Bill to Lift Federal Needle Exchange Ban Awaits Senate Approval

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Congress is still processing a bill that will lift a 20-year-old ban on using federal money for needle exchange programs, However, *The New York Times* reports, the bill includes a stipulation that prevents federally financed programs from distributing sterile injection equipment to intravenous drug users within 1,000 feet of any place where children might convene.

“I was thinking, ‘A thousand feet, how much is that?’” said Raquel Algarin, executive director of the Lower East Side Harm Reduction Center in Manhattan. “We’d probably be doing syringe exchange in the middle of the East River, and any exchange on the West Side would be in the Hudson River.”

Under a different bill, the 1,000-foot perimeter rule would apply to city funding as well. Both bills have passed the House of Representatives and a Senate subcommittee, awaiting a Senate vote. Advocates and organizations are urging Congress to cancel the 1,000-foot clause, which would apply to about 200 needle exchange programs nationwide.

Representative Jack Kingston (R–Georgia), who presented the DC funding bill, said, “Let’s protect these kids. They don’t need to be playing kickball in the playground and seeing people lined up for needle exchange.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, intravenous drug use directly or indirectly accounts for about one fifth of the country’s 1.1 million HIV cases. The CDC also states that needle exchanges are an effective HIV prevention tool.

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