

Heated debate brews over needle exchange programs

By Makebra M. Anderson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - One of the most intense debates over curbing drug addiction and AIDS centers around the practice of exchanging an addict's dirty needles for clean ones. On one side of the debate are activists who say that providing clean needles is a way of protecting those not yet ready to give up their habit. Opponents counter that instead of helping solve the problem, giving away needles encourages drug use.

Can the two sides coexist? Not if you listen to proponents and opponents.

"People misunderstand [needle exchange programs (NEP)]. It is not about encouraging drug abuse, it's about treatment. One goal is

to stop HIV and the other is to get them help," said Patricia Hawkins, associate executive director of the Washington-based Whitman-Walker Clinic.

Michael Orsi, former member of the Governors Advisory Council on AIDS, disagrees. In a column, he writes:

"The root problem of the spread of HIV through needle sharing is drugs. Remember, this is a major part of the drug culture. Not to recognize the real problem — and to increase the number of needles in circulation — will only add to the AIDS epidemic in the long term."

Whitman-Walker, a non-profit, community-based health organization specializing in HIV/AIDS, organized the first needle ex-

change program in D.C. for intravenous drug users (IDUs). The group split from the program after Congress enacted the first of several bans that prohibit the use of federal funding to support exchange programs.

"Needle exchange programs are simply giving them [IDUs] a chance to take care of themselves," explains Hawkins of Walker-Whitman. "Substance abuse is the same since 1996. They aren't changing their behavior; they are just using clean needles."

In addition to HIV, people who share syringes are at high risk for Hepatitis C because infected blood from dirty needles can be injected directly into the blood stream. Various legal barriers prevent many from getting sterile sy-

ringes.

The Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration Reorganization Act of 1992 requires: "None of the funds provided under [the Public Health Service Act] shall be used to provide individuals with hypodermic needles or syringes so that such individuals may use illegal drugs, unless the Surgeon General of the Public Health Service determines that a demonstration project would be effective in reducing drug abuse and the risk that the public will become infected [with HIV]."

Inasmuch as needles are distributed to known drug users that don't have legal medical prescriptions, these programs cannot be funded by the federal government.

"They [the government]

prohibit federal funding, but let local jurisdictions do what they want to do," Hawkins says. "Actually, D.C. is the only place prohibited from using their own money to contribute to exchange programs."

According to Hawkins, D.C. needs the needle exchange programs the most. The CDC reports that the District has the highest number of new AIDS cases. The rate of HIV/AIDS is 12 times higher than the national average and it is estimated that one in 20 adults in D.C. are infected. AIDS is the third-leading cause of death in the district. Approximately 94 percent of people infected with AIDS because of injection drug use in the area are Black, reports the local department of health.

All 50 states and D.C. have drug paraphernalia laws that impact any needle distribution programs. Most of the statutes are based on the Model Drug Paraphernalia Act drafted by the U.S. Department of Justice in the 80s. The act makes it "unlawful to use, or to possess with intent to use, drug paraphernalia to... introduce into the human body a controlled substance in violation of controlled substance laws."

In general, drug paraphernalia laws don't prohibit the sell of syringes if the seller has no reason to believe that the equipment will be used for illegal activity. Pharmacists are not required to question buyers' intent, but may decline a purchase if there are obvious signs of drug use.

In order to be considered legal, most needle exchange programs "must be designed to prevent transmission of HIV and Hepatitis C, provide maximum security for sites and equipment, provide a one-for-one exchange, screen out non-IDUs, provide drug treatment, counseling and education to all partici-

pants," according to data distributed by the state of Hawaii, which had the first state-endorsed NEP.

At present, there are more than 125 known programs in 102 cities including, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle, Atlanta, Cleveland and Minneapolis. Needle Exchange Programs began in Europe in 1983. Amsterdam introduced the NEP to reduce the transmission of Hepatitis B and HIV among injection drug users and their sexual partners and children.

Of the more than 100 NEPs operating nationwide, Hawkins says that there is no scientific evidence that they increase drug use. A study prepared for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) confirms her assertion. The report is titled, The Public Health Impact of Needle Exchange Programs in the U.S. and Abroad and was prepared by the School of Public Health, University of California, Berkeley and the Institute for Health Policy Studies, University of California, San Francisco.

"Although quantitative data are difficult to obtain, those available provide no evidence that NEPs increase the amount of drug use by NEP clients or change overall community levels of non-injection and injection drug use..." the report states. "NEPs in the U.S. have not been shown to increase the total number of discarded syringes and can be expected to result in fewer discarded syringes."

Other studies, such as Health Report 2003, prepared by the Harm Reduction Coalition, and research by the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR) reached similar conclusions.

"Every scientific study has shown that exchange programs don't increase drug (See Needles, Page 14)

WAAK-UP

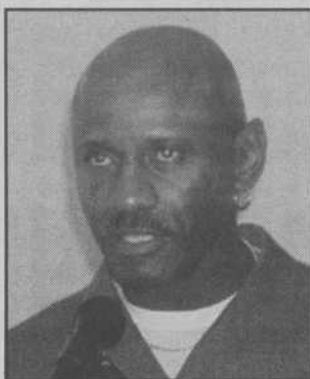
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historical value," Turner further commented.

In response to the allegations made about the play and the reassignment of Turner, Canyon Springs High School Principal Dr. Ronan Matthew, who was assigned to the school following Turner's dismissal, told the *Sentinel-Voice*:

"Well, I'll be glad to tell you what's happening at the school site. The kids are not focused on the play at all at this time. The students who were involved in the initial protest all are now going to class. They see that they do have a voice at school and that they will be listened to if they have concerns that can be addressed to me. I have had several meetings with them, so right now, I think that the kids are focused on having a basketball game on Saturday (a benefit game for

"He, (Matthew) said it (the play) wasn't historical, so apparently he doesn't understand the history and struggle of African-Americans."

— Ron Turner



a friend that was injured several weeks ago). The kids have asked me personally to focus on that with them, which they have organized."

Matthew continued, "This thing has gotten to the point where now we are not focusing on the kids anymore. We need to focus on the kids. The kids have a voice in our school. I have read the play, and I'm going to be perfectly honest with you, as a former

English teacher, I don't see the literary value of the play. This was a play written by a person who made attempts at being a playwright, which is alright, because everyone can do that. But, this play, in my opinion, was not very good. It doesn't really represent the African-American experience in the United States. We can take that play to any Black Studies department at any university in the United

States, give it to them and have them comment about the literary value of that play."

Representatives of WAAK-UP plan to attend the next meeting of the Clark County School District's board of trustees at 5:30 pm this Thursday at 2832 E. Flamingo Rd. They are also seeking to exercise other options to address this matter, like filing a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education - Civil Rights Division, contacting state legislative members on the education committee, and filing a complaint with the U.S. Department of Justice Community Relations Services.

"We want to see this play go on by any means necessary. We want Mr. Ron Turner to be returned to his post at Canyon Springs as an educator," said Marzette Lewis, president of WAAK-UP.

Bikers

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way traffic pattern for Memorial Day weekend.

Dennis Hayes, the NAACP's interim president & CEO, said: "The NAACP has been fighting for public accommodation laws since the 1930s and we're going to continue to fight until we make democracy work for all under our constitution."

The Rev. Kenneth Floyd, president, the Conway (S.C.) Branch NAACP, said: "The only thing that we are seeking is equal justice for all people regardless of race, creed or color. Closing the restaurants and certain parts of the streets when the majority of tourists in town are Black is simply wrong. That is racism at its worse and we will not tolerate it."

Angela Ciccolo, NAACP Interim General Counsel, said, "African-American motorcyclists and tourists deserve the same rights accorded all citizens." According to the memorandum in support of the motion for an injunction, "A number of direct statements made by city officials show that race played an illegal role in the city's decision to deploy a one-way traffic pattern (during Black Bike Week)."

Myrtle Beach Mayor Mark McBride testified during his

deposition that the city "welcomes" White tourists during Harley Week, and tries to "discourage" the Black Bike Week tourists from visiting. McBride said he does not consider the African-American tourists to be law-abiding.

He testified: "They want to disregard the law and sit on the tops of their car and smoke dope and drink and do whatever they want to and disregard everything."

In contrast to the Black Bike Week tourists, McBride testified that "when you, you tell a group of White youth to behave or you're going to jail, for the most part, they behave..." Last year, the NAACP also filed a federal civil rights class action lawsuit against four Myrtle Beach area restaurants accused of discriminating against African-American tourists. According to the lawsuit, the restaurants closed Memorial Day weekend when a large number of African-Americans visited Myrtle Beach.

The lawsuit against the City of Myrtle Beach was filed on behalf of the NAACP Conway Branch by the law firms of Derfner, Altman & Wilborn, LLC; Steptoe & Johnson, LLP; and the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs.

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