

Addicts drawn to needle exchange

Effort targets spread of HIV and hepatitis

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Every week in Newark, 2,500 clean needles are handed out and 2,500 dirty needles are taken off the streets -- one needle at a time.

This year's needle exchange could result in stopping the use and circulation of more than 130,000 needles possibly infected with HIV or hepatitis C, program officials say. As a result, 600 addicts who -- while still using drugs -- will hopefully not join the ranks of New Jersey's 27,000 intravenous drug users infected with HIV.

In all, not a bad start to the program that politicians opposed for 13 years.

A year ago, the North Jersey Community Research Initiative (NJCRI) began its needle exchange in Newark without a cent of state funding and in the face of critics who claimed that giving intravenous drug users clean needles was just supporting their habits.

From 78 clients a year ago, Newark now has about 600 regular clients who bring in about 500 used needles per day and leave with an equal number of clean ones, said Bob Baxter, director of addiction and education services for NJCRI.

"People think it is enabling and increasing the use of drugs. It's just the opposite," Baxter said of the exchange. "It's a public health issue. Just saying no to people who have always said yes doesn't work."

Proponents say the need is clear: of the 71,812 cases of HIV/AIDS reported in New Jersey as of June 2008, the state Department of Health and Senior Services said nearly 40 percent were contracted from IV drug use. The top reporting counties were those with inner cities, including Essex, Hudson, Passaic, Camden and Atlantic.

In 2004, the state announced intravenous drug use was responsible for 50-90 percent of all new hepatitis C cases.