

Ebel: Licking health department committed to disease prevention without needle exchange

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During its Feb. 19 meeting, the Licking County Board of Health voted to not allow the establishment of a syringe exchange program (SEP) in the county. Under Ohio law, a SEP may only operate legally if established by the board of health in that locality.

ORC 3707.57, titled Bloodborne infectious disease prevention programs, reads:

"A board of health may establish a bloodborne infectious disease prevention program. The cost of the program is the responsibility of the board of health. A board of health that establishes a bloodborne infectious disease prevention program shall determine the manner in which the program is operated and the individuals who are eligible to participate."

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recognize SEPs as effective tools to reduce the spread of HIV and hepatitis in communities with significant injection drug use. In Ohio, the CDC identified 11 counties that were in the top 220 counties vulnerable to experiencing or at-risk of outbreaks of hepatitis and HIV due to injection drug use. Those counties were Brown, Adams, Scioto, Clinton, Highland, Pike, Gallia, Athens, Vinton, Jackson, and Meigs – all Appalachian counties.

There are currently 19 counties in Ohio served by SEPs. The other 69, or 78 percent, of counties, including Licking, do not have SEPs operating in their communities. Last year the Ohio Department of Health asked for, and the CDC granted, a state-wide determination of need to allow federal funds to be used to support SEPs in the state. However, the state law remains unchanged, and the decision about implementing SEPs is still up to the local communities.

The Licking County Board of Health has been thoughtfully considering the benefits and risks as well as the moral and ethical implications of establishing a SEP in the county since June of 2018, when I first provided an in-depth presentation on the topic to the board. In the seven months since that presentation they have heard from SEP advocates and opponents, and eventually determined that the board was not in support of establishing an SEP in the county at this time. The board could have chosen to simply not act, and no SEP would be allowed, but they chose to make their position clear, allowing Harm Reduction Ohio, who had proposed establishing a SEP in the county, to focus their efforts in other Ohio communities.

The Board of Health remains committed to disease prevention through other means and has recently expanded HIV and Hepatitis testing in their reproductive health clinic. The health department has been reaching out to our population experiencing homelessness to provide free Hepatitis A vaccination in response to a recent statewide outbreak. The department is also working to reduce drug overdose deaths, including distributing free Naloxone kits to residents who may encounter someone who has overdosed on opioids, providing safe drug disposal options, educating the community about the dangers of opioid abuse, and working with local groups to provide referrals for drug and alcohol addiction treatment.

Joe Ebel is the Licking County public health director.

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