

SHARPS KITS, SYRINGES AND SOLIDARITY

*HIV Alliance and Trans*Ponder provide clean needles to people who inject hormones*

On the last Wednesday of every month, in the back corner of Falling Sky Pour House and Delicatessen in Eugene, members of Trans*Ponder — an education and advocacy nonprofit in Eugene that serves trans- and gender-diverse people — gather together to talk, drink and eat at the end of a long farm-style table beneath the soft glow of string lights.

Half an hour into their time together, a representative from HIV Alliance, a prevention and support organization, joins them carrying a cooler of needles, syringes and sharps kits for its needle exchange for hormone injectors.

Trans-identified people experience high rates of job instability, unemployment, poverty and discrimination in health care, making it challenging to access necessary medical treatment, including basic supplies like needles for injecting hormones. To ease this problem, HIV Alliance provides clean needles, safe disposal of used needles and HIV testing to community members in Eugene. In 2016 the group introduced a needle exchange program.

Used needles that are not properly disposed of risk spreading HIV and AIDS. For a demographic that is 49 percent more likely to be living with these diseases, according to the United Nations program on HIV and AIDS, access to clean needles for people who self-administer hormones is crucial.

Rebecca Thompson, a trans-identified military veteran who lives in Eugene, has been disposing of her needles through HIV Alliance for three years. She says that even though needles are over-the-counter purchases in Oregon, pharmacists are often uneducated when it comes to hormone injection and the types and sizes of needles to give patients.

Thompson says the needles she received from the Veterans Affairs office are “on my shelf, and I’ll probably give them away because they’re just not usable. I didn’t want to fight with them about the appropriate sizes, so I gave up.”

People who inject estrogen, like Thompson, typically inject very small amounts of the hormone, from 0.2 to 0.5 milliliters, but pharmacies try to give patients 3-milliliter syringes, making it extremely difficult to manage and measure doses. Pharmacists also give out needles that are too big, such as 1-inch needles, when patients need needles that are five-eighths of an inch, Thompson says.

According to Shane Feinstein, a transman and student at the University of Oregon who is a member of Trans*Ponder, even when doctors write notes for the nee-



SHANE FEINSTEIN

dles, pharmacists are still uncertain about what kinds of needles to provide. Sometimes he won’t realize until he’s home that the pharmacists gave him the wrong size needles or syringes.

“They’d get all get confused or give you the wrong thing, or you get home, ‘Wait this is totally not the right syringe; this is not the right needle,’” he says of the pharmacists, adding that this is the pharmacists’ job and they’re supposed to know this information.

Amanda McCluskey, HIV Alliance’s program director, founded the monthly needle exchange program for hormone injectors in response to listening sessions at the Wayward Lamb — a queer pub and event space, which closed early last year.

The trans needle exchange program provides the kinds and sizes of needles that trans folks need without the stress of arguing with pharmacists about sizes and types of needles. Volunteers from HIV Alliance bring 18-, 22-, 23- and 25- gauge needles and 1-, 2- and 3-cubic centimeter (cc) syringes.

In the first couple months of the program, it was taking in thousands of needles for disposal and only giving out 50 to 100 clean needles each month. Many people didn’t know where to dispose of needles, so they began to pile up.

“I was like ‘Oh great, because I have this whole stack of needles that I don’t know what to do with,’” Feinstein says.

HIV Alliance tries to meet this need through the needle exchange, but it also provides HIV prevention services like free HIV testing on Mondays from 3 to 5 pm, trans-inclusive safe-sex education and pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP, a daily HIV-prevention medication.

Since its creation, the exchange has seen a better balance in the number of needles being given out and being returned. In the past year (July 2017 to June 2018), HIV Alliance disposed of 1,772 syringes and gave out 2,265 through the trans needle exchange program.

The exchange has also moved locations from the Wayward Lamb, an openly queer space, to Falling Sky.

Falling Sky cofounder Rob Cohen said he hasn’t received any negative feedback from customers about

BREAKING THE SILENCE

Ending the sexual exploitation of youth

Sex trafficking in Lane County, especially of children, is a growing and still silent problem. It’s the silence that Lauren Babcock wants to change.

“Hidden in plain sight is pretty accurate,” is how Babcock describes the issue.

Babcock, a second-year student at Lane Community College, is a volunteer for Lane County Against Trafficking, which works under the umbrella organization of Hope Ranch Ministries of Eugene.

Hope Ranch Ministries is hosting its second annual Survivor Speakout, which is Thursday, Jan. 10, at Identity Dance Company in Springfield. Survivor Speakout is a platform for women who have been trafficked in Lane County to tell their stories. Friday, Jan. 11, is National Human Trafficking Awareness Day.

Stories sometimes start with confusion and detach-

ment at a broken home life, leading a young person to run away. Very young and alone, the stories morph into terror and isolation at the hands of pimps — mostly men — who circle like predators in city centers, malls or online looking for their next victim, Babcock says.

“They really know how to home in on their victims,” Babcock says of the pimps.

At any given time, dozens of under-age victims are sex trafficked in Lane County. The numbers are hard to pin down, but in the past year alone three men were sentenced in Lane County to prison terms of 50 to 240 months for crimes including promoting and compelling prostitution, all of which involved several female survivors.

Geography plays a role for sex trafficking in Lane County, Babcock says. “I-5 is definitely a thoroughfare for trafficking.” Along with cheap motel rooms, Babcock

adds, “sometimes its Airbnbs.”

Money alone is not always the driving force, either.

According to the Eugene Coalition Against Sexual Exploitation of Youth (ecaseylane.org), the sexual exploitation of children can include “situations where a child, whether or not at the direction of any other person, engages in sexual activity for anything of value, which includes non-monetary things such as food, shelter, drugs, gifts, or protection from any person.”

Hope Ranch Ministries was founded as a nonprofit in 2011 by Diana Janz. Before moving to Eugene, Janz worked with survivors of sex trafficking at a nonprofit in downtown Los Angeles.

Three performers will read the stories of sex trafficking survivors on Thursday night. Also, Janz, Lindsey Cooper (the owner of Identity Dance Company and also a sex trafficking survivor) and a representative of the Eugene Police Department will speak in a panel discussion. ■

Survivor Speakout starts at 6:30 pm Thursday, Jan. 10, at Identity Dance Company, 1479 Mohawk Boulevard in Springfield. A \$5-\$15 donation is suggested.