Virginia Moves to Legalize Syringe Exchanges Across the State

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The Virginia Department of Health recently declared a public health emergency in response to the region's growing opioid epidemic and has drafted a bill to legalize syringe exchange programs across the state, The Cavalier Daily reports.

If passed in the Virginia General Assembly later this year, health officials say the bill could help prevent the spread of infections such as hepatitis C virus (HCV), hepatitis B virus (HBV) and HIV through needle sharing and potentially avoid another public health crisis.

According to harm reduction advocates in Virginia, the proposed measure would allow community organizations that already provide services like testing and treatment referrals for injection drug users to begin programs that supply sterile injection equipment in exchange for used syringes. It's a practice that numerous public health studies and state models have shown helps reduce the risk and incidence of blood-borne infections and better connects at-risk individuals to treatment.

This is the Virginia Department of Health's second attempt at legalizing syringe exchanges across the state. A similar bill was proposed last year after nearby Scott County, Indiana, experienced an unexpected surge of HIV and hepatitis C related to its opioid epidemic. However, the bill was ultimately shot down by a subcommittee of Virginia's Courts of Justice, who said they were uncomfortable with some pieces of the proposal.

"The proposal was to give the commissioner of health, in an emergency situation like in Indiana, the authority to go ahead with safe needle exchanges," said Del. John M. O'Bannon III (R-Henrico), who has supported both attempts at passage of the bill in Virginia's courts. "I thought this was a reasonable thing to do and that's why I sponsored it."

Currently, syringe exchanges cannot be funded through federal grant money. If passed, Virginia's syringe exchanges would likely have to be financed through non-governmental organizations. However, lawmakers have yet to determine the exact sources of funding for the measure.

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