Mobile Unit Brings HIV, Hepatitis C and Syringe Services to Indiana [VIDEO]

The Damien Center in Indianapolis adds clean syringes to its harm reduction, HIV and hepatitis C efforts.

October 7, 2021 By Trent Straube

The Damien Center in Indianapolis rolled out its latest effort to combat HIV, hepatitis C and drug overdoses: a van that will serve as a mobile syringe exchange service and testing site for hepatitis C virus, HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), reports IndyStar.com. Vaccinations, including for COVID-19, will also be offered.

In addition, the van will provide people who inject drugs with naloxone, which reverses opioid overdoses, and harm reduction kits. In 2018, Indiana led the nation in the number of new acute hep C cases, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Like HIV, hepatitis B and C can be transmitted through shared needles.

"Our rates of hepatitis C and HIV are much higher than the national average, so programs like this will help reduce that burden on the health care system," Alan Witchey, the president and CEO of the Damien Center, told WISH TV (you can watch a video of the news segment at the top of this article).

> "I think it sends a message to the community that we value you," Caine said. "And it's not about you always having to come to us but we value you so much that we're bringing the resources to you in your own normal setting." https://t.co/hiMqzA0tj2
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> — Damien Center (@DamienCenter) October 6, 2021

The mobile unit will operate in collaboration with the Marion County Public Health Department, which has run its own mobile unit for the past two years and prevented over 400 overdoses and served more than 1,500 people.

The Damien Center, which is Indiana's oldest and largest HIV service organization, has been providing harm reduction services but until now did not offer a safe syringe exchange. The syringe program will be run out of the van, which will remain at the center at least two days a week, reports IndyStar.

One of the prevention program's goals is to lower new HIV cases in Marion County by 90% by 2030, which would prevent about 2,000 new transmissions.

Indiana isn't the only state to face related epidemics of injection drug use, HIV and hep C. West Virginia currently faces an HIV outbreak related to injection drug use. When the CDC weighed in on the situation, the federal agency advised, among other recommendations, "expanding and improving access to sterile syringe, testing and treatment…by bringing services to them through mobile and street outreach." For more details, read "CDC Offers This Advice for Tackling West Virginia's HIV Outbreak."

In Indianapolis, the Marion County health department reported that outreach through its mobile van winds up directing 10 to 15 people who inject drugs to recovery efforts, reports IndyStar.

"I think [the van] sends a message to the community that we value you," Virginia Craine, MD, the director of Marion County Public Health Department, told the newspaper. "And it's not about you always having to come to us but we value you so much that we're bringing the resources to you in your own normal setting."

In related hepatitis news, see "We Can't Beat Viral Hepatitis, HIV and Overdoses if We Close Syringe Services" and "International Overdose Awareness Day 2021," which points out that over 94,000 people died of drug overdoses in the United States last year—a 30.9% jump from 2020.

Both HIV and hepatitis C can be transmitted via blood-to-blood contact, including through shared needles and drug equipment that has come in contact with blood. Hepatitis refers to inflammation of the liver. There can be many causes, but hepatitis C virus can result in a lifelong infection, mild to serious scarring of the liver (fibrosis and cirrhosis, respectively), liver cancer, liver failure and death. The good news is that hep C is curable in most cases. To learn more, see the Hepatitis C section of Hep magazine's Hepatitis Basics, which includes an introduction to viral hepatitis as well as other forms of hepatitis and liver disease, such as non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD), non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH), alcoholic liver disease, autoimmune hepatitis and primary biliary cholangitis (PBC). And for a collection of articles in POZ about the intersection of hep C virus and HIV, click the hashtag #Hepatitis C.

HIV, in contrast, is a virus that attacks the immune system. Over several years, the immune system becomes depleted, and the body isn't able to fight infections, leading to an AIDS diagnosis. Although there is no cure for HIV, many safe and effective treatments—often just one pill a

day—are available. The medications help people living with HIV enjoy long and healthy lives and keep them from transmitting the virus to others. For more, see the Basics of HIV/AIDS in POZ.com, a sister publication of HepMag.com.

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