Rural Ohio Communities “Overwhelmed” With Hepatitis C Have Few Options

Several counties have seen HCV rates double, yet advocates say treatment and prevention strategies are still not in place.

April 5, 2018 By Casey Halter

Communities in Ohio are struggling with rapidly increasing rates of hepatitis C virus (HCV) yet have few options in the way of prevention or treatment to help combat the crisis, the Record Herald reports.

The phenomenon mirrors the situation in the rest of the country. Currently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that hepatitis C cases increased by nearly 1,000 percent nationally between 2011 and 2015 – a spike it attributes to rising opioid and injection drug use across the country. In Ohio, the latest hepatitis C rates reported to the state’s Department of Health appear to have nearly doubled over the past two years.

In 2015, the Ohio Legislature passed a law that allowed local health departments to operate syringe exchanges in order to prevent and screen for blood-borne infections like hep C and HIV. But rural health departments across the state are struggling to secure the funds and community support to start such programs and often direct drug users and people at risk to go outside their communities for prevention or treatment services. What’s more, drug users are currently not tested for hepatitis C when they go to jail in Clinton or Fayette counties (some of Ohio’s most rural districts), leaving many hep C cases undetected.

As for why HCV is on the rise throughout the state, local drug users interviewed by the paper say needles (let alone clean ones) are incredibly difficult to find in the area, which leads many rural Ohio residents to share or reuse syringes. Local pharmacies appear to have stopped stocking clean needles. And, advocates say, the lack of nearby syringe exchanges to mitigate the crisis, is significantly increasing the risk of spreading hepatitis C and injection-related infections like MRSA, a multidrug-resistant staph infection.

Meanwhile, local drug users and advocates are desperately calling for more access and information about substance abuse treatment. To read the full article, click here.

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