Indiana County Closes a Needle Exchange Despite HIV and Hepatitis C Risks

State officials reported that a clean needle program led to more drug use. The CDC called that conclusion “erroneous.”

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Another Indiana county has shut down its needle exchange program because of moral disapproval and despite the presence of an HIV and hepatitis C outbreak in the state, Indiana Public Media reports. Lawrence County commissioners voted last week to end the needle exchange program, which had been in operation for a year.

The program did not receive country or state funding, and it is the second one to close this year for the same reason (the first was in Madison County, in August).

“It came down to morally, they’re breaking the law. I can’t condone that,” Lawrence County Commissioner Dustin Gabhart told the paper. “Yes, it’s a problem. Yes, it needs to be resolved. I could not give them the tools to do it.”

Jared Stancombe, a county resident who worked with the group that ran the exchange, said that he fears that closing the exchange will increase HIV and hepatitis C rates, which will be most costly in the long run.

The state’s attorney general, Curtis Hill, has clashed with federal officials over the effectiveness of needle exchanges, saying that they manipulate facts to promote a pro–needle exchange agenda.

Officials with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) claim that Indiana officers have incorrectly reported that drug users increased the number of times they inject per day—from five to nine—because of the presence of needle exchanges.

The CDC sent a letter to the Governor’s Task Force on Drug Enforcement asking it to correct the data. Multiple studies show that needle exchanges, wrote the CDC, “are effective in reducing HIV transmission and do not increase rates of community drug use.”

In early 2015, an HIV outbreak related to injection drug use happened in Scott County, Indiana,

leading to then-Governor Mike Pence to allow needle exchanges if counties were experiencing epidemics.

As Mother Jones reports, one study in New York showed that providing clean needles can reduce HIV prevalence from 54 to 13 percent, and it can lower hepatitis C from 90 to 63 percent. As such, 35 counties in Indiana got approval for or began planning for needle exchanges since last year.

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