

To *Your* HEALTH *Fresno County*

Highlighting public health issues and ways to improve personal, family, neighborhood and community health.



Harm Reduction in Fresno County

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There is an often underutilized, frequently misunderstood, but highly effective public health strategy that is directed toward individuals or groups participating in risky behaviors that greatly reduces the harms those behaviors pose to the individuals, their families, and our community. This, so called, harm reduction strategy was initially developed for adults with intravenous (IV) substance abuse addiction for whom abstinence was not immediately feasible.

Imagine, if you will, struggling for years with an overwhelming addiction to an IV injected drug, finally overcoming that addiction to begin a new chapter in your life in recovery, only to find you must now also battle Hepatitis C or HIV.

I have asked a guest author to explain this strategy of harm reduction in the context of the Fresno Needle Exchange in a passionate story of what occurs there weekly.

Catalina Bautista is a public health communication specialist at the Fresno County Department of Public Health who has had considerable experience volunteering her time and skills at the Fresno Needle Exchange.

I urge you to read this story of harm reduction in action.

The moment I saw the growing line of individuals, eagerly waiting for the Fresno Needle Exchange to commence, I felt the great need these individuals have. I saw individuals from all walks of life. In the line stood both men and women of all ages, races and ethnicities. Some of them were well dressed in the latest designer clothing, others wore stained ripped and faded clothes and a few had as little as possible on due to the mid-July heat wave. Some walked from miles away, others pulled up on their bikes drenched in sweat, and some stepped out of a brand new truck or modest car. These individuals, which consist of mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, working professionals and students, and homeless, are evident proof that IV drug use can affect anyone.

The Fresno Needle Exchange began with the inspiration of two individuals, Tonee Mello and Jean Rodriguez. Recognizing the need for these services, they started this work out of their living room in 1994. The program is designed to provide syringe access and syringe exchange services. It is headed by two individuals, Dr. Marc Lasher and Dallas Blanchard, and depends on volunteers to run smoothly and efficiently. It occurs every Saturday from 1 to 3 PM, year-round, in a cul-de-sac near Roeding Park. Simultaneously, Dr. Lasher runs a free mobile patient clinic addressing common IV drug use health issues, such as abscesses. I still recall the first patient Dr. Lasher assisted on my first day. He was in obvious pain due to the golf ball sized abscess on his outer right thigh that was swollen and with noticeable redness surrounding the white pus filled center.



Dr. Marc Lasher performing an incision and drainage (I&D) on a patient.

Why does this program exist? The answer is harm reduction. Harm reduction is defined as a set of practical strategies and ideas aimed at reducing negative consequences associated with drug use. This very formal definition does not do justice to the extent of real life harm reduction that is put forth every Saturday, rain or shine, at the Fresno Needle Exchange.

As a volunteer at the Fresno Needle Exchange, I work collaboratively with a group of volunteers, to provide a safe haven for IV drug users. A typical Saturday starts by taking down supplies from Dallas' truck and Dr. Lasher's mobile clinic. Next the tent canopies go up to block the blistering sun or pouring rain, depending on the time of year. Within minutes the three stations are set up. The first station is where used needles are taken in. At the second station individuals pick up new sterile needles. Finally, at the third station individuals pick up supplies such as cotton, alcohol wipes and cookers. In the course of two hours, we collect on average over 15,000 used needles.



Fresno Needle Exchange and free mobile patient clinic set up.

With limited resources and funding, supplies are scarce. I quickly noticed the need for other supplies such as condoms and STD and behavioral health resources. The week after my first day at the Fresno Needle Exchange, I devoted time to creating resource packets with condoms, lube, and HIV testing information available at the Department of Public Health; an awareness note about the current syphilis epidemic in Fresno County with contact information to get tested and treated; a suicide prevention hotline card; and a Department of Behavioral Health resource tri-fold card.



Catalina Bautista holding a resource packet.

It has been over 6 months since I first started volunteering at the Fresno Needle Exchange and every Saturday I hear someone say, “the needle exchange saved my life”.

For individuals in the midst of an IV drug use addiction, it is not uncommon to share used needles. Sharing and reusing needles creates the perfect environment for infections to flourish. These infections include bacterial and viral infections (most commonly Hepatitis C and HIV). I often hear older individuals who started using IV drugs before the Fresno Needle Exchange say, “If only the needle exchange was here when I first started using, I wouldn’t have Hepatitis.”

The list of negative consequences associated with IV drug use is lengthy. Here are the most common:

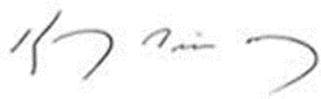
- Scarring of the veins and collapsed veins
- Serious skin infections, such as cysts, abscesses and ulcers
- Tetanus, septicemia, and thrombosis
- Hepatitis and HIV
- Injecting toxic and harmful adulterant substances
- Risky sexual behavior and STDs
- Overdose

At the Fresno Needle Exchange, we know that unsanitary conditions, sharing of needles, and dirty equipment and supplies all contribute to infections or the spread of diseases. Providing syringe access and supplies (alcohol wipes, cotton, sterile water, and condoms) reduces the risks associated with IV drug use and provides an opportunity to prevent serious infections and the spread of diseases, especially Hepatitis C and HIV. Providing an understanding and welcoming atmosphere opens the door to discuss recovery and rehabilitation opportunities.

Having direct access to IV opioid drug users allows for education and access to naloxone (a very effective drug that immediately reverses the effects of opioids in overdose situations) through a beautifully and efficiently organized process at the very beginning of the line where individuals can obtain a naloxone prescription.

All too often, IV drug users are discriminated against and ostracized. As a result, they fall through the cracks and suffer great physical and emotional health problems. At the Fresno Needle Exchange, there is no stigma, there is no judgment, and there is no pressure. It is a safe confidential place, where anyone suffering from an IV drug use addiction can come to find help and resources. Every now and then I hear someone say, "I'm clean Dr. Lasher" or "I'm not using anymore Dallas, I don't need these needles anymore". Hearing those words and knowing that all of us at the Fresno Needle Exchange helped that individual stay as safe as possible, in the midst of their IV drug use addiction, until they were ready to recover is the most fulfilling reward.

Here's to your health!



Dr. Ken Bird, Fresno County Health Officer

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Citations:

1. <http://harmreduction.org/>
2. <http://alcoholrehab.com/drug-addiction/intravenous-drug-use/>
3. <http://drugabuse.com/dangers-of-iv-drug-use-what-you-need-to-know-about-track-marks/>
4. <https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/index.htm>
5. <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/transmission.html>