Many Churches Now Offer Syringe Exchange, Harm Reduction Programs

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Churches and other faith-based organizations across the United States have increasingly begun operating their own syringe exchange programs and reaching out to local injection drug users with harm reduction services.

The judgment-free programs—currently located in cities such as Seattle, Albany, Cincinnati and Fayetteville, North Carolina—aim to build trust with those affected by heroin and prescription painkiller addiction and help stem the tide of overdoses, HIV and hepatitis C virus (HCV) in their communities, Kaiser Health News reports.

In addition to syringe exchanges, which allow drug users to swap out used needles for clean, sterile ones, many church programs also include linkage to education, treatment and testing for blood-borne illnesses. According to the report, some faith-based harm reduction programs have also begun distributing naloxone (commonly known under its brand name, Narcan) to help members reverse opioid-related overdoses.

Recently, institutions such as the United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church, United Church of Christ and the National Council of Jewish Women have made statements in support of syringe exchanges.

While more than 25 states have not explicitly authorized clean needle programs, the North American Syringe Exchange Coalition estimates that 228 such initiatives are currently operating in 35 states across the country—with a growing number operated by faith-based organizations.

Many church officials involved in the movement say syringe exchange is in line with other social services their organizations provide, such as soup kitchens, temporary shelters and other outreach ministries. What's more, harm reduction advocates say church involvement has contributed to growing support for the programs nationwide.

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