

Ebel: Syringe exchanges are an evidence-based public health intervention

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(Photo: Submitted photo)

One of the consequences of the opioid epidemic is an increase in bloodborne infectious disease rates associated with using and sharing dirty needles to inject heroin and other drugs. In 2015, the Ohio legislature authorized boards of health in each county to establish a “Bloodborne Infectious Disease Prevention Program” – more commonly known as syringe or needle exchange programs.

Licking County, like most of Ohio, has seen increased transition to the injection of illicit drugs as tighter regulations and the closure of “pill mills” have made access to prescription opioids more difficult. Injection of drugs increases the likelihood of fatal overdose and provides opportunities for injection site and bloodborne infections to spread.

The most common bloodborne infection is Hepatitis C with rates that have tripled over the past 10 years. Hepatitis C is a liver infection caused by the blood-borne Hepatitis C virus. For some people, Hepatitis C is a short-term illness but for most, it becomes a long-term, chronic infection that can cause serious health problems, including liver damage, cirrhosis, liver cancer, and even death.

Other bloodborne infections that can be spread by sharing used needles include Hepatitis B and HIV. A proportion of HIV cases reporting injection drug use as the mode of transmission has increased from seven percent of cases in 2015 to 13 percent in 2017.

Injection site abscesses are common and infections that reach the heart can cause endocarditis which can require heart valve replacements due to damage from the infection.

To help reduce the spread of these bloodborne infectious diseases, the Licking County Board of Health is considering joining approximately 20 other counties in Ohio in authorizing the establishment of a local syringe exchange program (SEP).

Harm Reduction Ohio, a non-profit based in Granville, has proposed operating a SEP in Newark in partnership with Equitas Health – a regional, not-for-profit health care and social services provider. The Board of Health will consider their request at their Nov. 20 meeting.

Beyond just providing clean syringes in exchange for returning used syringes, SEPs in Ohio are required to provide education to each program participant regarding exposure to bloodborne pathogens. That includes entering into referral agreements with health and supportive services providers and substance abuse treatment programs, encouraging each participant to seek appropriate medical care, mental health services, substance abuse treatment, or social services and make referrals to health and supportive services providers and substance abuse treatment programs.

Optional SEP services include providing on-site screening for bloodborne pathogens, distributing Fentanyl test strips, providing STD testing and Hepatitis A and B vaccination, and distributing Naloxone kits.

Reducing harm by stopping the spread of bloodborne infectious diseases and providing referrals for services and addiction treatment through a syringe exchange is an evidence based public health intervention recommended by the CDC. SEPs also help protect law enforcement and emergency medical services from needle sticks from people who have used needles in their pockets. Requiring used needles to be returned will also reduce infectious waste hazards in our communities.

While we would prefer to not have the need for such services, to ignore the problem and continue to allow these bloodborne diseases to spread in our community is not a responsible public health strategy.

Submitted by Licking County Health Commissioner, Joe Ebel, R.S., M.S., M.B.A.

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