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Syringe exchange plan moves ahead

Proposal to supply clean syringes and other health services to heroin users would cost \$170,140 a year.

CANTON A proposal to supply clean syringes and other health services to heroin users would cost \$170,140 a year, according to City Health Department officials.

The ballpark figure was based on a syringe exchange program that serves 200 people a year, said Diane Thompson, the department's director of nursing.

The budget would pay for clean syringes, disposal of used syringes, HIV and hepatitis C testing, a substance abuse counselor, vaccines for influenza and hepatitis A and B and naloxone, a drug that reverses opiate overdoses.

Local health officials began pursuing a syringe exchange after Stark County had 384 new hepatitis C infections in 2015, up 56 percent from 2010. The infection rate was highest among adults between the ages of 25 and 34.

Hepatitis C can cause chronic illness and liver failure and is primarily spread by contact with the blood of an infected person, such as when injection drug users share needles. HIV can be spread the same way.

"It's pretty obvious there's a need in our community for a (syringe exchange program)," Thompson said.

The ideal plan would have an exchange once a week for four hours, Thompson said. Right now, the health department is looking at hosting the exchange at its downtown offices so as not to pay rent at another location.

The biggest expenses would be syringes and other medical supplies (\$73,870), vaccines (\$30,000) and personnel (\$28,200), including a registered nurse, a substance abuse counselor and a person to do HIV and hepatitis C testing.

By comparison, it costs upwards of \$120,000 a year to care for one HIV/AIDS patient.

Health Commissioner James Adams said it's important to secure funding for a sustainable program. Possible funding sources include local foundations and businesses.

"If we're going to implement this, we're going to need local money," Adams said.

Thompson was aiming to have the exchange in place by the end of the year.

This summer, health department officials will be visiting Portsmouth, Columbus and Cleveland to see how syringe exchanges operate in those communities, she said. Recent changes in state law have made it easier for health departments to start syringe exchanges.

Thompson unveiled the exchange proposal at a meeting that included representatives of Canton law enforcement, local addiction advocacy groups, the county mental health board and the county, Massillon and Alliance health departments.

Further discussions about the syringe exchange will be held at the monthly meetings of the Opiate Task Force. The group meets on the third Friday of every month at Stark County Mental Health & Addiction Recovery.

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