New syringe exchange law causes hope and concern in Scott County

**By Zoie Richey TheStatehouseFile.com**

AUSTIN, Indiana — While walking down the streets of Austin, the sounds of dogs barking and sight of the trash in the ditches distract from the smaller, less noticeable objects lying on the ground: syringes. The bright orange caps are the only things that help the needles stand out in the tall weeds, but only if you’re looking for them.

Scott County residents and health officials held a needle cleanup earlier this month. After taking a training course on proper needle disposal, they walked the streets of Austin and Scottsburg to collect needles that had been thrown on the street. During the event, 317 needles were found.

Students from Indiana University worked with the community to put on the event. Daniel Sterling, one of the students who participated in the event, said the event had a great turnout.

“That’s definitely still 317 people that could’ve gotten hepatitis C or HIV had any one of those stuck them,” Sterling said. “Yes, the chance is small, but it’s definitely important to prevent transmission of disease in any way possible.”

Discarded needles have become a regular sight around Scott County in recent years as needle sharing among drug users has evolved into an HIV epidemic. To date, there are 215 confirmed cases of HIV out of the 24,000 people living in the rural area. Before the outbreak, there had only been five HIV cases in the county within the past 10 years.

In an effort to combat the outbreak in Scott County as well as around the state, Gov. Eric Holcomb signed House Enrolled Act 1438 into law Wednesday, which will allow more syringe programs to open in the state. The issue, however, has created a debate between those in favor of needle exchange programs and those who argue that the programs promote drug use.

The Scott County Needle Exchange was the first program to open in Indiana after then-Gov. Mike Pence signed legislation in 2015 to legalize the programs if they received authorization from the state. Since then, public health emergencies have been declared in eight other counties, clearing the way for syringe programs.

The new law, which went into effect immediately, allows a county or city to enact its own syringe exchange program rather than seek approval from the state.

For Austin Police Officer John Smith, driving around Scott County and collecting needles is part of his job. Smith gets multiple calls every day from residents asking him to go pick up needles. The town is not big enough to be having that many needle calls in one day, he said.

Scott County would be better off without a needle exchange in Smith’s opinion. He had hoped the new legislation wouldn’t pass.

“It’s not like I just see this from a police officer’s perspective,” Smith said. “I’ve been around this since I was born.”

Growing up, Smith shared a house with a heroin dealer and addict: his father. He also has a half-brother who is an addict and uses the program to get clean needles.

“It is not about his clean needles or this epidemic. It is about his ability to make decisions, it is about psychological care, it is about choices,” Smith said. “Genetically, one of the only few differences between me being where he’s at and him being where I’m at is choices that he and I have made in our lives.”

Although Smith does not want more exchange programs, he hopes to see more money being put towards education and rehabilitation programs.

The Scott County Needle Exchange provides a variety of services in addition to the clean needles. The program offers HIV testing and counseling, health insurance help, immunizations, BMV referrals, and food assistance.

Although it is referred to as a needle exchange, the program does not follow a one-to-one exchange. It does not require members to return every single needle acquired through the exchange.

This is one of the reasons Smith doesn’t think the program is working. He wants stricter regulations because people are benefiting from something that they aren’t being held accountable for.

The current needle return rate at the Scott County Needle Exchange is approximately 95 percent. Smith argued the return rate is not correct based on his experience as a police officer cleaning up needles discarded in public areas.

“The nature of a person who is under the influence of heroin — something much stronger than alcohol or any of those things — is very unlikely to do something you would have to be motivated to do, which is collect your needles and bring them in,” Smith said.

Before a vote on the new law in April, Sen. Erin Houchin, R-Salem, told lawmakers too many needles are being thrown out on the streets of Scott County. Houchin represents counties bordering Scott County.

The program in Scott County has turned into a “needle giveaway,” Houchin said, because the program does not have a one-to-one exchange. She argued the programs promote drug use because so many needles are being given out.

However, Dr. Carrie Foote, an IUPUI professor and HIV Modernization Movement chair, said research shows the exchanges do not increase drug use.

“What it does is it reduces infectious disease and it actually increases the amount of people that will seek treatment, because it provides them an access to treatment,” Foote said.

When she was 17, Foote was a homeless heroin addict living with HIV in New York City. Now, Foote tells her story and informs people about the misconceptions of HIV. From her own experience, she believes the answer to the state’s HIV problem lies in banishing the stigma and educating the community.

“I think one of the reasons I’ve done well is I had people in my life who provided me support and care,” Foote said. “I was not criminalized. I could have been, but I wasn’t. I was offered treatment.”

Foote did not have access to a syringe exchange program growing up, but she is glad they exist in Indiana now. For Foote, her only complaint with the new law is that it doesn’t go far enough. She doesn’t want Hoosiers to have to wait for an outbreak to happen before being allowed to open a new program in another county.

The addiction in Scott County has gone as far as people using whatever resources they can find to get their fix.

The syringe exchange programs in the state have helped HIV transmission rates decrease by 80 percent.

Patti Hall, the preparedness coordinator for the Scott County Health Department, says it’s important to provide drug users with sterile needles they need for safe injecting.

“When the addiction is that strong, you’re going to find a way to do it regardless of the circumstances or the consequences therefore,” Hall said. “They’re going to do it whether we provide the needles or not.”

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