

# DAILY HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE

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## Needle exchange programs have proven worth

By DAVID SULLIVAN and J. CHERRY SULLIVAN

More than a generation ago, after people from all socioeconomic groups fell gravely ill with polio and tuberculosis, public health departments stepped up. Holyoke was among them, giving citywide vaccinations and waging aggressive prevention campaigns.

It didn't matter if you were the son or daughter of an Irish or Polish immigrant or a wealthy mill owner. Children received inoculations and sick people were treated with dignity and respect. These harm reduction efforts saved countless children and adults from permanent disability or death.

Today, we are confronted with a different public health crisis: heroin addiction, hepatitis C infection and HIV/AIDS — diseases that, like polio and tuberculosis, imperil the lives and well-being of people of all racial, ethnic and economic classes.

Holyoke stepped up again in 2012 when it allowed Tapestry Health, a pioneer in the field, to open a needle exchange program that has since helped about 2,000 intravenous drug users each year. It's impossible to know how many lives have been saved by the program's prevention and intervention efforts. That program is now in jeopardy.

It's worth noting that among the most effective strategies to save lives endangered by the nation's prescription drug and heroin epidemic outlined at the National Rx Drug Abuse and Heroin Summit in Atlanta last month were syringe exchange programs like Tapestry's.

That is why we wholeheartedly support the program in Holyoke and the one operating in Northampton since 1995. We advocate for opening another one in Greenfield to serve the people of Franklin County, where rates of hepatitis C have doubled over the past three years.

In addition to taking infected needles out of circulation, syringe exchange programs educate drug users and their families about overdose prevention and train them in using the life-saving overdose reversal drug naloxone, also known as Narcan. Clients get referrals to treatment and a range of counseling services, in an evidence-based model that saves lives and keeps health care costs down.

A judicial ruling last month ordered Tapestry's Holyoke program to stop distributing clean syringes by July. That program had been approved by Holyoke Mayor Alex B. Morse and the city's Board of Health, but not the Holyoke City Council. This was a procedural error, according to the judge. The six city councilors who filed the lawsuit that led to the recent decision said their opposition stemmed from a 2001 non-binding referendum in which Holyoke voters rejected a proposed needle exchange.

Much has changed since that vote. With the well-documented opioid crisis reaching a fevered pitch, needle exchange programs are needed more than ever. We hope Holyoke's elected leaders find a path based on compassion and supported by science that will keep the syringe exchange program operating. Needle exchange programs buy time, preventing one accidental overdose at a time while communities work to establish services that will help people with substance use disorders find long-term recovery.

Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, addressing the National RX Drug Abuse and Heroin Summit, compared addiction to chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease, and said, "In the end, it may be that compassion is the most important resource we need for overcoming this crisis."

For years, syringe exchange programs have thrown out lifelines of compassion that allow substance users to find the help they need. Compassion and services are needed now more than ever.

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