

Governor Phil Murphy

Acting Governor Oliver Announces Murphy Administration's Support of Legislation to Preserve and Expand Access to Harm Reduction Centers Statewide

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TRENTON – As part of Governor Phil Murphy and the Murphy Administration's ongoing commitment to fighting the opioid epidemic, Acting Governor Sheila Oliver today announced support for legislation (S3009) sponsored by state Senator Joe Vitale and Assemblywoman Valerie Vaineri Huttle to amend current law to authorize the Department of Health (DOH) to independently establish harm reduction centers (HRCs) and the operation of syringe exchange programs. The legislation would also eliminate municipal authority to shutter syringe exchange programs, further strengthening the availability of evidence-based, public health services for vulnerable individuals.

The announcement of support follows a July vote by the Atlantic City Council to eliminate the city's syringe exchange program, a decision that is expected to take effect this fall. Since the vote, the Governor's Office and DOH have been steadfast in the commitment to finding a solution that will preserve this evidence-based and life-saving service in Atlantic City. Absent another viable solution that allow a syringe exchange operator in Atlantic City to continue serving as many individuals as possible in need of services, the Murphy Administration fully supports a legislative solution that will also prevent a similar crisis in the future. Earlier this year Governor Murphy raised alarm about the recent increase in drug use and opioid-related deaths due to the pandemic.

"As we experience a rise in drug use and overdose deaths nationally and in New Jersey due to the pandemic, we must confront this public health issue head on by securing access to sterile needle exchange services in our state," **said Acting Governor Sheila Oliver, who serves as Commissioner of the Department of Community Affairs.** "I call on our legislators to prioritize this issue and send a bill to the Governor's desk to sign as soon as possible when they reconvene this fall so that we can keep people out of harm's way and continue to work toward addressing infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS in New Jersey."

"There has never been a more important time to embrace harm reduction," **said DOH Commissioner Judith Persichilli.** "There is a lot of misunderstanding among the public about harm reduction and unfortunately it deepens the stigma that prevents vulnerable individuals from accessing critical, life-saving health services. A legislative solution is the only one that can preserve access to these services throughout the state, bring New Jersey in line with national best practices, and make strides towards the Murphy Administration's goal to end the HIV epidemic and opioid crisis."

"Harm reduction centers are vital to our efforts to combat the opioid epidemic and connect people to treatment," **Human Services Acting Commissioner Sarah Adelman said.** "We have been providing medication-assisted treatment for opioid addiction at the Atlantic City site, for instance. These programs offer life-changing help in a safe environment for individuals struggling with addiction. As we continue to focus on removing barriers to treatment and meeting treatment needs, we must continue to work to make it as easy as possible for people facing addiction to find help that has been proven effective. Preserving and expanding access to harm reduction centers - and harm reduction in general - is a smart approach."

HRCs provide life-saving services to individuals at risk of overdose and prevent the spread of HIV and other bloodborne diseases like hepatitis. Decades of research and national health and medical experts, such as the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American Medical Association, endorse needle exchanges as effective tools to save lives, ensure proper disposal of used syringes, and connect individuals to treatment. According to the CDC, individuals who utilize syringe access program are five times more likely to enter drug treatment and three times more likely to stop using drugs than those who don't use the programs.

In addition to strengthening access to treatment and recovery supports, expanding harm reduction services including syringe exchanges, are a critical component of Governor Phil Murphy's comprehensive, data-driven strategy to combat the opioid crisis. The Murphy Administration looks forward to collaborating with legislative partners, harm reduction and HIV advocates, and the public health and medical community to address this critical issue.

"The principles of harm reduction are simple. We must accept that there is drug use in our communities, and that some ways of using drugs are more dangerous than other ways. We need to meet people where they are, rather than forcing on them some preconceived notion of what their life should look like," **said Senator Joseph Vitale, chair of the Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee.** "We need people who have lived with substance use disorder to inform these programs based on their experience and what has worked for them, rather than pretending we know exactly how they should run, having never walked a moment in their shoes. Harm reduction programs are about compassion first, without judgment."

"Allowing the Department of Health to provide harm reduction services such as syringe exchanges, social service referrals and overdose prevention counseling will help minimize the harmful effects of drugs on individuals and their communities," **said Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttle.** "These services will serve as an important part of our state's ongoing efforts to protect the health and well-being of New Jerseyans struggling with substance use disorder. These residents need and deserve our compassion and assistance. I thank Acting Governor Oliver for her support of this critical legislation."

"Our state cannot ignore the plight of residents with substance use disorders by turning them away in their time of need," **said Assemblyman John Armato.** "Many of our community members will greatly benefit from harm reduction services offered by trustworthy public health officials. The educational and supportive services proposed in this legislation will go a long way in saving countless lives. This includes needle exchanges, which are critical to limiting the spread of dangerous blood-borne diseases and reducing improper needle disposal that litters our neighborhoods."

"Syringe access is a proven gold-standard to prevent overdose deaths, HIV, and Hepatitis C, and our access to health services should never be determined by where we live. Harm reduction programs, of which syringe access is a critical component, are the most proven way we have to end the overdose crisis, and this legislation would get rid of New Jersey's single biggest barrier to expanding harm reduction," **said Jenna Mellor, Executive Director of the New Jersey Harm Reduction Coalition.** "As we bury our loved ones, family members, and neighbors from preventable overdose deaths, it is time for our public leaders to take action and make lifesaving harm reduction services available in every corner of the Garden State. Inaction is inexcusable. Thank you to the Murphy Administration, Senator Vitale, Assemblywoman Huttle, and Assemblyman Armato for your moral leadership in the face of a public health crisis."

"New Jersey's syringe access services are a public health success story. We've dramatically reduced new infections from injection drug use, distributed thousands upon thousands of doses of lifesaving medicine to reverse overdoses, and made our communities safer and healthier. We stepped up during COVID-19 to ensure that residents got vaccines, housing assistance, food services, and lifesaving infectious disease prevention tools like syringes," **said Carol Harney, CEO of the South Jersey AIDS Alliance.** "That Atlantic City is on the verge of closing a highly successful syringe access program in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and overdose crisis, which could fuel a new HIV and Hepatitis C crisis, should be a wake-up call to policymakers to change restrictive, outdated legislation. With the leadership of the Murphy Administration, Senator Vitale, Assemblywoman Huttle, and Assemblyman Armato, we look forward to modernizing New Jersey's syringe access laws, aligning them with national best practices, and continuing to show up for the residents of Atlantic City every day with essential public health services. We invite any legislators who are interested in learning more about harm reduction to visit our site and meet directly with program staff. "

"Hyacinth Foundation proudly supports the legislative efforts of Senator Vitale's and Assemblywoman Huttle's to expand access to harm reduction programs including syringe access. We thank Acting Governor Oliver and Governor Murphy for their support of these efforts," **said Kathy O'Brien, Hyacinth's Executive Director.** "There is no doubt that harm reduction programs saves lives and prevents HIV and Hepatitis C infection. They provide access to and disposal of sterile syringes and injection equipment, linkage to substance use disorder treatment, and naloxone distribution. People who use syringe service programs gain access to other vital services including vaccination, testing, and linkage to care and treatment for infectious diseases including viral hepatitis and HIV. Nearly 30 years of research shows that comprehensive syringe service programs are safe, effective, and reduce overall health costs. These programs don't

increase the illegal use of drugs by injection. Studies also show that they protect the public and first responders by providing safe needle disposal.”

“Harm reduction centers are proven public health interventions and the State Department of Health must have a voice and role in where they are located to save the most lives. These critical interventions should be where they are needed most. The opioid epidemic is a public health emergency, and these interventions are essential to our efforts to save and restore the lives of New Jersey residents,” **said Linda Schwimmer, President and CEO of the New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute.** “At these harm reduction centers, people also are connected to housing and food, and, most important, to treatment. Studies have shown that people who inject drugs are far more likely to enter a treatment program after visiting an exchange.”

“NJAMHAA effusively praises Acting Governor Sheila Oliver for her leadership and deep understanding of the need and value of addiction treatment, stemming from her life-long dedication to advancing social justice, equality and education – the lack of which, in many cases, lead to substance use and mental health challenges. Acting Governor Oliver’s support of Senate Bill 3009 to expand access to syringe exchange and other harm reduction services is most commendable, as this legislation will undoubtedly open the door to saving lives,” **said Debra L. Wentz, PhD, President and CEO of the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies.** “NJAMHAA has always been a strong proponent of harm reduction centers and for giving people the tools they need to get on the road to recovery. These centers are essential for ensuring safety for the individuals served and the communities in which they live. They provide the first step for people with substance use disorders to receive treatment, which has been proven to be highly effective. We wholeheartedly and enthusiastically support S3009 and other legislation that create opportunities for New Jersey residents to overcome substance use, as well as mental illnesses, and lead the healthiest and most fulfilling lives possible.”

Governor Phil Murphy

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