Evansville Officers Suspended for Assault of Hep C Positive Man

November 8, 2016 By Matthew Zielske

Four officers in Evansville, IN, were recently suspended without pay for an incident involving a man who has hepatitis C. Three of the officers are likely to be terminated, with a 4th being demoted. You can watch the body cam video below to see what happened (Warning: the video can be hard to watch at times and contains strong language).

Video:
http://www.14news.com/story/33635680/epd-chief-bolin-officers-used-excessive-force-body-cam-footage-released

A week ago officers responded to a man breaking into a garage. When they arrived on the scene the officers handcuffed the man without incident. In the video you can see the officers did not ask the man if he had anything on him (including syringes). As one of the officers is conducting a search of the man in handcuffs, he gets stuck by a needle in the mans pocket. The officer looses his temper and begins to assault the man. Throwing him on the ground, smashing his head into the ground, and verbally abusing him (calling him a junkie, etc). The man reveals that he has hepatitis C and the officer gets even more angry. At one point one of the officers kicks the man while he is on the ground. Towards the middle of the video the officers take the handcuffs off the man so he can take his sweater and clothes off himself so they don't stuck again. You can hear them repeatedly tell the man that if he runs they'll shoot him in the back.

There are a lot of things that are disturbing about this video. And as a resident of Evansville myself (I've lived here since 2006) I find it frustrating and disheartening given that I've tried time and again to raise awareness on the risk of needle sticks in places without syringe exchange programs, and the importance of harm reduction measures for both public and first responder safety.

The officers in the video did a lot of things incorrectly. They didn't follow protocol when searching him. They lost their temper, they became violent, they put the mans life at risk, and they ultimately falsified reports in an attempt to hide the severity of the incident.

I don't think that these few officers represent all of those in Evansville, or even a majority, I am however concerned that we seem to be unable to move the conversation forward on a syringe exchange, or even a needle stick law, so that we can improve not only officer safety but the public safety.

This isn’t an issue that will go away and for better or worse I hope this underscores the importance that we take action in our communities to limit the risk of HCV/HIV transmission through situations such as these. Had the officers asked the man if he was carrying a syringe he may have said yes, or if a law were in place to encourage that, he may have willingly disclosed, but no attempt was made.

HCV can live in a syringe for 66 days, this opens many first responders, social workers, community health works and the community in general to risk from accidental needle sticks. This becomes even more likely when stigma exists that drives people further underground who use and limits their ability to safely dispose of equipment. We have to be proactive, compassionate and pragmatic.

We have to be everything the people in that body cam video weren’t.

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http://beta.docker.hepmag.com/blog/evansville-officers-suspended-assault-hep-c-positive-man