N.Y. Governor Andrew Cuomo Announces First-Ever Plan for Hep C Elimination

The ambitious plan will allocate an initial $5 million to help ramp up treatment, remove barriers to care and increase harm reduction.

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New York is the first state in the nation to launch an official plan to eliminate hepatitis C virus (HCV) after Governor Andrew Cuomo made good on his promise to appoint a state Hepatitis C Elimination Taskforce and significantly ramp up funding to support the effort, a recent press release from the governor's office reports.

Announced late last week, the new plan will allocate an initial $5 million in new funding for hepatitis C services. It also lays out commitments to expand immediate access to treatment, remove insurance barriers to care and integrate harm reduction strategies into the state's approach to combating the virus, according to a press release issued by AIDS service organization Housing Works in response to the announcement. The first-of-its-kind strategy will also significantly expand programs to connect New Yorkers to prevention, screening and addiction-treatment services.

The reasons for launching such an ambitious strategy are clear. More than 14,000 new HCV infections were reported in New York in 2016—more than five times the number of HIV diagnoses statewide for the same year. The New York State Department of Health estimates that more than 280,000 New Yorkers have been infected with the virus and that up to 50 percent are unaware of their infection.

Over the next few years, Cuomo's newly appointed Hepatitis C Elimination Task Force will advise the state as it implements its plan moving forward. Part of this approach will involve establishing patient navigation programs within existing syringe exchanges to help combat infections related to injection drug use, developing innovative hep C treatment models for people who use drugs and expanding HCV services to prison populations. The plan will also be the first in the United States to authorize Medicaid reimbursement for harm reduction services, a major win for advocates across the state.

"The governor's commitment to the elimination of hepatitis C is amazing and groundbreaking here

in the United States, very much in line with his commitment in 2014 to end AIDS as an epidemic in New York State," said Housing Works CEO and president Charles King in the organization's press release. "In both cases, New York is the first state to take up the challenge. When we developed the blueprint to end HIV as an epidemic in New York state, we knew we were paving the way for elimination of hepatitis C. What we lacked were an affordable way to pay for the cure and a trained and willing system of treatment and care. But prices have dropped significantly and, with the proposed regulatory changes that will allow us to treat people where they are at, we can now do this. We look forward to working with the governor and his staff to ensure the implementation of a plan that will end hep C just as we have been doing with HIV."

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