

Syringe and Needle Exchange Legislative Report July 2022

Purpose:

During the 2019 legislative session, the Syringe and Needle Exchange Act (Idaho Code Title 37, Chapter 34) was passed by the Legislature and signed into law. This report is a summary of Idaho syringe and needle exchange activities and outcomes the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare is required to report to the Legislature every two years.

Introduction:

Syringe and needle exchange programs are a practical approach to address problems related to opioid misuse in Idaho. The problem is complex, and the Department is putting most of our energy into preventing substance misuse and expanding treatment options for people with substance use disorder. However, we also need a way to safely dispose of used syringes and connect individuals to substance use disorder treatment. Syringe and needle exchange programs protect people by providing safe disposal of used syringes, which protects the public safety workforce and community members from injury. Syringe and needle exchange programs are also where individuals who inject drugs can go to access sterile syringes, get connected to substance use disorder treatment, and get health exams.

Activities & Outcomes:

The following activities and outcomes were reported to the Department by six syringe and needle exchange programs operating in Idaho between January 1, 2020 and December 31, 2021*:

- **Number of individuals who have exchanged syringes or needles:** In 2020, 527 unique individuals accessed a syringe and needle program exchange program. In 2021, 964 unique individuals accessed a syringe and needle program exchange program.
- **Number of used syringes or needles exchanged for new syringes or needles:** 1,010,618
- **Number of new syringes or needles provided in exchange for used syringes or needles:** 937,484
- **Estimated impact on blood-borne infection rates:** An estimated 159 hepatitis C infections and 48 HIV infections were averted in Idaho due to increases in safe syringe disposal and reduced needle sharing behavior (Ruiz, 2019; Department, 2022). Syringe and needle exchange programs also play a critical role in identifying and treating early hepatitis C and HIV infections. In 2020, four new hepatitis C and two new HIV infections were identified at a Idaho syringe and needle exchange program (172 total tests performed); in 2021, zero new hepatitis C or HIV infections were identified (523 total tests performed).
- **Estimated impact on individuals receiving treatment for substance use disorder:** At least 1,511 referrals for substance use disorder treatment were requested by syringe and needle exchange participants.
- **Potential for additional reductions in the number of syringes and needles contaminated with blood-borne disease if the programs receive additional funding:** Syringe and needle exchange programs collected more used syringes than they provided (Return Ratio: 0.93**), preventing injury and improving community safety. Organizations operating syringe and needles exchange programs remain committed to collecting used syringes for safe disposal, distributing sharps containers, promoting community safety by operating a “Found syringe hotline”, and hosting routine community clean-up events. Additional funding from the Legislature for syringe and needle exchange programs is not being requested by the Department at this time.

* Syringe and needle exchange data is collected on a calendar year enabling the Department time to perform data quality validations, conduct a thorough analysis, and report statute required variables timely to the Legislature.

** Return Ratio: syringes distributed divided by syringes collected.

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- **Potential for additional reductions in state and local government spending if the programs receive additional funding:** Syringe and needle exchange programs are community-based prevention programs that reduce state and local government costs associated with substance use by reducing healthcare costs associated with HIV infection, viral hepatitis, and associated complications. Idaho syringe and needle exchange programs contributed to averting an estimated 159 hepatitis C infections, saving over \$10 million dollars in lifetime healthcare costs (\$64,490 per person) (Ravazi, 2013). Similarly, an estimated 48 HIV infections were averted, saving \$21 million dollars in lifetime healthcare costs (\$450,000 per person) (Farnham, 2019). Syringe and needles exchange programs also have the potential to reduce state and local government costs associated with substance use by reducing societal impacts (e.g., need for crisis systems of care, incarceration, foster care) by breaking the cycle of substance use and providing a connection to recovery services. Additional funding from the Legislature for syringe and needle exchange programs is not being requested by the Department at this time.
- **Whether the programs promote illicit use of drugs:** No, the programs do not promote illicit use of drugs. Research summarized by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows that individuals who access a syringe and needle exchange program are five times more likely to enter substance use treatment and three times more likely reduce or discontinue injection drug use (CDC, 2019).

The Director supports the continuation of syringe and needle exchange programs in Idaho.

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