Needle swaps: ‘We’re in crisis’

Funding shrinks while demand increases

John Stucke, The Spokesman-Review

Lynn Everson, needle exchange coordinator for the Spokane Regional Health District, oversees the exchange as a participant drops off two of his 200 syringes into a dispenser at the health building.

Drug addicts will swap more than 1 million dirty needles for clean syringes this year as narcotics use soars.

The number of needle exchanges logged by the Spokane Regional Health District is unprecedented and affirms what doctors, counselors and police have been saying for several years: The stresses of job losses, deep service cuts by government and a ready supply of cheap drugs is taking a toll on the vulnerable.

Public health agencies have been cobbling together money to buy clean needles so that drug users can avoid infection with HIV, hepatitis C or a host of other skin and bacterial diseases from using contaminated needles.

“We’re in crisis,” said Lynn Everson, coordinator of the health district’s needle exchange program.

In 2009 her office exchanged about 500,000 needles. In 2011 the number ballooned to 968,000.

This year her office expects to trade more than 1 million.

“When we’re distressed, we retreat to what we know,” Everson said. “For some people that means family or friends.

“For people with drugs in their past … they often go back.”

On Monday afternoon people lined up outside her office. They brought plastic grocery bags and small boxes full of used syringes, disposing them into large red pails and later leaving with packages of fresh needles.

Last year Everson estimated that 1,400 people used the needle program. Each of those likely exchanged needles for at least one or two other users too ashamed, afraid or busy.

Volunteers logged 600 hours to help make it all work.
One 44-year-old woman, who asked that her name be withheld, has been coming to the needle exchange office twice a month for the past year.

Her ex-husband beat her so badly years ago that she doesn’t work and qualifies for disability pay.

Worse, she said, he hooked her on heroin.

“I know that ultimately the addiction is my choice,” she said. “But I had to survive. It’s so hard.”

She wants to enroll in the county’s methadone program, which is designed to wean addicts from heroin and other opiates such as prescription painkillers. The program slots for Medicaid patients are full, however, and the wait list is long. She lacks the money to pay for private drug rehabilitation.

She has avoided HIV infection and other diseases because of the availability of free, clean needles.

Whether it is addiction to cheap heroin or more expensive prescription painkillers, narcotics use often has a deadly aftermath.

In Spokane County the death rate from prescription drug overdoses is 12.8 per 100,000 people, according to health records. That’s double the rate of King County and higher than the statewide average of 7.1 deaths per 100,000 people.

Though needle exchanges prompt accusations of enabling drug users, public health officials stand behind the controversial programs.

Dr. Joel McCullough said his agency is tasked with trying to keep people healthy and fighting the spread of disease.

The needle exchange program helps do that, he said.

“Drug addiction is an issue that is very difficult for us to do anything about,” McCullough said.

Communities tend to put higher priorities on other programs.

“We have to operate in the world as it is, not as we want it to be,” McCullough said.

As state funding for the needle exchange program has shrunk by a third to about $90,000 annually, McCullough has directed staff to backfill the losses with local dollars and find savings wherever possible.

Similar programs across the country have been widely credited with curbing the number of new HIV infections among injection drug users.
Local data comparing five-year spans in the 1990s and 2000s found the number of new HIV/AIDS cases among needle users fell from 19 percent to 11 percent, said Lisa St. John, the district’s HIV/AIDS program manager.

The local health district had pinned some hopes for new funding on federal dollars.

Congress, however, reinstated its ban on syringe exchange funding even as the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention completed a recent study that noted the continued vulnerability of injection drug users contracting HIV/AIDS.

McCullough said while the ban deflated one possible source of funding, the district would keep trying to fight the spread of HIV/AIDS with other public and private agencies that contributed volunteer hours, in-kind services and money.

“Fighting (HIV/AIDS) is a multisector effort,” he said. “Needle exchange is one part of it. An important part.”
GOP restores ban on needle-exchange funding

Bob Egelko, Chronicle Staff Writer, Sunday, December 25, 2011

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It took AIDS activists 21 years to get Congress to restore federal funding for local programs that supply clean needles to drug users. It's taken Republicans a couple of months of hardball negotiations to get the ban reinstated.

Legislation to fund government operations for 2012, which President Obama is about to sign, includes an amendment prohibiting federal spending on needle exchanges in both domestic and international programs. That was the law from 1988 until December 2009, when Obama signed a Democratic-sponsored appropriations bill lifting the restrictions.

The ban will have no immediate impact in San Francisco, where the AIDS Foundation leads a group of contractors that use city funds and private donations to hand out about 2.5 million sterile needles per year. But backers of the programs say it's a big step backward for public health.

"Reinstating the ban is murderous. It's saying that people who use drugs should contract fatal and expensive diseases and die," said Laura Thomas, San Francisco director of the Drug Policy Alliance and a volunteer in a local needle-exchange program for the last 15 years.

The city, which spent $1.2 million on needle exchanges last year, decided not to apply for federal funds when they became available in 2010 because they didn't appear to be a stable revenue source in light of "the volatile economic and political climate," said Israel Nieves-Rivera, a program director at the Department of Public Health.

Preventing expansion

But he said the absence of federal support, and the elimination of state AIDS funding in 2009, will prevent counties from expanding their needle-exchange programs to reach everyone in need.

That's the case in Marin County, where the Marin AIDS Project uses $16,000 in private contributions to distribute 65,000 needles a year at its San Rafael office.

Director Jennifer Malone said the project has received a $28,500 grant from the federal Centers for Disease Control for 2012 and was planning to use it to resume needle exchanges for high-risk populations in West and South Marin and Novato. Those exchanges ended when the state cut off AIDS funding.
She said the federal restrictions mean the money can be used only for AIDS education and testing and not needle distribution. Although a new California law will allow drug users to buy up to 30 needles at a time at a pharmacy without a prescription, Malone said they're much more likely to obtain clean syringes in the free programs.

"Exchanges are anonymous, which feels more accessible to people, and you can exchange much larger numbers of syringes," she said, observing that individuals often pick up needles for multiple users. "I hope there's some change at the federal level."

**Infection rates cut**

Researchers have found that sharing of contaminated needles by drug users is a major source of infectious diseases like AIDS and hepatitis C, which are reduced by the distribution of clean syringes.

A 1997 study said HIV infection rates had dropped by 5.8 percent in 29 cities around the world with needle-exchange programs, and increased by 5.9 percent in 52 cities without them. A report in 2000 by David Satcher, surgeon general under President George H.W. Bush, said the programs reduce HIV transmission among vulnerable populations without increasing drug use.

Opponents argue, however, that needle exchanges encourage the use of dangerous drugs and that federal funding undercuts the government's antidrug message.

The funding ban was sponsored in 1988 by the late Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., and renewed annually for 21 years. It was removed in 2009 in a close vote that largely followed party lines, but House Republicans used the issue as a bargaining chip this year on a $1 trillion bill that had to be passed to avert a government shutdown.

Republican leaders initially demanded wholesale concessions from Obama as the price of approval, including elimination of funding for the new federal health care and bank-regulation laws and a ban on federal regulation of greenhouse gases.

They settled Dec. 15 for a more modest agreement that included a continued ban on federal and local funding for poor women's abortions in Washington, D.C., and a renewal of the prohibition on federal spending for needle exchanges.

The legislation was "the product of a tough negotiation," said White House spokesman Adam Abrams. "To reach a compromise, we had to accept certain provisions that we oppose and these are two of them."

That didn't satisfy advocates like Bill Piper of the Drug Policy Alliance. Thousands of preventable diseases, he said, will be the responsibility of "the Republicans who insisted on restoring the ban, and the Democrats who didn't fight hard enough to oppose it."

E-mail Bob Egelko at begelko@sfchronicle.com.