

Frequently Asked Questions about Needle Exchange

Why does PHMDC do needle exchange?

Our goal is to prevent disease transmission from injection drug use. HIV, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C are efficiently transmitted through shared syringes, and other injection supplies.

In addition, improperly discarded syringes pose a serious risk for injury and infection to sanitation workers and the community.

Needle Exchange is a disease reduction intervention recommended by a variety of public health institutions including CDC and WHO.

How long has there been needle exchange in Dane County?

Madison Department of Public Health started its needle exchange program in January 1996.

AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin and AIDS Network began exchange programs in Dane County soon thereafter.

How does the PHMDC needle exchange work?

Needle Exchange is available at PHMDC HIV testing sites during HIV Clinic hours – at the East Washington and Atrium offices. There is no enrollment procedure. Names are not taken. Only adults are served with this program.

People are encouraged to bring in their dirty syringes, but this is not required. Many users collect syringes in detergent containers and bring the container to a syringe exchange site when it is full. Some individuals dispose of syringes in public bathrooms that have needle collection boxes. Some may have had their equipment confiscated and don't have any syringes to exchange. Injection drug users often are fearful of getting caught with dirty needles by police.

Staff talk about safe needle disposal, if the client does not bring their dirty needles to PHMDC.

Staff also offer interested participants hepatitis B immunization, condoms, and testing for HIV and hepatitis B and C.

Staff provide information and referrals for addiction treatment, housing, and other resources.

Has it worked to prevent disease?

“For injection drug users who cannot or will not stop injecting drugs, using sterile needles and syringes only once remains the safest, most effective approach for limiting HIV transmission.” (CDC)

National studies indicate that needle exchange prevents HIV and hepatitis infections among injection drug users. Though we don't have studies to prove definitively that it has prevented disease locally, the numbers of reported new cases of HIV among injection drug users has dropped in the last ten years. In 2011, no cases of HIV were reported in Dane County with injection drug use as the only risk factor.

How many people use this program?

PHMDC counts the number of exchanges we do rather than unique individuals using the service. In 2011, PHMDC saw 1055 exchange client visits. This is more than double the number of exchange visits PHMDC had in 2010. AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin (ARCW) did 1536 exchanges in 2011, and AIDS Network did 1323 exchanges.

Why does the program give out more than just sterile syringes?

The injector's blood may contaminate any of the supplies used to inject drugs and be a means of spreading disease. CDC currently is collecting data from people with hepatitis C, to determine which specific injection supplies are linked to hepatitis C spread.

Doesn't giving supplies to injection drug users enable them to keep using drugs?

"Several studies have found that providing sterilized equipment to injection drug users substantially reduces risk of HIV infection, increases the probability that they will initiate drug treatment, and does not increase drug use." (National HIV/AIDS Prevention Strategy for the United States, 2010)

"Syringe Exchange Programs have become important referral to treatment sources" (CDC)

People addicted to drugs will use "dirty" syringes if new ones are not available.

Does PHMDC give out naloxone?

Naloxone (Narcan) is a medication that reverses the effects of opiates. It is usually administered through injection but a nasal spray is also available. If naloxone is given to someone who has not used narcotics, it has no effect at all. PHMDC does not dispense naloxone. ARCW gives out naloxone and trains people how to use it in case someone they are with overdoses on narcotics. Certain EMS providers in Dane County are trained and equipped to administer naloxone, if a drug overdose is suspected.

ARCW reports that naloxone was used 104 times in Dane County in 2011 by people they trained.

Questions?

If the public has questions about needle exchange, they may call 243-0411 (the STI Line).

If you have questions, call Cheryl Robinson or Mary Jo Hussey.