

Politics and needle exchanges

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AP Photo/Lauren Victoria Burke New syringes in supply boxes await distribution by the program Prevention Works in Washington. In a small room in Newark's central ward, heroin addicts arrive each day, drop their dirty needles into a green plastic bin and pick up a fresh supply of clean ones. For the past two years they have come and gone, nearly 1,000 of them in all.

It is a simple operation, it is cheap, and it's a proven way to reduce the spread of AIDS.

So when politicians use these clinics to score points, to huff and puff about zero tolerance for drugs, you have to wonder if they realize the damage they are doing. Lives are at stake.

The latest nonsense comes to us from Washington. Congress finally moved to lift the ban on using federal funds at these clinics, a bow to the reality they can no longer deny: Local clinics have been operating successfully for more than 20 years.

But in the House, Rep. **David Obey**, a Democrat from Wisconsin and a supporter of needle exchanges, added an amendment at the last minute to gain needed votes in committee. It stipulates that no federal funds can be spent on clinics that sit within 1,000 feet of a school, park, video arcade, or other places where children are present. It passed.

Are these guys aware that the heroin scourge and the AIDS epidemic tend to be concentrated in cities? New Jersey has five clinics — in Newark, Camden, Atlantic City, Jersey City, and Paterson. That restriction would effectively leave all our clinics out. And the same is true in urban areas across the country.

Bob Baxter, who runs the Newark clinic, says he can find only one spot in his city that qualifies: "There's a spot on runway No. 7 at the airport where I could set up," he says.

The Newark clinic is a low-budget operation. Addicts wait their turn in plastic chairs, talk to a social worker, and exchange their dirty needles for clean ones. About one in four are persuaded to get treatment. But for most of them, this is all about damage control.

"I try to bring all my friends here," one addict says. "I just don't want to see them die."

New Jersey opened its five clinics only a few years ago. We were national laggards, thanks first to the opposition of Gov. **Christie Whitman** and then resistance in the Legislature. Sen. **Joe Vitale**, chairman of the Health Committee, finally shepherded a reform through the political maze, with a big assist from a local health official in Atlantic City who threatened to break the law by passing out clean needles if the Legislature continued to dither while the disease spread. Even now, we allow only a handful of clinics in New Jersey, and the state provides no funding.

Remember that a clean needle costs about a dime at wholesale. Treating a single AIDS patient with hugely expensive drugs, and occasional hospitalization, now costs between \$300,000 and \$600,000 on average, according to the latest studies.

So let's stop the political games. Expanding needle exchange programs will save lives, and save money.