

News You Can Use

Your monthly resource for news and information about behavioral health and intellectual/developmental disabilities in western North Carolina and beyond

From the doctor: With Chief Medical Officer Dr. Craig Martin



Did you know providing clean needles to people who use IV drugs can slow the spread of diseases and improve public safety?

In July, North Carolina just joined at least 20 other states by legalizing needle and syringe exchanges, which

allow individuals who inject heroin and other drugs to safely discard used needles and receive clean ones. The law aims to mitigate the effects of the opioid epidemic by reducing the transmission of HIV, hepatitis C and other diseases, as well as accidental needle sticks to law enforcement and others.

Our partners at the North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition have lobbied for the new law since 2009. While some critics suggest legal exchanges condone drug use or encourage individuals to begin using, public health research shows that neither is true. Between 2010 and 2014, deaths due to heroin in North Carolina increased fivefold, and rates of hepatitis C – largely contracted by contaminated needles – nearly tripled.

Studies show states with existing programs have demonstrated improvements in public health and reduction of diseases commonly transmitted via dirty needles. Additionally, exchange sites will provide information on local treatment resources and healthier behaviors.

Another new state law allows anyone to purchase naloxone, a live-saving medication that temporarily reverses opioid drug overdoses, without a prescription at pharmacies statewide. Likewise, naloxone is highly unlikely to encourage additional substance use. At Smoky, we strongly support access to naloxone and recently funded the distribution of 2,600 free naloxone kits, saving at least 19 lives to date.

It's clear we cannot "arrest our way" out of the opioid epidemic by jailing substance users with a chronic disease. The social and human costs are too great to ignore, and the impact on families and communities has been devastating, particularly in our region.

Along with community partners, we're continuing to support prevention and recovery. These new laws are welcome steps toward building communities that promote health, wellness and compassion.