



## **County of Santa Cruz Board of Supervisors**

### **Agenda Item Submittal**

**From:** Ryan Coonerty, Third District Supervisor, Bruce McPherson, Fifth District Supervisor  
(831) 454-2200

**Subject:** Opposition to the Syringe Exchange Program Application from the Harm Reduction Coalition

**Meeting Date:** January 14, 2020

### **Recommended Action:**

Direct the Chair of the Board to send a letter to the California Department of Public Health opposing the syringe exchange program application from the Harm Reduction Coalition (HRC) of Santa Cruz County.

### **Executive Summary**

The Harm Reduction Coalition of Santa Cruz County has applied to the State for certification of a new syringe exchange program that would operate in Santa Cruz County. HRC is proposing a mobile location on Coral Street in the City of Santa Cruz and a home delivery service throughout the County as well. The California Department of Public Health is currently accepting public comments on HRC's application and the deadline for comments is January 20, 2020.

There are numerous serious concerns with this application, including the fact that our community has struggled with a persistent syringe litter problem for many years and a new syringe program that is not a 1 to 1 exchange is likely to exacerbate that problem. Santa Cruz County's Syringe Services Program distributed close to 600,000 syringes this past year to injection drug users and is already meeting the need for clean syringes for this population as evidenced by years of relatively stable disease rates. The County's SSP also provides enhanced access to treatment and testing that injection drug users will not be able to easily access if HRC's application is approved and clients are drawn away from the County's program. In addition, HRC's proposed location, adjacent to the County's only family shelter on Coral Street, is inappropriate and would create further community impacts to our most vulnerable residents.

Santa Cruz County already operates a robust, professionally-run Syringe Services Program. A new volunteer-run syringe program with no local oversight and multiple potential negative impacts to our community is unnecessary, harmful, and should be opposed by our Board.

### **Background**

For many years Santa Cruz County has operated a Syringe Services Program (SSP) with the goal of protecting and promoting residents' health and safety by preventing the spread of disease associated with injection drug use, and by decreasing the number of improperly disposed syringes in the community. The County's SSP is staffed by

medical professionals, maintains two locations, and is well known and well utilized. Santa Cruz County has worked very hard to design and implement a Drug Medi-Cal Organized Delivery System which has significantly expanded treatment capacity, and the County's syringe program is in the best position to be able to connect injection drug users with treatment.

In May of 2019 the Harm Reduction Coalition submitted an application for a separate, privately-run state-authorized syringe exchange program to operate in Santa Cruz County. This application raised serious concerns throughout the community and drew more than 2,000 signatures on a petition opposed to the application. While that application was ultimately withdrawn amid community opposition, now the same organization has submitted a new, substantially similar application to distribute syringes in our community.

## **Analysis**

### **LITTER**

Our community has struggled with a persistent syringe litter problem for multiple years now. The Office of AIDS should avoid authorizing a syringe exchange program that could exacerbate syringe litter problems. In Santa Cruz County, in the span of less than 11 months (7/1/18 to 5/15/19), a community clean-up organization picked up nearly 6,000 syringes in public areas. In addition, the City of Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Department picked up 3,501 syringes in parks and beaches in 2017 and 4,171 syringes in 2018. Save Our Shores, a local environmental non-profit that focuses on clean beaches, has also picked up hundreds of syringes that threaten the health of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary. While the County's SSP operates on a 1 to 1 exchange policy, the HRC's proposed program would not be a 1 to 1 exchange, which is likely to exacerbate the syringe litter problem. The public health impacts and environmental impacts of syringe litter must be considered.

Santa Cruz County has worked hard to address syringe litter, which we see as a public health issue that needs to be taken seriously. In order to deal with syringe litter, Santa Cruz County has placed sharps kiosks in multiple locations and required local pharmacies to participate in a sharps take-back program. Furthermore, the County's Syringe Services Program provides sharps containers and urges clients to dispose of syringes properly. Yet, despite these efforts, the syringe litter problem has persisted. When syringe litter reaches the volumes that it has in Santa Cruz County (particularly in the City of Santa Cruz) there are significant, far-reaching public health impacts, as some parents don't feel safe bringing their children to local parks and open spaces, using local public bathrooms, and participating in summer recreational programs on the beach due to concerns that their children will step on syringes. These concerns are not unfounded as many County residents have reported needle sticks throughout the years. Residents should not have to live this way.

### **COUNTY'S SSP**

HRC's current volunteer-run syringe distribution effort undermines and draws clients away from the County's professionally-run locally-authorized syringe exchange program. In Santa Cruz County, while the hours and locations of our SSP have remained constant, the number of unique IDs (clients) that visit one of our sites has

dropped drastically (387 visits in Sept. 2017, and only 148 visits in Sept. 2019) and the number of syringes dispensed has increased significantly as a number of volunteer secondary-exchangers associated with HRC have become more active. This secondary exchange activity by community volunteers has diverted injection drug users (who previously visited the County SSP) from the opportunity to see medical professionals who can identify and assist with medical issues, provide testing for diseases, connect clients to treatment and more. In such circumstances, it is a disservice, and potentially even a danger to injection drug users for the state to authorize a separate syringe exchange program to operate, because clients will shift to a syringe source that will not have the critical medical expertise that our SSP offers. Santa Cruz County has worked very hard (and invested heavily) to design and implement a Drug-Medi-Cal Organized Delivery system which has significantly expanded treatment capacity. Therefore our County's syringe program is in the best position to be able to connect injection drug users with treatment such as the County's Medication Assisted Treatment program.

The County-run SSP is accessible and will be increasing hours to become even more accessible per Board action on December 10, 2019. In addition, the SSP is exploring shifting hours to the most optimal times for utilization. The County's SSP continues to allow secondary exchange and provides a range of services. In our relatively small County of 274,000 residents, our SSP dispensed nearly 600,000 syringes in the last year, which is a per capita rate greater than Monterey County, Santa Clara County and San Mateo County's per capita rates combined. Santa Cruz County is not a community that lacks syringe access. County disease data has been relatively level with a downward trend in newly reported HIV cases and significantly fewer new cases of Hepatitis C reported in 2018. The County's program is already meeting the need for clean syringes and an additional syringe exchange program is not needed.

HRC's application doesn't appear to include oversight and involvement of licensed medical professionals. Santa Cruz County's Syringe Services Program is within the Public Health Division of the County's Health Services Agency, and the program is run with the oversight of professional health staff. Additionally, the County has formed a new commission to provide advice on improving our County SSP.

### **PROPOSED LOCATION**

The HRC describes their proposed location of mobile syringe services as, "a stretch of public property on the part of Coral Street that is between Limekiln Street and River Street. This outreach occurs on Sundays between the hours of 9am and 11pm." This location is completely inappropriate. The described location is in front of the Rebele Family Shelter, which provides emergency shelter for 28 households with children (approximately 90 individuals). The homeless children staying at the family shelter have been through enough adversity and often traumatic experiences. While their family is stabilizing in the shelter and working toward obtaining permanent housing, these children should not have to endure volunteer-run syringe distribution outside their building every Sunday. These vulnerable children and families deserve the state's consideration.

In addition to the family shelter, the Housing Matters campus on Coral Street includes shelter beds for homeless individuals, some of whom have struggled with addiction and are working hard to stay clean. A syringe distribution program that draws substance

abusers (and sometimes their dealers) to that area only makes it harder for the individuals in recovery to resist the temptation to use drugs.

In addition, there have been concerns about syringe distribution volunteers operating at local parks in the past without outreach to the community and without authorization of local jurisdictions. While the HRC states that they won't operate in local parks, there doesn't appear to be a legal prohibition from the state that restricts syringe exchange activities in public parks and open spaces.

It is our understanding that when a state-authorized syringe exchange program proposes changing or adding exchange locations, there is no requirement for the local government and the public to be informed and there is no opportunity to provide input. This is a concern because many locations are not appropriate for syringe exchange and it could be problematic for the HRC to start distributing syringes in a new neighborhood without any local consultation or consideration of impacts.

### **Conclusion**

Our goal is to protect and promote all residents' health and safety. Our Board has consistently supported the continuation of the County's SSP even though it has been controversial at times. The County's SSP remains accessible and access to treatment has been increased. If the State approves the Harm Reduction Coalition's application, it will further polarize our community on this difficult issue and would jeopardize the effectiveness of the County's Syringe Services Program. Our Board should express our opposition to this application to the State.

### **Strategic Plan Elements:**

1.A. Comprehensive Health & Safety, Health Equity; 4.B. Sustainable Environment, Natural Resources

### **Submitted by:**

Ryan Coonerty, Third District Supervisor, Bruce McPherson, Fifth District Supervisor

### **Attachments:**

a Letter of Sheriff Jim Hart opposing HRC's application



**Jim Hart  
Sheriff – Coroner  
County of Santa Cruz**

January 7, 2020

California Department of Public Health  
CDPH Office of Aids – MS7700  
P.O. Box 997426  
Sacramento, CA 95899-7426

Dear Ms. Katz,

I am writing to you about the Harm Reduction Coalition's application to operate a mobile syringe delivery program in Santa Cruz County. Our county has an existing syringe waste problem that plagues our cities, parks and beaches. Our county is the second smallest in the state geographically and has about 275,000 residents. The County currently operates a robust SSP from two locations that adequately meets the needs of our I.V. drug-using population and provides wrap-around services.

A secondary program, with little to no oversight and no services other than handing out syringes, is not needed and will only exasperate our syringe waste problem. Approving the HRC's application will negatively impact public safety by putting our community members at risk from exposure to even more syringe litter.

Recently, there have been concerns about HRC staff using local parks as a dispersal point. In their application, the HRC stated they would not operate in local parks; however, there does not appear to be a legal prohibition from the state that restricts services in public parks and open spaces. Additionally, it is my understanding that should the HRC receive state certification; they can apply to the state to expand services and amend their role without seeking approval from the county health officer, local law enforcement, or the public.

The HRC's lack of transparency and full disclosure in their first application has eroded community confidence and trust in this organization, and concern exists that the HRC will not operate within the parameters outlined in their application or seek input/public comment about changes to the program should licensing approval occur.

I have received well over 100 emails from concerned community members opposing this application. I have not received a single email supporting the application. This program is not wanted or needed in our community, it poses a public safety and health concern, and I strongly urge the Department of Health to deny the HRC's application.

Respectfully,



Jim Hart, Sheriff-Coroner