New Congress Members Educate and Advocate for Syringe Services Programs

The programs lower the transmission of HIV and hepatitis C, reduce overdoses and result in these other benefits.

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Over the past few years, there has been no shortage of discussion in Congress about the overdose epidemic in the United States and how to best address it. In an era defined by partisan conflict, the need to stop the meteoric rise of overdose deaths from prescription opioids, heroin, fentanyl, methamphetamine, and other illicit substances has been one of the few areas in which Democrats and Republicans have been able to find common ground. Unfortunately, the funding and support of syringe services programs has not received the attention it deserves in Congress's deliberations on this issue.

This week, Representatives Donna Shalala (D-FL-27) and Mary Gay Scanlon (D-PA-5) tried to elevate the need for swift action to support syringe services programs (SSPs) by hosting a briefing for members of the newly formed Freshmen Working Group on Addiction, a bipartisan effort among newly elected members of Congress to promote policies to end the overdose crisis in this United States. The briefing, which was organized by Reps. Shalala and Scanlon, included a wide range of speakers representing people who use drugs, researchers, SSPs, and law enforcement.

"For years, the evidence has shown that syringe services programs, like the IDEA Exchange at the University of Miami, reduce drug related overdoses, as well as the transmission of HIV, HCV and other blood borne diseases", Representative Shalala said. "Syringe Services Programs are an invaluable strategy to deploy in response to the overdose crisis and we must work to ensure that they can be scaled up nationwide."

SSPs are one of the oldest and most extensively proven best practices to prevent overdose deaths and the transmission of infectious diseases like HIV and hepatitis C. These community-based programs provide access to sterile needles and syringes free of cost and facilitate safe disposal of used needles and syringes. SSPs are an effective component of a comprehensive, integrated approach to addressing the harms associated with drug use, and their benefits go well beyond the provision of syringes.

Most comprehensive syringe services programs offer additional lifesaving services, such as overdose prevention with naloxone, referral to substance use disorder treatment programs, and counseling and testing for HIV and hepatitis C. In many ways, SSPs represent the most vital connection point between health care providers and people who use drugs.

“SSPs are really the first point of contact for health care services,” said Dr. Susan Sherman, a professor of health, behavior and society at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Dr. Hansel Tookes, who is the Principal Investigator of the University of Miami Harm Reduction Research Group which houses the IDEA Exchange, echoed Dr. Sherman’s sentiments, saying that “SSPs are much more than the provision of syringes.” This statement is bolstered by the fact that while overdose rates were skyrocketing all across the state of Florida in recent years, they were actually decreasing in Miami-Dade County. To this end, the IDEA Exchange recorded more than 1,000 overdose reversals in 2017 and 2018, with each reversal representing a life saved.

The number of lives that SSPs save and the amount of HIV and hepatitis C transmission that they prevent are remarkable, but equally important is the sense of belonging and acceptance that these programs can provide to people who use drugs.

“When I found harm reduction, I found radical love,” said Jess Tilley, the founder and executive director of the New England User’s Union.

During the briefing, Tilley highlighted the importance of supporting SSPs as safe spaces for people who use drugs to find nonjudgmental medical care and community where they are not only valued, but also given agency over their own drug use and recovery.

AIDS United thanks Representatives Shalala and Scanlon for their leadership in the fight to provide SSPs with the support they so desperately need and to fully repeal the senseless ban on federal funding for syringe services programs that currently exists in Congress. Check back with AIDS United’s policy update for more information about the intersection of HIV and the overdose epidemic.

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