

Seattle may get nation's first safe injection site

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

The first supervised injection site in the United States will open within six to 18 months in Seattle, Shilo Murphy said.

His nonprofit, the Seattle-based People's Harm Reduction Alliance, doesn't receive any government funding, which allows it to experiment with controversial programs that tax-funded syringe exchanges aren't as free to pursue.

For example, for five years, the alliance has been giving Seattle drug users glass stems for smoking crack, and as of February, it has been handing out about 25 to 30 meth pipes each week. It's illegal to give away drug paraphernalia under Washington state law.

Additionally, active drug users make up at least 51 percent of the staff and volunteers operating the nonprofit's programs, which extend into five counties across Washington and Oregon, including Multnomah.

Murphy, executive director of the alliance, uses heroin, and his attitude toward his own drug use has drawn criticism from other advocates in the harm reduction community.

If his nonprofit and Seattle's local drug users union are successful in establishing the nation's first safe injection site, it will likely be held under a microscope, serving as a model of whether such an approach to drug abuse will work as well in the U.S. as it has in Europe, Australia and Canada.

In October, Seattle Weekly first reported a safe injection site could be on the horizon after Murphy told a crowd at Seattle's Town Hall cultural center it was time to "get on the bandwagon, or get the fuck out of the way."

It also reported that the Public Defender Association had joined the effort and that every member of the incoming Seattle City Council said they either supported or were open to safe drug sites. Even Seattle Mayor Ed Murray told the weekly he'd consider the option.

Seattle recently saw a 58 percent spike in heroin-related deaths – 156 in 2014, up from 99 the previous year, according to a report by University of Washington Alcohol and Drug Abuse Institute.

While deaths from heroin overdose in Multnomah County happened at nearly the same per-capita rate as in King County in 2014, unlike their counterparts to the north, politicians in the Rose City haven't demonstrated that safe injection sites are an option they'd be willing to consider.

Multnomah County officials recently turned down a request from Street Roots to include a recommendation for a safe-injection-site feasibility study in its 2014 Domicile Unknown report. This report, which tracks the deaths of people experiencing homelessness who died outside of medical facilities, found heroin



PHOTO COURTESY OF SHILO MURPHY

From left: Regg Thomas, Shilo Murphy and Vivek Kumar Chaudhary. Murphy, director of the Seattle-based People's Harm Reduction Alliance has been working with the Urban Survivors Union, headed by Chaudhary, to open a safe injection site in Seattle.

was a primary or contributing cause of death in 14 people who died on the streets. That was out of a total of 56 deaths from heroin overdose in Multnomah County last year.

Safe injection sites are indoor spaces where drug users can inject drugs safely under the supervision of trained medical professionals rather than injecting while hidden from view in places such as behind a dumpster or locked inside a public bathroom. In those scenarios, users may overdose and die because people can neither see nor get to them in time to administer an overdose-reversing drug.

When users are able to inject at a facility where staff can quickly reverse an overdose, it drastically reduces deaths among intravenous drug users, according to numerous peer-reviewed studies. These sites are also shown to cut down on public injection, and addicts who use them are more likely to enter into drug treatment.

A recent Multnomah County report on opiate trends found nearly 40 percent of the 632 ambulances responding to opiate overdoses last year, including heroin and pills, were dispatched to public areas and roadways. An additional 4 percent were dispatched to bars and restaurants.

To save lives and take injection off the streets, Murphy said, the time has come to open safe injection sites across the Seattle area. If organizers decide to open the facilities as a direct extension of the People's

Shilo Murphy, a drug user and harm reduction advocate, is poised to open facilities where people can inject illegal drugs in the presence of medical staff

Harm Reduction Alliance, he said, the first site will likely open next year. If the committee decides a separate nonprofit should be created to oversee the facility, then it will likely open closer to mid-2017.

Street Roots gave Murphy a call to find out how he plans to pull this off and to learn more about his approaches to harm reduction.

E.G.: What role will active drug users play in the operation of the site?

S.M.: Our bylaws state that 51 percent of the board, 51 percent of the staff, 51 percent of volunteers have to be active participants of the program (active drug users) – and the official definition is "served by us, or could be served by us." So active participants will realistically have a controlling share of the site.

E.G.: Will there be doctors or nurses on site?

S.M.: Yes, I think it will be medical personnel to handle medical emergencies and medical assistants, along with active participants of the program to assist people in what they are trying to consume.

E.G.: Do you know how large the facility will be?

S.M.: I don't think the U.S. should invest

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