Georgia and Idaho Legalize Needle Exchanges to Stop HIV and Hep C

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On April 2, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp signed into law a bill legalizing needle exchanges, reports the Star Tribune. In March, Idaho Governor Brad Little signed a similar piece of legislation. That makes 28 states and Washington, DC, that have legalized the programs.

Georgia has one of the highest HIV rates in the nation, and the opioid crisis has increased concerns across the country about HIV and hepatitis C outbreaks, both of which can be spread by injection drug use. Legalizing needle exchanges lowers the risk of transmission of these viruses by providing clean needles as well as information about treatment for substance use disorders.

"This is a step in the right direction, but more work needs to be done," Asal Sayas, the director of government affairs at amfAR, The Foundation of AIDS Research, told the newspaper. She would like to see states set aside funding for the needle exchange programs and to ensure they'll be available to folks in rural areas.

Considering the costs of treating HIV and hep C, the sponsor of the Georgia bill, Representative Houston Gaines of Athens, said the law will "save lives and money."

Support for needle exchanges continues to grow since the HIV and hep C outbreaks that occurred among injection drug users in rural Indiana in 2015 under then-Governor Mike Pence, who initially opposed needle exchanges. His delayed response had grave consequences, with about 215 people contracting HIV.

Injection drug use, fueled by the opioid crisis, is an increasingly common route of HIV transmission. In recent months, health officials have reported HIV clusters among injection drug users in Seattle and West Virginia.

Perhaps that's why Alex Azar, the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, last month expressed support for the programs as a way to prevent the spread of HIV and hepatitis C.

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