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FACT SHEET

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## NEEDLE EXCHANGE PROGRAMS: PART OF A COMPREHENSIVE HIV PREVENTION STRATEGY

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***Overview:*** *Since 1981, injection drug use has played an increasing role in the spread of HIV and AIDS, accounting for more than 60% of AIDS cases in certain areas in 1995. To date, nearly 40% of the 652,000 cases of AIDS reported in the U.S. have been linked to injection drug use. More than 70% of HIV infections among women of childbearing age are related either directly or indirectly to injection drug use. And more than 75 percent of babies diagnosed with HIV/AIDS were infected as a direct or indirect result of injection drug use by a parent.*

*To protect individuals from infection with HIV and other blood-borne infections, several communities have established needle or syringe exchange programs. In communities that choose to use them, needle exchange programs are a form of public health intervention to reduce the transmission of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) among drug users, their sex partners, and their children. They provide new, sterile syringes in exchange for used, contaminated syringes. Many needle exchange programs also provide drug users with a referral to drug counseling and treatment, medical services, and provide risk reduction information.*

*Under the terms of Public Law 105-78, federal funds to support needle exchange programs were conditioned on a determination by the Secretary of Health and Human Services that such programs reduce the transmission of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and do not encourage the use of illegal drugs. The Secretary has made that*

*determination. The Act's restriction on federal funding, however, has not been lifted.*

*The Administration has decided that the best course at this time is to have local communities which choose to implement their own programs use their own dollars to fund needle exchange programs, and to communicate what has been learned from the science so that communities can construct the most successful programs possible to reduce the transmission of HIV, while not encouraging illegal drug use.*

*In a February 1997 report to Congress, Health and Human Services Secretary Donna E. Shalala reported that a review of the findings of scientific research indicated that needle exchange programs "can be an effective component of a comprehensive strategy to prevent HIV and other blood borne infectious diseases in communities that choose to include them."*

*On April 20, 1998, Secretary Shalala announced that a review of research findings indicated that needle exchange programs also "do not encourage the use of illegal drugs."*

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## **FEDERAL RESEARCH ON NEEDLE EXCHANGE**

While Congress has restricted the use of federal funds for needle exchange programs since 1989, lawmakers have authorized funding for research into the efficacy of needle exchange programs as a public health intervention to reduce the transmission of HIV and to examine the impact of such programs on drug use. The federal government has supported and will continue to support research into the effectiveness of needle exchange programs.

### **Effect of Needle Exchange Programs on HIV Transmission**

Three major expert reviews of the scientific literature on needle exchange programs conclude that such programs can be an effective component of a comprehensive community-based HIV prevention effort. Additionally, needle exchange programs can provide a pathway for linking injection drug users to

other important services such as risk reduction counseling, drug treatment, and support services. The reviews include:

- *Needle Exchange Programs: Research Suggests Promise as an AIDS Prevention Strategy*, United States General Accounting Office, March 1993, is an extensive review of U.S. and international data looking at the effects of needle exchange programs. It estimated that a needle exchange program in New Haven, Connecticut, had led to a 33% reduction in HIV infection rates among drug users in that city.
- *The Public-Health Impact of Needle Exchange Programs in the United States and Abroad*, prepared by the University of California, San Francisco, September 1993, reported that needle exchange programs served as an important bridge to other health services, particularly drug counseling and treatment. It also found that needle exchange programs reached a group of injecting drug users with long histories of drug use and limited exposure to drug treatment.
- *Preventing HIV Transmission: The Role of Sterile Needles and Bleach*, National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, September 1995, concluded that needle exchange programs have beneficial effects on reducing behaviors such as multi-person reuse of syringes. It estimated a reduction in risk behaviors of 80% and reductions in HIV transmission of 30% or greater.

Based on that scientific evidence, in February 1997, Secretary Shalala reported to Congress that a review of scientific findings indicated that needle exchange programs "can be an effective component of a comprehensive strategy to prevent HIV and other blood borne infectious diseases in communities that choose to include them." She also directed the Department's scientific agencies to continue to review research findings regarding the effect of needle exchange programs on illegal drug use.

#### **Impact of Needle Exchange Programs on Drug Use**

Extensive research indicates that needle exchange programs do not encourage illegal drug use and can, in fact, reduce drug use through effective referrals to drug treatment and counseling. Several recent studies strengthen the conclusion that needle exchange programs do not encourage the use of illegal drugs. They include:

- In March, 1997, the National Institutes of Health published the Consensus Development Statement on Interventions to Prevent HIV Risk Behaviors. That report concluded that needle exchange programs "show a reduction in risk behaviors as high as 80% in injecting drug users, with estimates of a 30% or greater reduction of HIV." The panel also concluded that the preponderance of evidence shows either a decrease in injection drug use among participants or no changes in their current levels of drug use.
- An October 1997, study of needle exchange programs in Baltimore, Maryland, (Brooner et al., Abstract presented to the American Public Health Association,

October 1997) reported that needle exchange programs that are closely linked to or integrated with drug treatment programs actually reduce the incidence of drug use with high levels of retention in drug treatment. A 1998 NIH Consensus Conference report on the effectiveness of treatment for heroin addiction found that drug treatment programs can assist heroin users in halting their drug use.

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