuits like that can take four, six, eight, 10 years to get to a resolution," he said. "Right now these settlement talks give us the ability to potentially get some help right now when we need it."

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Meanwhile, more than half the counties in the state have joined a lawsuit against several pharmaceutical giants, alleging in a 2017 case the drugmakers waged a misinformation campaign that caused the opioid crisis. Similar suits have been filed in states, counties and cities across the country.

Asked if he would want the Wisconsin counties to drop their suit, Schimmel said it's "their decision."

"The one challenge that comes from all the local lawsuits is we do have a lot more individual plaintiffs and their attorneys that need to be appeased in this whole process, so it's going to make it harder to reach a settlement that everyone agrees with," he said. "That's the one challenge."

Schimmel has also been hit for campaign donations he's received from opioid manufacturers including Purdue Pharma, which produces pain medication OxyContin. Wisconsin, as part of a multi-state lawsuit against Purdue Pharma for improperly marketing OxyContin to health care providers, received a settlement in 2007.

But Schimmel said he didn't know he had received a campaign contribution from Purdue Pharma until he read it in a newspaper article.

"I didn't know it even happened," he said. "They're not influencing anything we do."

Schimmel highlighted the importance of the state's response, treatment and prevention efforts in the fight against opioid abuse. He cited a July 2014 Wisconsin State Council on Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Prevention Committee report that showed 163,300 Wisconsin adults reported using heroin or another non-opiate for non-medical purposes.

"We cannot and should not incarcerate all those people, but more concerning we cannot get treatment to that many people if we do not address prevention," he said, after earlier highlighting the importance of drug treatment courts that handle substance-abuse offenders.

And he highlighted the Department of Justice's "Dose of Reality" campaign, launched in 2015, aimed at combating the opioid crisis through law enforcement, treatment and prevention.

One component of the campaign, Schimmel said, collaborating with employers to help them "become part of the solution here" and provide resources to help employees who are addicted to opiates.

"If that employer gives them the help early on in the process of their addiction, maybe we need this much in resources to get them help," he said, adding that if it's not until someone's in the criminal justice system that the individual gets help, that person would need many more resources to combat his or her addiction.