What Convinced Florida Republicans to Expand a Needle Exchange Program?

Governor Ron DeSantis signed the Infectious Disease Elimination Act, effective statewide July 1. [VIDEO]

July 3, 2019 By Caroline Tien

In an effort, to ease the local opioid crisis and resulting health issues, Florida is the latest red state to pass a law permitting needle exchanges, according to joint reporting by Kaiser Health News and WLRN.

On June 28, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis signed Senate Bill 366, which was sponsored by Democratic legislators Senator Oscar Braynon and Representatives Shevrin Jones and Rene Plasencia. The bill received near-unanimous support in the House and unanimous support in the Senate.

The law went into effect July 1, according to the digital news channel WTSP, whose video you can watch above.

Formally known as the Infectious Disease Elimination Act (IDEA), the law expands the IDEA Exchange program already in place in Miami-Dade County, until now the only legal needle exchange program in the state. The program also offers HIV and hep C testing and connects clients to care. “This is more than just a needle exchange,” Braynon told WLRN. “This has become a roving triage and health center.”

The new law permits the creation of mobile health clinics where injection drug users can exchange dirty needles for clean ones.

HIV, hepatitis C and other blood-borne pathogens can be spread through the sharing of needles. By providing clean needles to injection drug users, needle exchanges reduce the rates of viral infections and remove dirty needles from the streets. Such programs have been legal in states across the country for decades, WLRN reports, but until recently, they were mostly forbidden in the Republican South.

That’s because conservative lawmakers feared the programs promote drug use. But after seeing the impact of the IDEA Exchange program in Miami-Dade County, many have warmed to needle

exchanges. IDEA has pulled more than a quarter of a million used needles out of circulation and, through the distribution of the opioid-reversal agent Narcan, prevented more than a thousand overdose deaths since it was established in 2016.

“The results speak for themselves,” said Republican Senator Rob Bradley, who rejected the IDEA Exchange program legislation when it first came across his desk three years ago. “[Needle exchange] is a very good public policy.”

After Washington, DC, and Atlanta, Florida has the third-highest HIV rate in the nation, a “very problematic health concern,” in the words of Lieutenant Governor Jeanette Núñez, that officials attribute in part to widespread heroin and fentanyl abuse. To read more about Núñez and the state’s HIV-reduction programs, click here.

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