

A.I.D.S. Secret program exchanges needles

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SANTA CRUZ — A clandestine needle-exchange program has been operating in the city for more than a year with workers providing sterile needles to drug users in trade for their old syringes.

"We are doing this as concerned citizens in response to a health crisis," said a representative of the program. "To the extent contaminated needles are a vehicle for the HIV virus, we are taking it upon ourselves to dispose of contaminated needles and provide access to sterile needles."

Possession of a hypodermic syringe without a prescription is illegal, but the exchanges, which number between 70 and 100 per week, serve a "life-saving function," said

the representative.

Santa Cruz Deputy Police Chief Mike Dunbaugh said the police department does not have a set position on the issue.

"We encourage programs that stop the spread of AIDS and hepatitis," he said. "... We understand that the seriousness of HIV and hepatitis calls for extraordinary and innovative measures."

Dunbaugh said "to the best of my knowledge" the police department has not known about the local needle-exchange program.

This unsanctioned group has centered its work in the Beach Flats and River Flats areas of the city and has generated its clientele mostly through word of mouth, said the representative, who was identified only as "Libby" during a

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panel discussion Thursday on needle exchange.

Sponsored by the AIDS Response Planning Group, the discussion also included talks by Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina, drug-treatment providers and a member of a needle-exchange program in San Francisco.

"There's a lot of hard questions about needle exchange," Medina said.

In addition to discussing the legal implications of distributing needles, panelists raised the ethical issues of whether the exchange of needles promotes drug use and what to do when a child wants to exchange a needle.

"It is unlawful to possess a hypodermic needle unless you have a prescription from a doctor," Medina said. "To remedy that is through community work. If the community thought it was necessary, you would get a bill through the Legislature."

Medina said he does not have a position on a needle exchanges, but that it does pose a dilemma for police officers.

"What do we do when we come across a health agency officer with a bag of needles?" he asked.

During the two-hour discussion, Libby stressed that the program does more than just trade needles. It provides AIDS education materials, condoms, bleach and alcohol swabs, she said.

The distribution of needles has raised the argument that it promotes drug use, but Libby emphasized that the operation does not advocate drug activity.

"The outreach group does not function, in any capacity whatsoever, as a means for encouraging,

fostering, condoning or facilitating the use of such drugs through provision of needles," she said. "On the contrary, the group provides those who are already using and addicted to such drugs the means to avoid using faulty, dirty or potentially infected needles which have been documented as a primary source of HIV transmission."

The group has a strict one-for-one exchange policy, and under no circumstances is a needle provided to a person unless an old needle is provided, Libby said.

The group exchanges between 70 and 100 needles a week as well as provide condoms, information and referrals to drug-treatment programs, Libby said.

George Clarke, a representative of a San Francisco needle-exchange program, said his project started much like Libby's group when it began in November 1988.

Volunteers currently go to four different neighborhoods and serve 750 drug-injection users in a two-hour period, he said.

The program gives them an opportunity to move to a safer behavior, Clarke said.

Bobby Jaurigue, who said he is a recovering heroin addict, raised several issues about the distribution of needles.

"What I'm concerned about is the effect on the individual who injects drugs," he said. "I am one of those. I am an addict though I have not used in more than seven years. If you really do care about me, put me in a drug-treatment program, help my family."

He also raised the question of what happens when an AIDS vaccine is discovered.

"Will you continue giving needles out?" he asked.