

UP FRONT

DAVID ALEXANDER



Needle Exchange volunteers, some of whom declined to have their last names used, include: Heather Edney, Christina, Anthony, Josh, Tonee, and Chriss.

Exchange Program Needles The Long Arm of the Law

THE NEEDLE EXCHANGE PROGRAM in Santa Cruz could lose its unlawful image if legislation to legalize syringe giveaways passes the State Senate this month.

For more than two years, the program has given away new needles to heroin addicts in exchange for used ones to help prevent the spread of AIDS. Although the program is illegal, police haven't interfered with it — yet.

"The cops know we're doing a good thing," says Heather Edney, the program's director. "We're not increasing the number of needles out there, just increasing the number of clean ones."

Funded by donations, the program gives away an average of 300 needles a week. But the Exchange's illegal status scares most addicts away, Edney says. It also prevents organizers from spreading awareness about the programs. "Since we can't legally advertise, people can only hear about us by word of mouth," she adds.

Although police haven't made any arrests yet, Santa Cruz police chief Jack Bassett says they may, someday. "Under the health and safety code, it's illegal," he says.

There have also been harsh words about the program from Santa Cruz County Sheriff Al Noren. "I don't think they have any proof that they are eliminating HIV by giving out nee-

dles," Noren says. "It gives tacit approval to engaging in illicit activities."

But, in spite of the criticisms leveled at the program, needle exchanges could become legal soon.

Under AB2525, written by Rep. Willie Brown, D-San Francisco, the State Department of Health Services would be authorized to condone pilot needle and syringe exchange programs in any county or city that requests it. Also known as the "Clean Needle Act," the bill passed the Assembly, but

has yet to clear the State Senate.

Edney worries that legalization could bring a whole new batch of problems. Under the Clean Needle Act, each individual county is able to put stipulations on its exchange program.

"In New York City, the needle exchange was legalized but the pilot program was a failure because the drop-off location was across from the courthouse," she says. "A lot of places where it's legal, applicants have to show track marks and sign a paper saying they'll enter a treatment program. This discourages people."

For more information on the needle exchange program, call Heather at 429-9489.

— Jennifer Ruggles and Erik Espe

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