

*AIDS - Oct. 7 '92*

# Needle exchange continues

## Working in face of Wilson's veto

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SANTA CRUZ — A group that distributes clean hypodermic needles in an attempt to stop the spread of the AIDS virus is vowing to continue in the aftermath of Gov. Pete Wilson's veto of a bill that would have made needle exchanges legal in select communities.

Workers from the Santa Cruz Needle Exchange Program said this week they will continue — underground and undaunted — in the face of the governor's veto.

"There's no reason for us to stop," said Heather Edney, the exchange program director. As long as the group can survive on community donations and support, "we're going to keep doing it," she said.

Twice weekly, program volunteers swap hundreds of clean hypodermic needles and syringes one-for-one with injection-drug users. On a recent Saturday night, more than 300 clean kits were traded for contaminated needles and syringes at a location in downtown Santa Cruz.

In addition, clients receive educational material, bleach for cleaning needles, alcohol swabs, drug-treatment referrals, condoms and peer counseling.

After gay men, injection-drug users are the group most at risk for contracting HIV; the virus is spread when HIV-contaminated needles and syringes are shared. Health officials estimated last spring that the local exchange program had helped prevent more than 200 cases of HIV infection since its inception in 1990.

In San Francisco, where the non-profit group Prevention Point has exchanged millions of needles since 1989, 10 percent of the used kits test positive for HIV, said project director George Clark. Injection drug users there recognize Prevention Point volunteers by the baby carriages full of clean needles the group pushes around city streets.

Area health officials and AIDS prevention and education specialists had hoped the legislation would open the door for pilot, legal needle exchange programs in San Francisco County and other communities, since possession of a hypodermic needle without a prescription is illegal.

In fact, local HIV prevention and AIDS service groups had already met with county officials in anticipation of the bill becoming law, said Dr. Ira Lubell, the county's medical director.

"I was surprised and disappointed because I felt that this would have been a positive step toward reducing morbidity and mortality from AIDS, hepatitis B and other blood-borne infectious diseases," said Lubell.

But Wilson, in his veto message

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last week, said there was "insufficient evidence to demonstrate the efficacy of these programs."

Lubell and others questioned the Republican governor's reasoning.

"The governor talks that there is 'insufficient evidence'....," said Lubell, "and I feel that this is weak. Saving one life is reason enough."

Edney asked, "How many more people have to die before this thing goes through?"

John Laird, executive director of the Santa Cruz AIDS Project, said, "In his veto message the governor says there isn't enough information to justify this kind of program. This bill would have been a pilot project to develop just that kind of information."

"You can't have it both ways," said Laird.

Craig Reinerman, a professor of sociology at UC Santa Cruz who has studied needle exchange programs throughout the world, said Wilson's decision "makes life a little more difficult for all of the very committed people all over the country who have been doing very, very courageous work in this border area of the law. ...

"This, in my view, amounts to sentencing people to death in the interest of a moral ideology," said Reinerman.

Joey Tranchina, co-author of the Assembly and state Senate bills proposing the pilot programs, called Wilson's veto a "tremendous setback for needle exchange and public health in California."

Still, Tranchina, executive director of the AIDS Prevention Action Network in San Mateo County and a needle exchange volunteer who has helped other communities start hypodermic-swap programs, said the effort will press on, legal

or not, in the San Francisco Bay Area.

"You're not going to stop me without putting me in state prison and there are a lot of other people who feel the same way," he said.

The veto will mean "another year of scrounging around for money and doing (exchanges) in a dark parking lot," said Edney. "It's hard for us to advertise to get clients when what we're doing is illegal. There are huge portions of the community that we're not reaching because we have to stay underground," she said.

Wilson's action also will serve to discourage the start-up of illegal needle exchange programs in communities with conservative political climates, said Tranchina. In addition, it plays into the stereotype that only gays and injection-drug users are at risk of contracting HIV, he said, noting that more than 70 percent of all pediatric AIDS cases are "traceable to a dirty needle."

While gay and bisexual men continue to account for the majority of new AIDS cases, their percentage of the total has declined yearly, according to statistics from the state Office of AIDS. The percentage of new cases among injection-drug users and heterosexuals, though, continues to rise.

State figures estimate as many as 200,000 Californians were living with HIV infection — but had not progressed into AIDS — in 1990. By the end of 1993, 69,000 cases of AIDS are expected to be diagnosed in the state, more than double the number identified in 1989, according to the Office of AIDS.

*The Santa Cruz Needle Exchange Program needs volunteers and donations. For more information, call 429-9489.*