

# Needle exchange pilot programs in N.J. are successful, health department finds

By Susan K. Livio/Statehouse Bureau

April 08, 2010, 6:14PM



AP File PhotoAn independent evaluation commissioned by the state health department found needle exchange programs in five pilot cities were successful.

**TRENTON** -- Two years after the state authorized a pilot needle exchange program, nearly 4,500 intravenous drug users have participated in the program, with 1,000 of them entering drug treatment, according to a **state Health Department report**.

Only five municipalities — Atlantic City, Camden, Jersey City, Newark and Paterson — volunteered to host a syringe exchange program, even though the law allows for six sites. But the programs, run without state funding by private

community agencies, have gotten off to a strong start, enrolling 4,482 IV drug users and helping 998 of them enter treatment. The sites collected 295,736 used syringes and provided 706,568 new ones.

"The program is off to an excellent start and serves a hard-to-reach population with tremendous promise in preventing the transmission" of HIV and hepatitis, according to the report, compiled by the Division of HIV/AIDS Services and the School of Public Health at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. "It is recommended the program continue."

Roseanne Scotti of the Drug Policy Alliance of New Jersey said the intent behind the law was to expand to other sites if a trial run proved effective, and it has.

"We are pleased, but not surprised, that New Jersey's evaluation has confirmed that the syringe-access programs are a success," she said. That decision has been made easier by President Obama's administration, which has lifted the ban on using federal money to help run such programs.

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In Newark, 1,250 people enrolled since the North Jersey Community Research Initiative opened the site in February 2008, Bob Baxter said, an institute director. "Of that, 25 percent have not just been referred but admitted to treatment, which is phenomenal."

In Paterson, 988 IV drug users enrolled in the three-day-a-week syringe exchange program run by the Paterson Counseling Center, according to the report. Of those participants, 259 entered a treatment program.

Health and Senior Services Commissioner Poonam Alaigh said, as a doctor, she supports needle exchange programs. "They help to mitigate high-risk behavior that intravenous drug users are exhibiting, and they also reduce use of dirty needles from illicit sources."

Alaigh declined to discuss the program's future until January, when the final report is due.

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