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Support here for needle exchange

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Photographic illustration by Mike McCollum

Needle Exchange Program in Santa Cruz is regarded as a success fighting AIDS infection by drug users.

Program called success in fighting AIDS

By CHELA ZABIN
STAFF WRITER

A Santa Cruz program that swaps used syringes for clean ones in the hopes of limiting the spread of the AIDS virus may soon come to Watsonville.

Santa Cruz Needle Exchange Program has been operating for about three years in the northern part of the county and is regarded by many in the health community as very successful. Volunteers go to places where intravenous drug users congregate and for each dirty needle the users turn in, they get a clean one in return.

Drug users who share nee-

dles are at high risk of contracting HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Similar programs on the East Coast and in San Francisco have been successful in reducing infection rates.

Possession of a needle without a prescription is illegal. But in most places where the programs exist, there's a tacit understanding with the police not to arrest those exchanging needles. Legislation that would have legalized a pilot needle-exchange program was vetoed by Gov. Wilson last year. It has been re-introduced this year.

About a dozen people gathered at a meeting Tuesday night

at Salud Para La Gente Clinic to discuss how to bring such a program to Watsonville, and how, in particular, to reach Latino drug users.

Richard Smith, the head of the Santa Cruz program, said his organization exchanges about 1,000 needles each quarter. Besides the needles, they hand out bleach (for cleaning needles), condoms and alcohol wipes. They also refer drug users to treatment and other programs. Although the outreach workers do not preach, they have helped between 15 to 20 people get into treatment programs each quarter.

"It's been a phenomenal success in Santa Cruz," Smith said. Word has spread throughout the drug-using community about the program, and people now wait in line for the outreach workers to come.

But the program has been unsuccessful in reaching Latino drug users in Santa Cruz, and when its outreach workers tried working the levee in Watsonville last November, they were lucky to get a handful of people a day to participate, he said. In February they gave up, deciding a re-evaluation of tactics was needed.

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Ricardo Mac Kee, who volunteered with the program before taking a job at Salud Para La Gente, said the need for such a program in Watsonville is great.

"The IVDU community is a large community here in Watsonville," he said.

Mac Kee and others concluded that Latino outreach workers would be needed to successfully reach the Latino drug users, who are in the majority in Watsonville.

And a representative from Si Se Puede, a local drug treatment program, suggested using recovered drug addicts to work the needle exchange, saying that she thinks Latinos would respond better to people they know than to "strangers."

But there is a problem with that, said Ruben Chavez, who works with addicts in the jail system.

In some cases, terms of probation prevent addicts from being in places where there is heavy drug use, and anyone who has a record of drug addiction arrests would face a heavier sentence if he or she was caught carrying needles. Then there's the risk of relapse when you send someone into their old stomping grounds with a pocketful of needles.

Another woman, who identified herself as a former long-time addict, agreed that former addicts would be effective outreach workers. She suggested that they could spread the word about the needle exchange and tell addicts when and where the program is happening, rather than carry the needles themselves.

Just about everyone familiar with drug addicts agreed Tuesday night that distributing needles would not encourage drug use. Chavez said the clients he works with have told him people are "going to inject whether there's a (clean) needle or not."

Maribel Cuervo, who does AIDS education and outreach for Salud Para La Gente, said she thinks the community is ready for such a program. Salud's workers don't exchange needles, but they do distribute bleach, condoms and literature. Initially, Cuervo said, many Lat-

inos rejected the bleach, insisting they didn't need it. Now, she said, more and more people take it and several have asked about getting needles.

"This is a big sign for me, right there," she said.

But Cuervo and other health outreach workers said they wanted to make sure they wouldn't be confused with the people who distribute needles. The group discussed the possibility of T-shirts or badges to keep the identity of the different groups separate.

Several more steps need to be taken before needle exchange workers will hit the streets. Group members want to talk with the police, with local politicians and others in health care here first.

Watsonville Mayor Oscar Rios said yesterday that he would support such a program if it would help stop the spread of AIDS. He said he thought any apprehensions that business owners on lower Main Street might have about it could be assuaged if they were brought into discussions about the program, and that he would urge the police department to take a tolerant stance on the issue.

"The whole point here is to find common ground to solve a problem — the spread of AIDS," he said.

Rios also liked hearing that used needles aren't found lying around in Santa Cruz much anymore. That's a problem here that worries parents, he said.

Police Chief Terry Medina said he didn't think all the AIDS education efforts of the last four or five years have made a dent in the infection rate and wondered whether it was good public policy to break the law for negligible results.

But Medina also said going after people with needles is "not one of our highest priorities," unless it is being done in a way that's "an obvious violation of the law."

Right now, the Santa Cruz Needle Exchange's phone number is a toll call from Watsonville. There was discussion Tuesday night of getting a Watsonville exchange or an 800 number. The message on the machine also needs to be bilingual; right now it is in English only.