
County of Santa Cruz Health Services Agency Recommendations to improve syringe litter reporting and response through a centralized system across all partners

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**Prepared for the County Board of
Supervisors by HSA's Public Health
Division, Syringe Services Program**

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Introduction

The distribution of clean syringes, known as a syringe exchange program, started in the late 1980's to stop the spread of HIV among people who inject drugs. Since that time, syringe exchange has been noted as an evidence-based intervention to prevent the spread of bloodborne infectious diseases, such as HIV and hepatitis C, preventing injuries associated with injecting drugs, and preventing death. Preventing spread of disease among persons who inject drugs creates lower disease prevalence overall, leading to a safer community for all. The program encourages participants to utilize a clean syringe for every injection. Syringe exchange programs also teach participants about safe and proper disposal of their syringes.

Similar to all litter, syringe litter is currently addressed by a variety of stakeholders, including Public Works and Parks departments within the city and county jurisdictions, community-based organizations, people who inject drugs and the general public. There is currently no consolidated system to track the total number of syringes collected countywide. The current systems for the public to report found syringes is complicated by the differing processes of each jurisdiction.

On December 10, 2019, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors directed the Health Services Agency to return with recommendations to improve syringe litter reporting and response through a centralized system across all partners.

Background

The County of Santa Cruz's Syringe Services Program (SSP) is a program in the Health Services Agency's Public Health Division, focused on reducing the spread of infectious diseases in the community and increasing access to services for people who inject drugs. The program distributes clean syringes, educates on harm reduction and overdose prevention, provides linkages to health and social services including treatment for substance use disorder (SUD), and promotes safe disposal of used syringes in our community. This countywide and multi-pronged approach is critical to reducing syringe litter in Santa Cruz County. As syringes are dispensed, the program creates accessible opportunities for safe disposal of used syringes through the exchange program. The program also coordinates availability of public kiosks and clean-up services for syringe litter "hot spots". Continued efforts to identify areas of heavy syringe litter, targeted education for community members on proper disposal, resources available for disposal, and improved response to complaints of syringe litter are key to successfully address the issue.

As noted in the County of Santa Cruz Grand Jury report from 2017, “Sharper Solutions: A Sticky Situation That Won’t Go Away” (http://www.co.santa-cruz.ca.us/Portals/0/County/GrandJury/GJ2017_final/SharperSolutions.pdf), the County SSP is run by dedicated professionals from HSA without a budget or permanent staff. In 2020, HSA’s Public Health Division was able to add a full-time Program Coordinator to support core program operations, leveraging new funding for communicable disease control. However, the majority of program functions continue to depend on redirected staff from other programs (e.g. HSA Clinics’ Medication Assisted Treatment Program), temporary, unbenefited paid staff and unpaid labor (volunteers, uncompensated overtime for County management staff). Currently, the Public Health Division has limited resources to sustain this program. Though the program has value for improving community health, it will not be possible to expand programming without additional resources and partnerships.

It is difficult to sustain current programming, given the current landscape of Public Health directives. The Public Health Division has a responsibility to ensure a sustained response for the COVID-19 pandemic, and continued provision of legally-mandated essential services. Though SSP is locally mandated by the County Board of Supervisors, it is an unfunded mandate that is not considered an essential service of a Local Health Jurisdiction in California (17 CCR § 1276).

Locally, there are two authorized syringe service programs: the County SSP, operated by the Health Services Agency, and the State-authorized Harm Reduction Coalition of Santa Cruz County (HRCSCC). HRCSCC was authorized in 2020. Both programs conduct core services of syringe distribution and collection, however HRCSCC differs from the County program in that they operate a needs-based syringe distribution in the field (i.e. they are not fixed to a specific building). As HRCSCC conducts syringe services in the field, they also conduct regular syringe cleanup in the community.

Public Health Analysis

Best Practices to Address Syringe Litter

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the best way to deal with syringe litter is to provide multiple options for disposal (e.g. sharps containers, kiosks) and building a community-wide support for safe syringe disposal, including from people who inject drugs (PWID) and law enforcement, will help in reducing syringe litter in the community. Studies have found that syringe litter is more likely in areas without SSPs, and that more restrictive approaches do not reduce syringe litter in communities. Additionally, PWID will dispose of used syringes safely when given the options to do so and change their syringe-disposal behavior in response to increased safe disposal options. In addition, drug paraphernalia laws, which can criminalize the possession of syringes, are also associated with an increased likelihood of unsafe and improper syringe disposal. Communities concerned about syringe litter could consider examining their drug paraphernalia laws in addition to policies that affect the presence of an SSP. For example, a state may exempt syringes from the definition of drug paraphernalia entirely or only under certain circumstances (e.g., if a person is a participant in an SSP).

The CDC also notes some strategies to promote safe disposal of used syringes, which have been implemented by SSPs and other health departments across the nation:

- Emphasizing the value in returning used needles/syringes through education and providing sharps containers with every visit.
- Conducting community clean-ups and engaging the community in this effort.
- Developing strong relationships with law enforcement to educate them on their role in promoting safe disposal.
- Empowering police officers to collect used syringes safely by providing sharps containers for squad cars.
- Providing syringe disposal boxes in communities most convenient to PWID to collect used needles/syringes.
- Supporting programs where people in need of employment are hired by the city to pick up trash/recycling to include syringe pick up. This approach requires safety training and supplies.
- Establishing a call number for community members to report the presence of syringe litter and ensuring a short timeframe for pick up.

Reference: https://www.cdc.gov/ssp/docs/CDCSSP-FAQ_508.pdf

Local Assessments of Local Syringe Litter

From July through November 2019, the County SSP engaged with the community assess the current perceptions of the County program¹, and to identify areas for improvement. One meeting included a consultation with litter collection organizations, including Save Our Shores, Downtown Streets Team, Needle Solutions Team, Clean Team Associates and the County Department of Public Works. The participants from this meeting noted the following:

- Most syringe litter is seen in North County and is seasonal
- Agencies that provide litter cleanup often get calls from the public who want to report syringe litter
- Most of the organizations regularly collect data on the syringes they collect, though with varying methodology

The feedback from this meeting helped to develop a visual assessment of syringe litter in the county.

In the Fall of 2019, the County SSP assessed local syringe disposal options, which is documented in the report Syringe Access and Disposal in Santa Cruz County, CA¹. This assessment included individual field surveys, focus group discussions and a visual litter inspection.

During the two-week visual litter-inspection period of cross-sectional data collection, observation teams found 310 syringes (includes syringes with intact needles as well as syringe barrels without needles) and 506 pieces of injection equipment. *Non-sharp* injection equipment (e.g., syringe caps, sterile water vials, etc.) was found 1.6 times more often than syringes (sharps).

Syringe litter was not proportionately located throughout the community during the inspection period; it was often aggregated into piles and found near encampments, away from public bystanders. Out of the 310 syringes found in the visual inspection, three specific piles accounted for 60% (n=186) of the syringe litter found. Still, 40% (n=114) of syringes were found alone or in smaller piles (in groups of 2 to 12) in more public areas, such as outhouses, parking lots, or the tree outside the downtown public library.

¹ A full summary of these reports found at the County SSP's report to the Board of Supervisors on Dec 10, 2019: http://santacruzcountyca.igme2.com/Citizens/Detail_LegiFile.aspx?Frame=&MeetingID=1737&MediaPosition=0.000&ID=7842&CssClass=

Overall, during the two-week visual inspection, the amount of syringes that were disposed of safely vastly outnumbered the amount of syringe litter found in the community. The ratio of syringes improperly disposed of compared to those properly disposed of during the inspection period is 0.0103 or 310 to 30,106.755. In other words, for every 1,000 needles disposed of properly within Santa Cruz County, about 10 needles were disposed of improperly as litter.

The results of the visual inspection are specific to syringe *litter* and do not account for the syringes routinely collected by sanitation organizations and community groups. Many of these organizations have noted a recent increase in syringes collected, though there is no consolidated resource for reporting the quantity of syringe litter collected through these organizations. There is also no community-wide agreement defining “syringe litter” from general “syringe waste”, and the understanding for how it would benefit the community to track both metrics.

Syringe reporting and collection in throughout the county is dependent on the jurisdiction where the syringe is found. Each jurisdiction, cities and county, have their own system to track and respond to syringe litter. Recently the SSP Advisory Commission provided feedback to the County program that the current systems to report syringes is confusing for the general public and a centralized system would benefit the community.

In April 2021, the program surveyed local organizations (n=10) who conduct syringe cleanup in the community. The survey results indicate the organizations that collect syringes also collect other types of litter, and all respondents also note that they provide cleanup near encampments. There is also some variation in how syringe litter is defined, as some organizations define it as only a needle while others also include a plunger without a needle. Survey respondents noted that a centralized reporting system like My Santa Cruz County would be useful for their syringe collection efforts, and the majority of the respondents stated that if they received an alert of syringe litter from this centralized system seven days per week between 8am-5pm, they would be immediately responsive to it.

Public Health Priority

From the initial assessments noted above, the majority of syringe waste is routinely collected by the existing infrastructure of sanitation organizations (Public Works departments of all jurisdictions, Parks departments, non-profit groups such as Downtown Streets Team), the syringe services programs (through syringe distribution encounters and public kiosks), and community groups (such as Needle Solutions Team). The County SSP reached out to other California counties on the concept of a resource that is specifically responsive to syringe litter reports. Deploying such a specified resource is expensive and requires resources beyond what is typically

practical for local governments and community-based organizations. Instead, the most feasible solution is to embed syringe clean up with existing infrastructure. In Santa Cruz County, the County SSP contracted with two organizations for syringe litter abatement, both having existing systems to support general litter collection: Downtown Streets Team and Clean Team Associates.

SSP programs are typically operated by local Public Health departments because of its effectiveness at reducing disease, injury and death. It helps lower communitywide prevalence of infectious diseases, such as HIV, by making it possible for people to use a clean syringe with every injection. When an SSP is operated using evidence-based practices, as noted earlier in this report, it has been shown to contribute to a reduction in syringe litter. However, syringe litter is not the sole responsibility of a syringe service program. Syringes are distributed through other venues, such as being prescribed by a medical provider and purchased online or through pharmacies. The use of syringes is not just by people who inject illicit drugs, but by those with medical conditions that require regular injections (such as Diabetes Mellitus). As a program, the County SSP continues to provide resources and education for its participants to ensure syringe disposal is accessible. Both the County SSP and HRCSCC are valuable stakeholders to help the community determine sustainable solutions to prevent syringe litter. However, as SSP services are not considered an essential service for a Local Public Health Department, the County's Public Health Division has to consider the public health benefit and its own capacity to determine appropriate investments in a consolidated syringe collection system.

Developing the Recommendations

The recommendations developed for this report relate specifically to the Board's directive to return with recommendations *to improve syringe litter reporting and response through a centralized system across all partners*. This is a downstream intervention, which is responsive to existing, recurring syringe litter. There are additional upstream interventions which would focus on prevention of syringe litter. Syringe litter is a complex issue, intersecting with other social factors (homelessness, poverty, substance use disorder) that require complex solutions. However, the specific intervention of a well-coordinated syringe reporting and response system could benefit community. Data from this system may also help identify upstream interventions that would prevent syringe litter.

To develop the recommendations, the program reviewed the Syringe Access and Disposal report from October 2019, conducted an initial survey with organizations who conduct syringe cleanup, had conversations with the cities of Watsonville and Santa Cruz, and reviewed potential recommendations with the SSP Advisory Commission. The recommendations for this report have been developed with the County's vision, mission and values in mind.

Recommendations

The Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency recommends that we improve our partnerships and service coordination with our cities, non-profits, and private organizations to have a greater impact on all litter and to ensure syringe litter is addressed efficiently. The Health Services Agency continues to partner with many organizations supporting syringe-litter cleanup, including the County Department of Public Works (DPW). DPW has offered additional funding through new revenue measures to increase cleanup activities in underserved areas. They are also invested in improving the use of the My Santa Cruz County app for reporting syringe and other litter.

Utilizing the My Santa Cruz County application as a centralized reporting tool for our community to report syringes and identify problem areas was supported by the Syringe Services Program Advisory Commission on Tuesday, April 6, 2021. The SSP Advisory Commission noted that a simple reporting system could be useful in the community, though implementation should include promotion of the app so that the public knows how to use it. For the initial implementation, the My Santa Cruz County app will coordinate syringe reporting in unincorporated areas of the county. As this app is developed, continued efforts will be needed to assess and implement interoperability with systems of other jurisdictions, such as the Community Request for Service Portal (CRSP) through the City of Santa Cruz. Ideally, when syringe litter is reported, the issue will be directed to the appropriate jurisdiction to respond.

Syringe clean-up efforts are already underway. Various organizations are performing litter abatement with some specifically focused on syringe litter. Sustaining these organizations' efforts is a key recommendation to complement syringe reporting through My Santa Cruz County. The County DPW has approved funding in the Recycling and Solid Waste budget that can be used to expand syringe cleanup through litter-cleanup organizations throughout the County. The County SSP has existing contracts with the Downtown Streets Team (DST) Inc. and Clean Team Associates for syringe litter abatement. The County SSP also partners with Human Services Department's CalFresh Employment & Training Program (CFET) to support syringe cleanup and offer work experience to CalFresh recipients through work training programs like DST. Leveraging the existing litter-cleanup infrastructure is recommended for sustainable syringe litter abatement.

The County SSP has deployed six syringe disposal kiosks throughout the county, accessible by the public 24 hours a day 7 days a week. One kiosk is on County property in Watsonville and the remaining are located on County and City property in Santa Cruz. Three of these kiosks were recently deployed last year within the City of Santa Cruz. The County SSP directly contracts with Sharps Solutions to service these kiosks. The kiosks are well-utilized by the public and sustaining this program is recommended.

However, no additional funding or staff were provided to the County SSP when the Board directed HSA to perpetually fund the deployment and servicing of the public syringe kiosks. Expansion of the kiosk program will be dependent on available County General Funds allocated to HSA.

Ongoing efforts to address syringe litter requires collaboration among all stakeholders, including but not limited to: all jurisdictions, community members who benefit from access to syringes and safe disposal options, organizations who conduct syringe cleanup, and the SSP Advisory Commission. Collaborations will support a coordinated response and identification of sustainable solutions to address syringe litter. As the My Santa Cruz County app is implemented, the County should continue to collaborate with these stakeholders to collectively address syringe litter.

Below is an estimated annual budget for the recommendations, totaling \$131,940. The project will be dependent on leveraging existing County personnel and infrastructure. As this is implemented, the County will assess resources needed to sustain the system.

Line Item	Estimated Annual Cost	Description	Funding Source
In-Kind County Personnel	TBD	Staffing for this project will come from HSA, DPW and ISD. Staff activities will include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project management for implementation • Contract oversight for litter-collection organizations • Develop and oversee public promotion of the app • Collaborate with other stakeholders and determine interoperability of app with other jurisdictions 	TBD
My Santa Cruz County start-up and maintenance	15,408	ISD staff time to accommodate for countywide reporting, interoperability and updating resolution	TBD
Contractors for syringe litter	100,000	Sustaining existing infrastructure of contractors who will be responsive to reports of syringe litter	HSA, DPW Recycling and Solid Waste, HSD CFET
Educational campaign	5,000	Campaign to promote the My Santa Cruz County application and education for community members about disposal and resources	TBD
Three additional syringe kiosks	5,700	Total one-time cost for deployment of three kiosks (\$1,900 x 3) in FY 21/22; 2 in Santa Cruz 1 in Watsonville	County General Funds from HSA
Kiosk maintenance	5,832	Annual service cost of \$648 for 9 syringe kiosks (reflects monthly service). 6 existing kiosks and 3 new kiosks deployed FY 21/22	County General Funds from HSA

Summary of Recommendations

Expansion of syringe collection efforts will not be possible without additional resources and partnerships. To improve syringe litter reporting and response through a centralized system across all partners, HSA's recommendations are centered around leveraging the existing infrastructure for litter collection and promoting collaboration among County departments. A summary of the recommendations include the following:

1. Relevant County departments, such as HSA and DPW should continue to collaborate on countywide strategies to reduce syringe litter.
2. Maintain existing disposal strategies, such as the kiosk program across all jurisdictions.
3. Leverage existing litter-cleanup infrastructure for syringe litter response, including expansion of contracts with litter-cleanup organizations to support syringe cleanup efforts.
4. Utilize the My Santa Cruz county mobile application (app) for easier reporting and response in the unincorporated county regions.

The County SSP will continue to collaborate with partners to support proper syringe disposal and mitigating syringe litter, as safe syringe disposal is a core component of the program. The program will continue to partner with the other jurisdictions on the deployment and maintenance of public syringe kiosks. SSP will assess the syringe-litter reporting verbiage on its website, and attempt to streamline the instructions. Moving forward, the SSP requires strong collaboration with other stakeholders to deliver a coordinated and sustainable approach for syringe litter reporting and response.