



Harm Reduction Institute
P.O. Box 1017
Santa Ana, CA 92702

For Immediate Release
April 16, 2024

HRI STRONGLY OPPOSES RESOLUTION FROM THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF SANTA ANA ANNOUNCING ITS STRENUOUS OPPOSITION TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A NEEDLE EXCHANGE PROGRAM IN THE CITY.

SANTA ANA. Harm Reduction Institute (HRI) has submitted a public comment in opposition to the Santa Ana City Council's resolution to announce its opposition to the establishment of a needle exchange program in the City:

Given the vitriolic attacks we are receiving on social media, Harm Reduction Institute (HRI) staff are regrettably unable to attend in person this evening to speak on agenda item 27 due to safety concerns. HRI opposes the proposed resolution since it aims to deny HRI the ability to provide vital healthcare services to the most vulnerable residents of Santa Ana by establishing a syringe services program (SSP).

To begin with, we would like to correct some of the assertions and accusations that the City has offered in support of its opposition to HRI and its mission. For example, the City claims that HRI's proposed SSP will lead to a large increase in the number of syringes littered in public areas. This claim is completely unsupported by evidence as all data presented by the City is from 2016-2018, two to four years before HRI ever opened. HRI offered syringe access for almost two years from 2020-2022 under the direction of a physician at a medical office, and went largely unnoticed by the broader community while serving the healthcare needs of hundreds of participants. Further, the City ignores the emphasis that HRI places on proper syringe handling and syringe collection. HRI strives to retrieve as many discarded syringes as feasible. As explained in the following paragraph from our application, which the City continues to leave out of the conversation, it is simply not possible for HRI to collect every single syringe it dispenses:

HRI is dedicated to collecting as many used syringes as possible, however, because there are many other places to legally dispose of syringes, HRI cannot assume that it will be able to collect all of the syringes that it distributes. HRI participants may legally dispose of syringes at sharps disposal kiosks in the community and at other syringe services programs. Further, syringes are often confiscated and disposed of by the police. This number reflects these other avenues for syringe disposal.

We hope our estimated 60% return rate is an underestimate, and plan to do everything in our power to collect as many syringes as possible from the community. HRI in no way intends to ONLY

collect 120,000 needles annually. We hope that we will be able to collect more, and that people who utilize our program will use sharps disposal kiosks in the community that the CDPH has offered to provide.

As described in our CDPH application, HRI is committed to using its best efforts to collect discarded syringes. The HRI outreach team will be in the community collecting syringes from participants Monday through Friday from 9 am until 5 pm so that they can be safely disposed of. In other words, HRI will be dedicating 40 hours each week to collecting syringes from participants. HRI will also do syringe litter sweeps throughout the city, and will operate a hotline where residents can report syringe litter. We take this issue very seriously, and are committed to increasing access to proper syringe disposal in the community (whether those syringes originated with HRI or elsewhere).

Without providing any context, the City also claims that HRI is not transparent and has not worked collaboratively with the City. HRI was originally launched at a medical office under physician supervision in Santa Ana, in direct response to the City's repeated requests in 2017 and 2018 that any syringe program be run out of a physician's office. At the City Council meeting on September 1, 2020, Councilmember Solorio publicly stated that syringe exchange programs should be operated at medical offices so that there could be more oversight. Despite this rhetoric, on September 15, 2020, the City passed an ordinance banning Health and Safety Code syringe services programs, and resolved to pursue other enforcement action against HRI, as HRI's operation was not authorized pursuant to the health and safety code. Despite heeding the City's demand and doing exactly what Councilmember Solorio had asked for, the City still shut down HRI's operations in January 2022.

Contrary to the City's claims that HRI has refused to discuss its operations with City officials, the City has turned down HRI's invitation to discuss HRI's operation. In October 2022, HRI emailed the entire Santa Ana City Council asking to discuss our plan to apply to CDPH. We ultimately met with Councilmember David Penaloza and Assistant City Manager Steven Mendoza to discuss the application. When HRI asked about the City's opposition to HRI's medical office location, we were told that its centralized location was a problematic because it drew people from one area of the city to the other. In direct response to the City's concern, HRI proposed switching to a home delivery system, but were told to take our program to another City. We view this suggestion as unreasonable given that the City has consistently had the highest rate of HIV transmission in Orange County since at least 2013 (according to publicly available data from the Orange County Healthcare Agency). Santa Ana is in desperate need of an SSP to address its position as the epicenter of the HIV epidemic in Orange County. As an HIV prevention agency, we must go to where the need is greatest.

Lastly, the City's complaint that the CDPH has not yet engaged in the mandatory consultation process pursuant to the Health and Safety Code is false and misleading. HRI is aware of the CDPH's current efforts to schedule consultation meetings with local law enforcement and the Orange County Public Health Officer, and that talks regarding the consultation phase have been going on since HRI applied in December 2023. Despite CDPH's offer to consult with the City since January, the City has consistently dragged its feet and has made no effort to engage in good faith discussions with CDPH officials.

HRI has an excellent track record in the community. We continue to work collaboratively with several Santa Ana based organizations and are open to good faith, productive dialogue with concerned citizens and stakeholders. We provide naloxone and naloxone training to community organizations both in Santa Ana and across the county. We ran a successful syringe services program in the City for 18 months. We attempted to dialogue with the City regarding our CDPH application when we were first working on it in the fall of 2022. Based on the City's recalcitrant and dismissive attitude, we have come to believe the City is only interested in shutting down our operation in order to appease a small but vocal minority who are opposed to our life-saving operation.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact HRI by email:
info@harmreductioninstitute.org