



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

AGENDA ITEM

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

NORA VARGAS
First District

JOEL ANDERSON
Second District

TERRA LAWSON-REMER
Third District

NATHAN FLETCHER
Fourth District

JIM DESMOND
Fifth District

DATE: June 8, 2021

XX

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

RECEIVE UPDATE ON COMPREHENSIVE COUNTY SUBSTANCE USE HARM REDUCTION STRATEGY (DISTRICTS: ALL)

OVERVIEW

On January 26, 2021 (13), the San Diego County Board of Supervisors (Board) voted to find prior Board direction opposing harm reduction programs, including the December 9, 1997 resolution entitled “Resolution to Oppose Needle Exchange Programs,” to no longer be in effect.

The Board further directed the Chief Administrative Officer to create an Action Plan to realize a Syringe Services Program to meet the needs of San Diego County’s population, and to return within 90 days with a comprehensive County Substance Use Harm Reduction Strategy including immediate-, intermediate- and long-term actions that broadens the existing “Opioid and Prescription Drug Misuse” strategy to bring a harm reduction approach to all substance use interventions across San Diego County.

Today’s update outlines a comprehensive County Substance Use Harm Reduction Strategy which envisions a world where harms related to substance use are seen as concerns of overall health and well-being, where stigma does not impede access to services, and where we realize a community free of substance use-related harms, with efforts concentrated in four specific focus areas: cross-sectoral convening, housing, workforce, and healthcare integration and access. An action plan to realize a Syringe Services Program is included in the update, as part of the healthcare integration and access focus area.

As further engagement of stakeholders in shaping the tactics associated with the Harm Reduction Strategy moves forward, including input from those with lived experience, specific tactics to operationalize a local naloxone distribution effort will be launched immediately to address alarming rates of drug overdose deaths further exacerbated during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today’s action provides a framework for our County’s collaboration with community stakeholders to further incorporate a client-centered, data-driven, public health-oriented approach into service delivery and policy. By supporting the reduction of individual and community harms associated with substance use, this item supports the County’s *Live Well San Diego* vision.

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RECOMMENDATION(S)

CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

Receive an update on the comprehensive County Substance Use Harm Reduction Strategy, inclusive of a Syringe Services Action Plan.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Poverty, drug use, and involvement with the justice system are deeply intertwined and the resulting community and individual traumas are disproportionately felt by low-income populations, as well as communities of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) throughout San Diego County. The County Substance Use Harm Reduction Strategy is designed to combat these patterns at a systemic level and to address the most pressing issues at the intersection of behavioral and public health to improve outcomes for people who use drugs (PWUD) and the broader San Diego community.

Today's action advances equity and racial justice through a client-centered, data-driven, population health approach that delivers behavioral health services through a system of care which recognizes the lived experience of people who use drugs and affirms the dignity of all individuals, families, and communities.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact associated with this item.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

N/A

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

The Behavioral Health Advisory Board unanimously supported the recommendations at its meeting on May 6, 2021. This was presented to the Health Services Advisory Board as an informational item on June 1, 2021.

BACKGROUND

In an action brought forward by Chair Nathan Fletcher on January 26, 2021 (13), the San Diego County Board of Supervisors (Board) voted to find prior Board direction opposing harm reduction programs, including the December 9, 1997 resolution entitled "Resolution to Oppose Needle Exchange Programs," to no longer be in effect.

The Board further directed the Chief Administrative Officer to:

- Create an Action Plan to realize a Syringe Services Program to meet the needs of San Diego County's population, including identification of necessary resources and program partnerships, and in accordance with findings and recommendations in the January 14, 2021, Health and Human Services Agency (HHS) memo and accompanied the Family Health Centers of San Diego and San Diego State University's Institute for Public Health study, *Environmental Assessment on People Who Inject Drugs*, and report back to the Board with regular updates; and

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- Return within 90 days to the Board with a comprehensive County Substance Use Harm Reduction Strategy including immediate, intermediate, and long-term actions that broadens the existing “Opioid and Prescription Drug Misuse” strategy to bring a harm reduction approach to all substance use interventions across the County.

Following this direction, HHS leadership immediately established an internal Population Health Steering Committee. The Population Health Steering Committee is an interdepartmental body formed to support a broad-reaching, multidisciplinary collaboration across key County of San Diego (County) departments and business groups for the design, planning, and implementation of population health approaches in San Diego County. Co-chaired by Public Health Officer and Public Health Services Director, Dr. Wilma Wooten and Behavioral Health Services Director, Dr. Luke Bergmann, the Steering Committee has led the development of a **comprehensive County Substance Use and Harm Reduction Strategy (Harm Reduction Strategy)**, inclusive of a **Syringe Services Action Plan**, while working swiftly on the immediate, life-saving task of expanding naloxone distribution in San Diego County.

The Harm Reduction Strategy:

- Envisions a world where harms related to substance use are seen as concerns of overall health and well-being, where stigma does not impede access to services, and where we realize a community free of substance use-related harms.
- Strives to respect all people who use drugs, as well as their families and communities, regardless of gender, race, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, culture, spirituality, health, or socioeconomic status.
- Is driven by a multidisciplinary evidence base and builds upon over a decade of foundational work of local regional stakeholders to mitigate the harms to residents, families and communities related to the misuse of prescribed and illicit opioids and other prescribed medications.

The Harm Reduction Strategy includes four major focus areas listed below, with complete details on Attachment A. Each focus area contains a roadmap of activities rooted in immediate-, intermediate- and long-term tactics.

- *Cross-sectoral Convening,*
- *Housing,*
- *Workforce, and*
- *Healthcare Integration and Access.*

While deeper engagement of stakeholders is in development and implementation of the tactics associated with the Harm Reduction Strategy moves forward, specific tactics within the focus area of *healthcare integration and access* to operationalize a local naloxone distribution effort will be launched immediately to address alarming rates of drug overdose deaths further exacerbated during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Local Naloxone Distribution Effort

Naloxone, commonly known by brand name Narcan, is an emergency medication which reduces and reverses the effects of opioid overdoses. In practice, naloxone is a life-saving drug often administered by bystanders to an individual in the midst of an opioid overdose, allowing the overdosing individual’s normal breathing to be restored. Naloxone can be delivered intranasally with the use of a mucosal atomizer device or, intravenously or intramuscularly with a syringe and vial, or auto-injector.

Naloxone is commonly carried by first responders, law enforcement agencies, and community-based organizations that serve people who may be at risk of drug overdose and others who may know people at risk of overdose. Additionally, County Emergency Medical Services developed a partnership with the California Department of Healthcare Services (DHCS) Naloxone Distribution Project (NDP). Through this program, EMS agencies, first responders, and community organizations in California can distribute naloxone to those who would benefit following an emergency patient contact.

Public health research reflects that broad community distribution of naloxone is a proven strategy to reduce overdose deaths. Broad distribution, coupled with training, helps ensure those who are using substances are carrying this life saving medication if needed in the event of an overdose. It also helps ensure people who may witness an overdose, such as family members of a person who uses substances, have naloxone readily available and can render aid. Naloxone success depends on the level of saturation within the community, and ideally should be widely distributed and available at a variety of access points.

While there is already a baseline level of naloxone distribution and access in the community, the rising threat of fentanyl – an ultra-potent opioid found increasingly in opioid and non-opioid drug supplies alike – has precipitated the need for greater naloxone saturation in the community. The onset of COVID-19 coincided with a significant rise in deaths due to drug overdose (50% more overdose deaths in July and August 2020 than in February and March 2020), further increases the urgency for naloxone distribution.

Building on existing efforts, the County’s plan to enhance our naloxone distribution effort includes the implementation of a local Naloxone Standing Order. Naloxone is a prescription medication, requiring a prescribing entity to write individual prescriptions for each person receiving a dose of the medicine. This process can be time-consuming and prohibitive of the ability to quickly and efficiently distribute naloxone into the community. California law provides for the issuance of a local standing order which is a legal document authorizing properly trained individuals within a given jurisdiction to distribute naloxone without needing a specific prescription for each trained community recipient. The standing order for naloxone distribution was recently signed by Dr. Wilma Wooten, the County’s Public Health Officer, which authorizes trained County staff, contracted staff, health organizations, community-based organizations, and other trained community members to distribute naloxone per the standing order. This standing order removes barriers and allows the County to enhance the speed and volume of naloxone distribution into the community.

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To take the initial steps to enable broader community distribution of naloxone, HHSA has filed an application to receive a free supply of naloxone from the State Department of Health Care Services via its Naloxone Distribution Project. Potential distribution sites and distribution methods are being evaluated in the context of population health data, operational efficiency, and on achieving the greatest success of community saturation. Information from this initial distribution effort will be used to inform any longer-term plans for expanding and sustaining broad community distribution.

Another immediate-term tactic within the *healthcare integration and access* focus area is creation of a Syringe Service Program Action Plan per Board direction. Realizing a County Syringe Services Program (SSP) is a complex effort requiring collaboration with partners and stakeholders across disciplines and communities as well as inputs of resources. Outlined below are action steps to realize a Syringe Service Program.

Syringe Service Program (SSP) Action Plan

In support of those at risk of harm from substance use, HHSA continues to enhance the array of engagement strategies by transforming our care ecosystem toward low-barrier access modes of care and ensuring the process to get health care and social services is easy. Settings that employ harm reduction strategies adopt a supportive, inclusive, stigma-free, “meeting people where they’re at” posture and facilitate easy entry into general health care, social services, and/or treatment.

Based in the community, SSPs are an evidence-based component of low-barrier care that provides clean syringes to people who inject drugs (PWID) and collect used syringes in return. This helps ensure hazardous needles are not discarded into parks, on streets, or elsewhere in the community, and supports a reduction of sharing of needles among PWID which contributes to reductions in transmission and acquisition of the Hepatitis C virus (HCV), the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and other diseases. Notably, in 2019, 30% of newly reported chronic Hepatitis C cases in San Diego County were people with a history of intravenous drug use. SSPs are a critical component of working together with other community-wide efforts such as the Eliminate Hepatitis C San Diego County initiative.

Additional services may be offered at SSPs, such as linkages to substance use disorder treatment, mental health services, primary and specialty medical care, social services, HCV and HIV testing, naloxone training and distribution, overdose prevention assistance, and education. SSPs may utilize a workforce consisting of medical, behavioral health, public health, and addiction specialist personnel, as well as peer support specialists and volunteers.

In response to Board direction, a high-level SSP Action Plan was created to meet the needs of San Diego County’s populations and ensure successful deployment and operation of a SSP Action Plan.

1. Engaging San Diego County stakeholders and residents

The County will engage residents and stakeholders from organizations and constituent groups across San Diego County’s communities to receive input that will shape planning and implementation efforts.

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To support these efforts, HHSA will procure a consultant to conduct a Community Readiness Assessment. The Community Readiness Assessment will help the County better understand resident knowledge of SSPs, identify organizations and groups that support deployment of SSPs, and better understand concerns and objections regarding SSPs, particularly for residents who are located in areas considered for SSPs.

The County will use information and data collected from this assessment to build relationships with organizations and constituent groups and support the action steps outlined below including the reviewing and assessment of policy, and development evaluation criteria to assess the success of future SSPs. Ultimately, information and data from this Community Readiness Assessment will be used to help improve the County's response to our residents impacted by injection drug use and support the health and safety of all our residents.

2. *Convening the County enterprise around planning and implementation*

Given that the County has not previously operated SSPs, and given that implementation of SSPs will involve multiple stakeholders across the County enterprise, this set of activities will bring together representatives of County leadership and business groups to meet and collaborate to identify key operational and policy decisions. To guide the discussions, staff and subject matter experts will hear and share community input gathered including from those with lived experience; key population health and other data; and review best practices as identified by technical experts and as informed by the experiences of other jurisdictions. Staff will develop a work plan describing key activities and decisions required to deploy SSPs along with proposed timelines.

3. *Developing policies and procedures for siting, implementing, and monitoring SSPs*

This set of activities will create the operational blueprint for the establishment, monitoring, and evaluation of SSPs. Key activities will include identification of potential resource needs such as staffing and funding, and development of policies, procedures, and criteria to site, implement, and monitor SSPs. This includes the development of processes to respond promptly to resident concerns about any sited SSPs, including processes for follow-up, investigation, response, and resolution.

4. *Implementation and ongoing evaluation*

The model for, and timing of, implementation of SSPs will be shaped by the action steps above. In support of transparency with stakeholders and constituents, the County will identify key measures associated with any permitted SSPs and collect data that can be used to assess their effectiveness. These measures will include operational measures (e.g., number of syringes collected, number of syringes distributed, number of naloxone kits distributed, number of fentanyl test strips distributed, number of HIV and HCV tests provided), and outcome measures (e.g., the percentage of clients linked to medical care, number of clients enrolled in substance use treatment and the percentage who complete treatment, reductions in local overdose admissions, reductions in local overdose deaths). Information on development of these measures will be provided in a future update.

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As resources are needed to support implementation and operationalization of elements of the Comprehensive Harm Reduction Strategy, including realizing a Syringe Services Program, these will be identified for your Board.

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today’s action supports the County of San Diego’s 2021-2026 strategic initiatives of Building Better Health and Living Safely, as well as the County’s *Live Well San Diego* vision, by updating a comprehensive and coordinated plan to support people who use drugs through implementation of proven harm reduction strategies.

Respectfully submitted,

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HELEN N. ROBBINS-MEYER
Chief Administrative Officer

ATTACHMENT(S)

Attachment A – County of San Diego Comprehensive Harm Reduction Strategy

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AGENDA ITEM INFORMATION SHEET

REQUIRES FOUR VOTES: Yes No

WRITTEN DISCLOSURE PER COUNTY CHARTER SECTION 1000.1 REQUIRED

Yes No

PREVIOUS RELEVANT BOARD ACTIONS:

January 26, 2021 (13) Framework for the Future: Saving Lives and improving Health Outcomes Through Comprehensive Harm Reduction Approach; March 10, 2020 (03) Adopting Best Practices to Promote Recovery and Protect Public Health; July 23, 2019 (05) Receive Prescription Drug Abuse Plan Update; December 9, 1997 (29) Needle Exchange Program.

BOARD POLICIES APPLICABLE:

N/A

BOARD POLICY STATEMENTS:

N/A

MANDATORY COMPLIANCE:

N/A

ORACLE AWARD NUMBER(S) AND CONTRACT AND/OR REQUISITION NUMBER(S):

N/A

ORIGINATING DEPARTMENT: Health and Human Services Agency

OTHER CONCURRENCE(S): N/A

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