



Agenda Date: September 5, 2023

Board Briefing Report

DATE: August 14, 2023

TO: Board of Supervisors

FROM: David Luchini, RN, PHN, Director, Department of Public Health
Susan Holt, Director, Department of Behavioral Health
Sanja Bugay, Director, Department of Social Services

SUBJECT: Pilot Partnership with San Joaquin Valley Free Medical Clinic and Needle Exchange to Host Harm Reduction Program at Brix-Mercer Complex

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This briefing will provide information regarding Fresno County Department of Public Health's (DPH) discussions with the San Joaquin Valley Free Medical Clinic and Needle Exchange (SJVFCNE) related to the possibility of DPH hosting a harm reduction pilot program in the County's Brix-Mercer Building Complex. DPH has developed this harm reduction proposal in collaboration with the Fresno County Departments of Social Services (DSS) and Behavioral Health (DBH) with the aim of providing wraparound services for high-risk populations, specifically individuals who use injection drugs for the purpose of decreasing the impact of injection drug use on the public health and safety of the community. This briefing also includes a summary of your Board's past action regarding this topic.

HISTORY / STATUS

On April 9, 2002, following a request by the San Joaquin Valley Exchange Works and the Fresno Free Medical Clinic, as well as other community stakeholders, to adopt a resolution declaring a State of Local Emergency relating to transmission of HIV through contaminated needles, your Board on a 4-to-0 vote directed staff to evaluate the proposal submitted based on concerns regarding liability, Federal and State laws, Health and Safety Codes and report back with findings. The District One Board of Supervisors seat was vacant then, therefore, there was no 5th vote cast.

In 2004, a study was released by the Journal of Urban Health that stated that "*Fresno has the highest number of users of illegal injection drugs per capita of any large U.S. Metropolitan area.*" The Fresno County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) cited this report in their 2004-2005 Final Report and found that Fresno County had many intravenous drug users at risk for acquiring HIV and Hepatitis C. The Grand Jury recommended that the County of Fresno:

- 1) Establish needle and syringe exchange and purchase programs in accordance with State laws AB 136 and SB 1159, and
- 2) Establish a relationship with one or more charitable organizations that fund legal needle and syringe exchange programs.

On May 16, 2006, Dr. Edward Moreno, former Director of DPH and the Fresno County Health Officer at that time, presented a report to the Board of Supervisors regarding "*Hepatitis C Virus and Human Immunodeficiency Virus Transmission Among Injection Drug Users in Fresno County.*" The report evaluated and analyzed the

health status of injection drug users and their impact on the community. On a 3 to 2 vote, the Board directed staff to bring back an item for the May 23, 2006, Board date to decide on implementing a needle exchange program.

On May 23, 2006, DPH returned to your Board requesting approval authorizing local needle exchange programs to provide clean needles and syringes to injection drug users in exchange for used syringes to reduce the risk of transmission of Hepatitis C and Human Immunodeficiency Virus. Your Board, on a 5 to 0 vote, directed staff to work with the City of Fresno regarding the distribution of clean hypodermic needles and syringes in Fresno County and to return to the Board with a program that also integrates a structured treatment program within Fresno County.

On December 16, 2008, DPH returned to your Board requesting authorization to implement a one-year Community Health and Safety Collaborative Pilot project to include needle exchange services to minimize the spread of HIV and Hepatitis C Virus.

On August 30, 2011, DPH, DSS, and DBH presented an item to your Board seeking agreements with Westcare California, Inc. and Fresno Free Medical Clinic to provide harm reduction services on behalf of the Community Health and Safety Collaborative. The item was voted down on a 2 to 3 vote.

The opioid crisis has worsened over the last few years. Data through 2019-2021 shows that California has seen a 121% increase in all opioid-related overdose deaths and a 256% increase in fentanyl-related overdose deaths. During the same three-year timeframe, Fresno County saw a 74% increase in all opioid overdoses and a 274% increase in fentanyl specific overdoses. In addition, Fresno County also saw a 67% increase in all opioid-related emergency room visits. These include but are not limited to abscesses, injuries, withdrawals, and naloxone reversals ⁱ.

The SJVFCNE has been operating in the Fresno Metropolitan Area since 1994, providing harm reduction and medical services at no charge for community members, which includes the service of collecting used syringes for proper disposal in exchange for clean syringes, and medical care related to complications of injection drug use. SJVFCNE currently provides these services out of a mobile van near Roeding Park every Saturday afternoon. As a result, close to 20,000 syringes are exchanged each Saturday afternoon as part of the needle exchange service, which, according to national data, reduces the risk of blood-borne infections, such as Hepatitis B, C, and HIV/AIDS. More recently, SJVFCNE has been providing naloxone (medication that can reverse opioid overdose and keep patients alive when used by bystanders before EMS arrival) and pipes as an alternative route of drug ingestion to limit the use of syringes, which helps reduce the risks of transmitting blood-borne infections mentioned above as well as helps reduce the chances of soft tissue infection that can result from non-sterile injections ⁱⁱ. SJVFCNE has also established a grant-funded program to initiate patients who use injection drugs on medication-assisted treatment (MAT), an evidence-based strategy of safer prescription medications that treat opioid addiction and other substance use disorders. These services are all effective harm reduction strategies because they reduce the number of used syringes improperly disposed of in our community, decrease the demand for medical services related to injection drug use, reduce complications, and provide a pathway out of addiction and into recovery for the patients they serve.

The staff of the SJVFCNE provides several other harm reduction services, all of which aim to improve health and decrease healthcare costs in our county. For example, a reduction in the spread of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) like gonorrhea, chlamydia, and HIV/AIDS is achieved by distributing free condoms as a harm reduction strategy. Further, SJVFCNE has licensed physicians who provide basic medical assistance and treatment, particularly for infections, abscesses, and wound care related to injection drug use. In addition, many individuals receive medical services from SJVFCNE, which reduces the strain on other parts of the countywide medical system. They also provide some linkages to drug treatment and primary care providers, mental health, and social services, but there is a limit to these navigation services at the current site. Finally, SJVFCNE offers other harm reduction methods, including the distribution of naloxone, the opioid overdose reversal medication commonly known as Narcan®, which bystanders can use to reverse the effects of severe opioid overdose.

SJVFCNE has recently approached DPH, requesting the use of the Brix-Mercer Building Complex to provide their services. Use of the Brix-Mercer Building Complex would be a significant improvement for the SJVFCNE because not only would it create a partnership with DPH, DBH, and DSS, but it will also establish a fixed location to provide medical services, exchange syringes, distribute Narcan®, and make available other options for drug treatment and a broader range of harm reduction options. The proposed initial operation hours would be from 12:00 PM to 4:00 PM every Saturday. This time corresponds with the SJVFCNE's current program hours. DPH, in collaboration with its partners, would evaluate operations and adjust as necessary to avoid conflicts with special events scheduled at the same time so that harm reduction services can be consistently available every Saturday.

Because the individuals served by the SJVFCNE are at high risk of encountering barriers related to timely healthcare access, DPH has also approached DBH and DSS to develop more holistic strategies that connect individuals to available services. The Brix-Mercer Building Complex is recommended because it provides a centralized location for this whole-person harm reduction approach. These combined efforts will lower barriers for high-risk individuals needing the services and help address the current opioid, STI, and emergency care access crises concurrently impacting Fresno County and surrounding counties in Central California. The combination of external programs, community health workers, and County Departments makes this a unique collaboration that will benefit from synergy across several agencies which serve this population.

FOCUS OF STAFF ACTIVITY

The participating departments have identified activities and responsibilities aimed at lowering barriers for the high-risk population served by the SJVFCNE. DPH staff and partners from the contracted community health workers network will provide access and referral services. This proposal would establish the Brix-Mercer Building Complex as a whole-person harm reduction center where community health workers can assist in linking individuals to services such as signing up for health insurance through CalViva, Anthem, or Covered California, finding a primary care provider, as well as services for those with housing insecurity. This project would also expand the range of public health services offered to this population to include screening and treatment options for STIs and HIV/AIDS and linkages to prenatal or peri-natal services. DBH would provide their access line for screening individuals needing behavioral and mental health services. DSS would provide training and support for the community health workers and opportunities for individuals to enroll, re-enroll, or renew cases in Medi-Cal, CalWORKs, CalFresh, and job programs.

DPH has examined the details of the proposal and hosted an on-site visit with SJVFCNE, DBH, and DSS to survey the Brix-Mercer Building Complex and to discuss the logistics of potentially moving the clinic there. DPH is actively pursuing this option because of the public health benefits of the SJVFCNE's harm reduction activities and to preserve the long-term viability of these services.

ACTION TIME-FRAME

DPH proposes a lease agreement for two years with the SJVFCNE at no charge to use the Brix-Mercer Building Complex every Saturday afternoon to host the pilot harm reduction program for two years. The anticipated cost of this program is estimated to be approximately \$150,000 per year. DPH is working with DBH and DSS to help offset costs. Funding from the County will not supplant any existing funding provided by SJVFCNE to support needle exchange activities including purchasing clean syringes and disposing of used syringes collected from participants.

During the harm reduction program pilot period, staff will track various metrics to measure success. These metrics include but are not limited to:

- Track the unique number of clients served
- Track the number and type of referrals that are made to connect program participants to available resources
- Track the number of health professionals receiving training in the field through this program
- Track the number of encounters with DPH, DBH, and DSS staff addressing identified health and social service needs

- Track the number of medical visits that otherwise might have led to a visit to a local Emergency Department

Ultimately, success of the program will hinge on whether clients utilize all the available services and if emergency situations are reduced. Additionally, connecting clients with treatment services with the goal of reducing or ending the use of needles to inject drugs.

The Departments of DPH, DBD and DSS are working on an Agenda Item to the Board for consideration of this pilot program through formal agreements.

CONTACT PERSON

Should your Board have any questions about these matters, please contact the following individuals based on the topic:

Harm Reduction Program: Jena Adams, FCDPH Supervising Communicable Disease Specialist, at (559) 600-3042
Ahmadreza (Ahmad) Bahrami, Division Manager, at (559) 600-6865

Brix-Mercer Facility Usage: James Sponsler, FCDPH Staff Analyst, at (559) 600-6478

Needle Exchange: Dr. John Zweifler, MD, FCDPH Physician, at (559) 779-4227

San Joaquin Valley Free Medical Clinic and Needle Exchange: Dallas Blanchard, fresnofnb@yahoo.com
Dr. Marc Lasher, DO, marclasherdo@aol.com

SOURCES

ⁱ [California's opioid deaths increased by 121% in 3 years. What's driving the crisis?](#)

ⁱⁱ [Syringe access for the prevention of blood borne infections among injection drug users](#)