HIV, Hepatitis C Advocates in Pennsylvania Join Forces to Combat Future Outbreaks

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HIV and hepatitis C virus (HCV) advocates in Pittsburgh are joining forces to help better coordinate prevention, testing and treatment efforts for both viruses among injection drug users across the region, according to a press release from the Pittsburgh AIDS Task Force (PATF).

Starting in April, PATF and Prevention Point Pittsburgh (PPP) will provide services in the same building every Sunday to coordinate PPP's needle exchanges, case management, drug treatment and risk reduction counseling with PATF's widespread HIV, hepatitis C and sexually transmitted infection (STI) screening initiatives.

The new partnership is a response to the massive increase in HCV infection across the state. According to recent reports from the Pennsylvania Department of Health, new cases of hepatitis C grew by more than 800 percent in southwestern Pennsylvania between 2003 and 2014. State health authorities attribute the increase in diagnoses to increased HCV testing at local health centers and the region's ongoing opioid epidemic and needle sharing.

Although the region has not yet seen a surge in HIV infections, advocates argue that the influx of prescription painkillers, heroin and other injection drugs has created a heightened risk for an outbreak of the epidemic as a result of increased needle sharing—and that both groups are seeking to avert a potential health crisis.

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