

i n F O C U S

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PROJECT INFORM PROVIDES LEADERSHIP ON SAFE INJECTION FACILITIES: The Next Step for Harm Reduction for People Who Use Drugs

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With increased awareness of injection related HIV and HCV infection outbreaks across the US, attention to the domestic opioid epidemic and the suffering that has resulted from overdose deaths, there is now much public discussion about ways of reducing harm to injection drug users (IDUs). One option, long in use throughout Europe, in Sydney, Australia and Vancouver, Canada, is safe injection facilities, or SIFs.

Project Inform has long been a supporter of syringe access programs, which distribute sterile syringes to IDU and have been proven to significantly reduce new HIV infections and strengthen access to health care in this group. Consistent with our commitment to advancing innovative, evidence-based approaches to ending the HIV and hepatitis C epidemics, we are now working to support community advocacy for the creation of SIFs, as well. We wanted *In Focus* readers to know more about the issue.

What are supervised injection facilities?

SIFs are “protected places for the hygienic consumption of pre-obtained drugs in a non-judgmental environment under the supervision of trained staff. SIFs represent a public health intervention operating as part of a wider network of services for people who use drugs, woven into local networks of coordinated strategies to address the individual risks and community impact of drug use. These programs aim to reach underserved and marginalized populations, address health inequities, and resolve public health and safety tensions related to public injecting.” (IDCP 2012)

Numerous research papers, books and reports have evaluated the impact of SIFs in local communities. SIFs have a host of positive benefits, both for individuals who use the services and the communities in which they exist. Those benefits include improved access to clean syringes and

improved disposal of used syringes; reduction in overdose morbidity and mortality; reductions in soft tissue infections and other medical complications from injecting; increased linkage to substance use treatment programs; increased linkage to health care services and fewer public order issues (public nuisance, petty crime, and public drug use, etc.).

SIFs have a demonstrated impact on reducing new HIV infections (there is no current research on direct reduction of HCV), and models have demonstrated the potential to reduce new HIV and HCV infections in the long-term. Research from Canada — using mathematical models that estimate the potential impact on reducing new HIV and HCV infections in Montreal — projects that there would be 14-53 fewer HIV infections and 84-327 fewer HCV infections annually per jurisdiction. Although the numbers may differ from city to city, it can be assumed that a similar impact can be achieved in all jurisdictions where SIFs might exist.

Current Barriers to SIFs

There are significant barriers to establishing most, if not all, harm reduction interventions in the US, including SIFs. Insistence on abstinence and criminalization of drug use have been the primary means of dealing with this issue. A significant challenge to establishing SIFs is overcoming public perception among both policy-makers and community members that these programs will create a host of negative consequences, and that the programs condone and will increase drug use. The evidence is clear, however, that these concerns can be overcome.

In the fall of 2015, international law enforcement, substance use and public health experts met to discuss lessons learned from their SIFs with a group of US advocates and public health officials. The report from this meeting concludes with the following observations about the international experience with SIFs:

1. People who use SIFs take better care of themselves, reduce or eliminate their needle sharing, use their drugs more safely and ultimately reduce their drug use;
2. SIF participants gain access to other medical and social services and entry into drug treatment;
3. There has not been a single overdose death in any of these programs over many years of operation and many thousands of supervised injections;
4. SIFs do not increase drug use in the area, nor do they encourage young people to initiate drug use; and
5. Crime and public nuisance decrease in the areas around these programs.

The Future for SIFs in the United States

Recently, there are signs of change in the discourse regarding drug use in the US. Much of this has resulted from the significant increase in heroin use among young people living in middle class and suburban areas. The White House has talked about the need for a public health approach to drug use, syringe access programs have been established even in conservative states like Indiana (where a major cluster of new HIV infections recently occurred), and Congress has partially lifted a ban on the use of

federal dollars to operate syringe access programs.

There has also been an increase in the number of politicians and newspapers speaking about the need to establish SIFs as part of a more humane, public health approach to drug use. The mayors of Boston, Seattle and Ithaca have expressed support for the concept of SIFs. The mayor of Ithaca, Svanta Myrick, actually included SIFs in his city's plan to deal with drug use. The Seattle Times, Baltimore Sun and other newspapers have written positive opinion pieces about SIFs, and the Washington Post ran a front page story on the topic.

In September of this year, Project Inform will convene a national meeting to discuss SIFs. Working in conjunction with other community partners including but not limited to AIDS United, VOCAL-NY, Harm Reduction Coalition, Open Society Foundation, Drug Policy Alliance, and amFAR, we will explore local, state and federal advocacy, awareness and implementation strategies to help make SIFs a reality nationally.

Project Inform is excited to be part of the movement to push this lifesaving agenda forward. We will keep *In Focus* readers well informed about future developments.

2016 Evening of Hope Gala

Saturday, October 29th, 2016

7PM - 9PM | The Green Room, 401 Van Ness Avenue,
San Francisco

Project Inform is proud to announce the return of Evening of Hope - A Night of Lifesaving Fashion! One of a kind condom couture will be presented atelier style, in the magnificently restored Green Room. Mix and mingle with designers and models, while enjoying performances by vocalist Jason Brock (X Factor) and DJ Christopher B. The night will culminate with an auction featuring one-of-a-kind packages, and end with a VIP after party at the Bently Reserve!

You can buy tickets by going to www.projectinform.org

For more information regarding this event, please contact Philip Walker, Development Manager at (415) 580-7304

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