Alabama Bill Aims to Legalize Needle Exchanges

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A new bill introduced in Alabama would legalize needle exchange programs across the state in an effort to tackle recent increases in opioid use and viral infections in the region, AL.com reports.

Rep. Jack Williams (R–Vestavia) introduced the potential new law last week at the Alabama Legislature, which would change the state's current paraphernalia laws by granting injection drug users immunity from arrest as long as their syringes were obtained at an approved harm reduction site.

The proposal is a reaction to the state's growing opioid epidemic and the health crises that have followed it. According to the Alabama Department of Health, hepatitis C virus (HCV) rates have increased by nearly 200 percent across the state between 2009 and 2013, and nearly 15 percent of new HIV cases in the state are linked to drug use. What's more, a recent report by the state's DOH found that four counties in west Alabama — Walker, Winston, Marion and Franklin — are at a high risk for a future HIV outbreak.

Currently, Alabama law allows pharmacies to sell syringes without a prescription. However, local harm reduction advocates say many won't sell them to suspected drug users and that users can be arrested for accessing clean needles when they try.

Proponents of the bill also argue that the needle exchange programs could also provide overdose treatment, HCV and HIV testing and information about drug treatment, which could help curb the state's opioid epidemic substantially.

Local advocacy group AIDS Alabama has already stepped up and said it would be ready to operate syringe exchange programs if the law permits. If approved, Alabama would follow several states in the region, including North Carolina, Kentucky and Indiana, that have recently launched similar syringe exchange initiatives to help combat their local heroin crises.

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