Virginia's First Needle Exchange Could Open by the End of 2018

The state is seeking new ways to curb the spread of hepatitis C in the midst of the ongoing opioid crisis.

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Virginia's first needle exchange program could open by the end of 2018, as the state seeks new ways to combat the spread of infectious diseases like hepatitis C virus (HCV) in the midst of the ongoing opioid crisis, The Roanoke Times reports.

State health officials say the harm reduction facility is likely to open in or near Wise County, in southwestern Virginia, which has been hit particularly hard by the epidemic. Local health departments report that the county's hepatitis C rate is 214 per 100,000 people, well above the state rate of 141 per 100,000 people and that more than 120 people have died of overdoses in the county over the past decade.

The Virginia Department of Health has already completed a review of an application to open a needle exchange in the area and conducted a site visit. Officials say they are likely to authorize the program soon.

The decision to open the site comes after a bill to legalize needle exchange programs in Virginia became effective in July. Currently, 28 other states across the country have authorized public health organizations to distribute syringes legally, which help cut back on the sharing of needles, which spreads diseases like HIV and hepatitis C among injection drug users. Syringe exchange sites also provide services such as HIV testing, HCV screening, and referrals to medical or drug treatment programs.

Officials say they're hopeful that the site will help reduce all sorts of risks related to the opioid crisis and inspire other counties to follow suit and open their own such facilities. In Virginia, over 2,100 new cases of hepatitis C were reported among 18- to 30-year-olds in 2017, up from 840 in 2009. Meanwhile, 1,227 Virginians died after overdosing on opioids, an increase of more than 50 percent since 2015.

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