California Sues El Dorado County for Banning Needle Exchange

Needle exchange programs have been shown to reduce the risk of acquiring and transmitting hepatitis C and HIV in injection drug users.

April 1, 2024 By Laura Schmidt

California is suing El Dorado County and the city of Placerville following a ban on drug needle exchange programs issued by the county and city governments, according to CBS News.

The ongoing dispute is between county officials and the Sierra Harm Reduction Coalition, a nonprofit in El Dorado County that distributes clean needles and naloxone (Narcan) and provides other services. Established in 2019 by the California Department of Public Health, the organization helps empower disadvantaged community members to lead healthier and safer lives through treatment and recovery.

The El Dorado County Board of Supervisors passed an ordinance in December 2023 that banned certain drug harm reduction services, such as needle exchanges, from operating in the county. In February, the Placerville City Council followed suit, passing its own ban.

In response, the California Department of Public Health filed a lawsuit March 8 in El Dorado County Superior Court seeking a writ of mandate, which compels local governments to remove their ordinances regarding syringe services programs.

El Dorado County District Attorney Vern Pierson told CBS that he stands by the county's ban on syringe exchange programs, claiming they normalize the use of "hardcore drugs."

The lawsuit, however, claims that the exchange of used needles and syringes for clean ones does not increase drug use and can serve as an "important bridge to treatment and recovery from drug abuse" as well as reduce the spread of HIV.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), syringe exchange programs help reduce the risk of acquiring and transmitting blood-borne diseases, such as hepatitis C (HCV) and HIV, in people who inject drugs.

HCV is transmitted when the blood of an infected person passes into the blood of an uninfected person. HCV is most easily spread through direct blood-to-blood contact, such as sharing needles

and other equipment used to inject drugs. Injection drug users who share needles, syringes and paraphernalia associated with injecting are at the highest risk for HCV.

Because most needle exchange programs also offer referrals to treatment, they help reduce substance use and overdose deaths. In fact, syringe exchange programs are associated with an estimated 50% reduction in HIV and HCV incidence, according to the CDC.

In December 2023, the director of the Sierra Harm Reduction Coalition, Tom Ewing, told the Tahoe Daily Tribune: "It's a simple fact that people who use drugs will obtain the supplies they need to use them, whether there is a harm reduction organization in the area or not, just like they manage to obtain drugs in spite of the fact that they are illegal," Ewing told the Mountain Democrat.

According to Ewing, El Dorado County has seen a significant reduction in syringe buying, sharing and using since the nonprofit started operating.

To read more, click #Needle Exchange or #Harm Reduction. There, you'll find headlines such as "Striving for a Healthier Future: Combating HIV and Hepatitis C Coinfection," "Nation's First Drug Control Strategy Calls for Expanded Harm Reduction" and "Narcan, Now Available Without a Prescription, Can Still Be Hard to Get."

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