Initiative Proposed to Ban Safe Injection Sites in Seattle's King County

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Last week, an initiative to ban safe injection sites for heroin and other drugs was launched by local officials in Seattle's King County. The proposed law would also ban public consumption of heroin and all federal Schedule I drugs except marijuana across the city, The Seattle Times reports.

According to lawmakers in favor of the initiative, the next step is collecting more than 47,000 signatures from county voters. If successful, this would place the measure on the city's November ballot. The proposal's chief sponsor, City Councilmember Joshua Freed, was joined by state Senator Mark Miloscia (R–Federal Way) and Speak Out Seattle, a neighborhood coalition concerned with public safety in the city, to kick off the initiative.

The move to ban public consumption sites goes directly against the recommendations of a task force created by Seattle Mayor Ed Murray and King County Executive Dow Constantine last year, which recommended the creation of two safe injection sites (facilities where individuals can use drugs under medical supervision): one in Seattle and one in another King County site. The King County initiative would be the first of its kind in the United States.

In King County, opioid-related overdose deaths have nearly tripled from 49 in 2009 to 132 in 2015.

Advocates argue that safe injection sites are needed to address the city's heroin and opioid crisis. The facilities aim to reduce fatal overdoses and get drug users off the streets and into supervised locations, where they can be linked to treatment. The sites also help to prevent the spread of HIV and hepatitis C virus (HCV) by offering its visitors clean needles.

Critics say the sites don't address the underlying problems of the heroin crisis and enable addiction. Lawmakers in support of the ban would prefer an emphasis on discouraging doctors from prescribing opioids, expanding access to addiction treatment and making sure that local law enforcement officers and firefighters are equipped with the opioid-reversing drug naloxone.

According to King County Elections, if the proposal to ban safe injection sites qualifies for the ballot, it will be called Initiative 27.

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