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Bill targets online drugs

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ST. PAUL — One leg of a St. Cloud-area family's journey to prevent their tragedy from happening to others is nearly complete.

A bill that would make it more difficult to purchase addictive prescription drugs over the Internet is almost headed to Gov. Tim Pawlenty for his signature.

Lawmakers voted 134-0 Thursday night to pass a bill from Rep. Steve Gottwalt, R-St. Cloud, created in response to the fatal 2006 prescription drug overdose of St. Cloud resident Justin Pearson.

"Justin's Bill" tightens language defining legal prescriptions and requires a face-to-face visit between a patient and a doctor prescribing the medication.

"We understand that it's not going to bring Justin back," said Dan Pearson, Justin's father. "But putting these steps in place should help prevent other families from going through what our family's had to experience."

A technical amendment added Thursday means the bill must go back to the Senate for a final vote, but Gottwalt said he has received assurances that it won't prevent the bill from getting to Pawlenty, who has indicated he will sign it.

Law enforcement will have "an important tool in cracking down on illicit online trafficking of prescription drugs, and the pharmacies that distribute them illegally," Gottwalt said.

The bill would not prevent people who already have a valid prescription from refilling it, he said.

A law passed last year tightened access by requiring prescriptions to be based on more than just a credit card and online questionnaire, which is all it took for Pearson to obtain the Vicodin, Percocet and OxyContin that ultimately led to his death.

But some online distributors instituted a 30-second telephone consultation with a doctor to get around the law.

This bill would also prohibit pharmacies from filling prescriptions they know are not based on a legitimate medical relationship.

Pharmacies that knowingly violate the law could see their licenses suspended or revoked and face misdemeanor charges.

It has the support of the Minnesota Pharmacists Association and was created with help from the Minnesota Board of Pharmacy.

The Senate passed the bill in March with exceptions to the law for public health, treatment of a sexually transmitted disease or in the case of a designated caregiver.

The House bill includes those provisions.