

They break the law to stop HIV

by GREG BEEBE
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Two days a week, like clockwork, a handful of otherwise law-abiding people go out and commit a crime — distributing hundreds of clean hypodermic kits to the community's intravenous drug users.

Possession of a hypodermic needle without a prescription is against the law. But for these 10 volunteers from the Santa Cruz Needle Exchange Program, the risk is small when weighed against the greater goal: curbing the rate of HIV infection among IV drug users.

After gay men, IV drug users are the most likely group to contract the virus that causes AIDS; the virus is spread when HIV-contaminated needles are shared. Such needle sharing, according to the state Office of AIDS, is the primary route of HIV transmission in het-

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erosexuals, females and the unborn.

For IV drug users like Cathy (last name withheld), a heroin addict for 20 years, the exchange is "a way to get clean, unused needles to protect me from the threat of AIDS."

For program volunteers like Ken Vail, the exchange is a simple matter of life and death.

"It's better to break the law and save a life than not break the law and watch someone die," said Vail,

33, a graduate student in public health and a recovering drug addict.

The exchange, said Rita Scardacci, the county's assistant chief of public health, has "tremendous value to our community." Public and private health officials estimate the two-year-old exchange program has spared at least 200 men and women from HIV infection.

While safe-sex practices and extensive peer group education have

■ Sheriff Noren denounces exchange program — A2

helped reduce the rate of HIV infection in the gay community, IV drug use has become one of the most prevalent risk factors for new HIV cases in California, according to the state AIDS office.

A recent Yale University study indicated that in the first eight months of a needle exchange program in New Haven, Conn., the HIV infection rate among IV drug users was reduced by 33 percent.

"The person who's shooting drugs in the Beach Flats may end up having sex with someone at UCSC who might end up having sex with your kid," said Charlene Worley, 24, another needle exchange volunteer. She joined up with the program after a close relative died of AIDS.

Cocaine is rivaling heroin as the
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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Hypos, condoms and bleach are included in the program.

Needle exchange program

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IV drug of choice, according to federal studies. Addicts, said Vail, are going to continue to use drugs, but at least with the exchange they can shoot-up removed from the threat of AIDS. In addition, clients get educational material, bleach for cleansing needles, alcohol swabs, drug-treatment referrals, condoms and an understanding ear.

"There are a lot of scared people out there," said Vail. A 1989 survey by area narcotics agents revealed 1,100 IV drug users in the county. That number has surely increased in two years, agents said.

On the streets, a sterile syringe could "fetch" as much as \$10, said Vail. The program exchanges about 200 fresh needles a week in the winter, and more than 400 a week during the summer months. Besides exchanging needles from two regular stationary locations, the program recently started making house calls, and saw its popularity with users jump as a result.

Many IV drug users, said Vail, are reluctant to exchange needles in the open, fearing arrest and/or the label of drug addict. Program participants, he said, "cut across all different classes ... from Beach Flats to Scenic Drive (near UC Santa Cruz)"; sometimes they travel from outside the county.

Needles are traded on a strictly one-for-one basis. Users turn their needles into a bio-hazardous collection box and receive a new sterile hypodermic kit in exchange.

The program, said Richard Smith, director of outreach to injection drug users for the Santa Cruz AIDS Project, has several important fringe benefits.

"We're not finding discarded syringes — at playgrounds, in people's backyards, in the streets — because they have a value now," said Smith. Emergency room admissions for abscesses have also declined by 50 percent because of the distribution of alcohol swabs for sterilizing, Smith said.

And, as many as two or three addicts a week are going into drug treatment as a result of the esteem-building relationships they've established with the exchange's volunteers, said Smith.

"We're losing a lot of our regulars to drug treatment," said Smith. "But unfortunately, there's others out there to take their place."

The exchange is funded strictly by donations from volunteers, clients and others.

"We can get money from a strung-out dope fiend, but we can't get \$44 for 500 syringes from the county," said Vail.

"We've been using money out of our own pockets for the last two years and it's time for the people of Santa Cruz to take responsibility, because people are dying."

Legislative help for needle exchange proponents may be on the horizon. Assemblyman Willie Brown, D-San Francisco, has introduced a bill that — if passed — would allow individual counties to decriminalize and fund pilot pro-

Program encourages drug use, says sheriff

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SANTA CRUZ — Offering clean needles to intravenous drug users as a way of reducing the spread of AIDS is tantamount to encouraging illegal drug use, the county's top law enforcement official said Friday.

County Sheriff Al Noren said he is against needle exchange programs "because I think all it's saying is, 'We can't win (the war on drugs) so let's help people use drugs.'"

Stopping the flow of drugs is a more sensible alternative, said Noren.

"They have given out condoms and bleach and comic books on how to clean your needles and if that doesn't do it, why do they think giving out needles will?" he said.

An underground needle exchange program in Santa Cruz currently makes one-for-one trades for as many as 500 clean needles a week during peak periods. Proponents of the program say the exchange — in concert with peer education, condoms and bleach for sterilizing needles — is reducing by one-third the spread of HIV in the drug-using community.

"People were using drugs before we got there and they are going to continue to use drugs whether we're there or not," said Ken Vail, a needle exchange volunteer and recovering addict who's been clean for eight years.

Noren, though, said, "All you're doing (with needle exchange) is kind of saying, 'Go ahead and use drugs.'" He thinks a three-part plan of drug treatment, law enforcement and education can effectively curb IV drug use, and hence, the HIV infection rate.

Noren said he could not recall any instances where Sheriff's deputies have encountered or arrested needle exchange outreach workers.

The sheriff sees the exchange program as "kind of an indica-

tion of our attitude toward life.

"Maybe we should start paying burglars. Instead of stealing VCRs, bring in an old one and we'll give you a new one."

Steve Belcher, Deputy Chief of Santa Cruz Police, said arresting outreach workers for exchanging hypodermic kits with addicts is not a top department priority.

"We don't go out and clandestinely try to follow them around," said Belcher. If the SCPD was to cite a needle exchange volunteer, the department would routinely refer it to the District Attorney's Office for prosecution or dismissal.

A half-dozen San Francisco needle exchange volunteers were arrested in January for trading syringes with addicts. The charges were later dropped.

"There's a lot of other social issues that go along with it," said Belcher. "We're not the moral police or the social police."

Vail said his fellow volunteers are acutely aware that possession of a hypodermic needle without a prescription is against the law. They go out of their way to not cross police or flaunt the trading of syringes in public, he said.

Needle exchange, said Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina, poses "hard questions."

He supports "above board" efforts by county health workers and Salud Para La Gente health clinic to distribute literature, condoms and bleach to South County IV drug users.

But bringing clean needles into areas where neighbors and merchants are often already upset about drug abuse and its associated activities may be a disruptive force in the community, said Medina.

Watsonville police, Medina said, "want to be as supportive as we can" short of ignoring violations of the law. Perhaps the best thing to do at this time, said the chief, is for needle exchange proponents to "work to change the law."

jects that exchange clean needles.

Both Scardacci and Vail said the streetwise spirit of the current clandestine needle exchange must be continued if a county-sponsored program is to be effective. Drug-using clients, they said, would bolt from any service stamped with the seal of a bureaucracy.

The needle exchange concept, however, has yet to make its way into South County.

In the Pajaro Valley — where "we have on a per capita basis the

same number of heroin and opiate users as New York City, 200 times the national average" — the idea is getting lukewarm reviews, said Richard Miranda, director of education for Salud Para La Gente health clinic.

"I'm not going to have my (outreach) people violating the law," said Miranda. "I'm not sure whether I'm in favor of it or not. ... It's kind of like abortion — any position you take is either going to be right or wrong."