Philadelphia Vies to Open Nation's First Safe Injection Site

Harm reduction advocates say the facility would help reduce injection drug-related risks like overdoses and hepatitis C infections.

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Top health officials in Philadelphia are now advocating that the city become the first in the United States to open a supervised injection site, a safe-haven facility where people who inject heroin and other opioids can use drugs under medical supervision, WHYY reports.

The controversial proposal aims to address Philadelphia's opioid crisis and cut back on known injection drug-related risks like overdoses and hepatitis C virus (HCV) and HIV infections. At the injection site, drug users would have access to clean needles and other injection equipment, while medical professionals stand by with the overdose-reversing drug naloxone (commonly known under its brand name, Narcan) to ensure their safety. Advocates also say social service workers at the facility could be on hand to help those addicted to opioids access detox or drug treatment services.

Philadelphia's plan is being discussed with the press on condition of anonymity, since officials have not been authorized to publicly talk about it. But according to behind-the-scenes sources, a new nonprofit would be set up to host the site, while private donors would finance it. One possible financial backer, say local advocates, is local philanthropist Max Tuttleman, who shown interest in investing in strategies to combat the nation's opioid epidemic and recently described safe-injection sites an "innovative approach" in preventing overdose deaths.

The city joins similar pushes from advocacy groups and public health workers in cities like Seattle, San Francisco and Ithaca, New York, that are also hoping to break the national barrier on these types of facilities. Currently, there are more than 100 safe injection facilities around the world, but none operate in the United States.

However, the plan is facing a lot of resistance. According to several insiders, top city police officials are fighting against the plan as is Councilwoman Maria Quiñones-Sánchez, whose district includes Kensington, a neighborhood considered to be the heart of the city's opioid epidemic.

Meanwhile, Philadelphia health officials report that opioid-related overdose deaths claimed 900 lives across the city in 2016 and are expecting the 2017 total to be around 1,200

people—quadruple the number of people who were murdered in the Pennsylvania city last year. The proliferation of the dangerous synthetic opioid fentanyl into the local drug supply is thought to be responsible for many of those deaths.

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