Syringe Service Programs (SSPs)

WHAT IS HARM REDUCTION?

Harm reduction is a set of practical strategies and ideas aimed at reducing negative consequences associated with drug use. Harm reduction is also a movement for social justice built on a belief in, and respect for, the rights of people who use drugs. This fact sheet focuses on harm reduction applied to drug use and HIV.

Harm reduction incorporates a spectrum of strategies that includes safer use, managed use, abstinence, meeting people who use drugs "where they're at," and addressing conditions of use along with the use itself. Harm reduction requires that interventions and policies designed to serve people who use drugs reflect specific individual and community needs, therefore there is no universal definition of or formula for implementing harm reduction.

WHAT ARE SYRINGE SERVICE PROGRAMS?

Syringe Service Programs (SSPs) are a harm reduction measure designed to reduce the adverse effects associated with injection drug use.

SSPs serve as a way for people who inject drugs (PWID) to receive sterile needles and injection equipment in exchange for their used equipment. Most of these programs provide treatment referrals, testing for blood-borne viruses, and street cleanup opportunities.

A recent study comparing Miami, a city without SSPs, with San Francisco, a city abundant with SSPs, found that there were 8 times more discarded used syringes on the streets of Miami, even though Miami has only half as many injection drug users as San Francisco.

Studies have also shown SSPs to be effective in reducing the transmission of blood-borne viruses such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV). By reducing the reuse and sharing of needles, SSPs prevent injection-related bacterial infections, reduce cases of fatal overdose, and improve community safety.

Additionally, SSPs act in a cost-effective manner. By focusing on prevention, they reduce the medical costs associated with antiretroviral treatment (ART) of HIV or treatment/cure of HCV.

WHO SHOULD CONSIDER SSPs AND HARM REDUCTION?

SSPs and other harm reduction services should be considered by anyone interested in reducing the adverse effects of injection drug use. These programs are beneficial for improving public health and safety.

SSPs and other harm reduction services serve as ways for PWID and non-drug users to be empowered, responsible, and helpful members of their community.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF SSPs AND HARM REDUCTION?

SSPs significantly reduce the rates of HIV and HCV infection in their communities, reduce unsafe needle disposal, protect law enforcement, improve the safety of the community, and empower PWID to take care of their bodies, support each other, and educate one another.

WHAT ARE THE CONCERNS ABOUT SSPs AND HARM REDUCTION?

A major criticism of SSPs and other harm reduction services is that they enable drug use and cause more crime in the area. However, both of these claims have been proven to be false time and time again.

In reality, the main drawback of SSPs is that they lack the resources and support to meet the entire needs of their community. Ultimately, a Supervised Consumption Service (SCS) may be necessary to prevent overdose and public injection, both of which are not adequately addressed by SSPs.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Syringe Service Programs (SSPs) and other harm reduction services are pragmatic measures to address the adverse effects associated with injection drug use. They are beneficial for people who inject drugs, as well as those who live and work in communities that experience injection drug use.

MORE INFORMATION

Drug Policy Alliance

Drug Policy Alliance: Supervised Consumption Services

Harm Reduction International

National Harm Reduction Coalition

National Harm Reduction Coalition: Syringe Access

National Harm Reduction Coalition: Harm Reduction Issues

National Harm Reduction Coalition: Supervised Consumption Services

North America Syringe Exchange Network (NASEN): Find a syringe service program (SSP) near you

Find a treatment center near you or call 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

NEXT Distro: Access mail-based naloxone

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