

City says no to county's needle exchange program

BY OLIVIA SULLIVAN osullivan@fedwaymirror.com

After a resident's stakeout to watch the King County Needle Exchange program in action, local officials have suspended the program within Federal Way city limits without a clear plan to replace its services.

King County Needle Exchange is a Public Health — Seattle & King County program for people who use drugs by injection (PWID) with the intent to reduce the spread of HIV and other bloodborne infections among drug users and the larger community, according to the organization.

Throughout the county, various sites allow drug users to exchange used and contaminated needles for new, clean syringes. In addition, the program works to build trust with individuals with drug addictions to help them into drug treatment programs, counseling, education and more.

In late March, resident Grace Lubrano said she posed as a drug user to see how the needle exchange program works, thus prompting a quick response by Federal Way Mayor Jim Ferrell to ask public health for a suspension of its services within the city.

"What we can't have is hundreds, if not thousands, of needles indiscriminately distributed to people on the street without a plan of how this would help — or hurt — the individuals they're provided to," Ferrell said.

Needle exchange in Federal Way

King County spends \$1.2 million per year on the needle exchange program. The program is funded by state, county and city disease prevention funds and private donations or grants. Needle exchange programs are offered at four sites in the Seattle area, along with locations in North and South King County cities by appointment.

The South County Outreach Referral and Exchange (SCORE) program visits Federal Way twice a week on average, said Sharon Bogan, communications manager for Public Health — Seattle & King County. Operating in Federal Way since 2009, the route of the SCORE van varies daily depending on the people calling in to request service.

The SCORE van meets people at private residences, park and rides, or other public spots and does not go near churches, schools or parks, Bogan said.

"We try to serve all who call, but sometimes, due to the volume of calls, we may not be able to see someone the same day," Bogan said. "If we can't see someone on the day that they initially call us, we work to make them a priority stop the next time we are out."

In the past, the program has operated as a one-for-one exchange, but has always made sure that people coming into the exchange without any supplies still have what they need to be safe, Bogan said.

When COVID-19 hit the community, the program shifted to a model that minimizes exposure risk for staff and the individuals by providing the amount of needles and other equipment needed for a two- to three-week period.

Client-driven conversations about treatment options and referrals are another portion of the program. The SCORE program also provides Naloxone, a lifesaving medication used to reverse opioid overdoses.

Program staff discuss the importance of proper disposal of needles and encourage individuals to bring their contaminated equipment to the exchange program or other syringe drop box options. The program works to ensure people get necessary

supplies "to be safe, healthy and reduce the negative effects of drug use."

"The SCORE program typically reaches community members discreetly and has been a cornerstone of hepatitis C prevention and HIV prevention for many years, but may fly under the radar for people who do not need these services," Bogan said.

'Public health department is creating a public health crisis'

After becoming frustrated with the lack of acknowledgement from Federal Way city officials about the program and its presence in the area, resident Grace Lubrano took matters into her own hands.

She called the SCORE line to set up an appointment and find where the needle exchange

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Local charity collects thousands of diapers in annual drive

Federal Way area nonprofit organization Do the Right Thing has been collecting diapers all March as part of an annual March of Diapers drive. Organization founder Cheryl Hurst estimated she could have between 60,000 and 70,000 diapers so far in storage at Billy McHale's restaurant in Federal Way. Do the **Right Thing collaborates** with public and private organizations to help meet the needs of at-risk families with children. To learn more about the charity, visit www. Dotherightthingnonprofit. org or call 253-334-1020.



PHOTO BY ANDY HOBBS/FEDERAL WAY MIRROR Cheryl Hurst stands among the thousands of diapers being stored at Billy McHale's in Federal Way as part of the annual March of Diapers charity drive.

Starting April 15, everyone 16 and older is eligible for a vaccine

By JERRY CORNFIELD jcornfield@soundpublishing.com

OLYMPIA — All Washington residents 16 and older will be eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine starting April 15, Gov. Jay Inslee announced.

At a news conference March 31, Inslee said an expected increase in vaccine supply enables the state to open eligibility two weeks ahead of a May 1 target set by President Joe Biden.

Also, Inslee said he hopes full eligibility will help tamp down a disturbing trend of rising cases. He echoed warnings from public health officials across the state who say a recent climb could foreshadow a fourth wave of COVID-19 infections.

In recent days, the governor had resisted calls to expand eligibility faster, even after a majority of other states did so. Washington now joins California with an April 15 date.

Roughly 5 million Washington residents were eligible for a vaccine as of March 31.

Of those, 2 million people were allowed to get in line March 31 when the state expanded eligibility to everyone in Phase 1B. That included anyone 60 and older, restaurant staff, construction workers, those in congregate settings such as prisons, and people with two or more health

conditions.

That leaves an estimated 1.2 million people. They can get in line in two weeks.

Inslee's announcement isn't a surprise.

With Washington receiving an increasing supply of doses from the federal government, the state Department of Health shut down an online tool for figuring out if one is eligible for a shot.

The state expects to get 408,730 total doses this week and roughly 711,000 over the next two weeks. But health officials stress that demand is still outstripping supply. This week providers requested 489,690 doses, they said.

In a related development Wednesday, Pfizer announced that its COVID-19 vaccine is safe and strongly protective in kids as young as 12.

In a study of 2,260 U.S. volunteers ages 12 to 15, preliminary data showed there were no cases of COVID-19 among fully vaccinated adolescents, compared to 18 among those given dummy shots, Pfizer reported. As of March 31, Pfizer's vaccine is authorized for ages 16 and older.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.



COURTESY PHOTO, PUBLIC HEALTH-SEATTLE & KING COUNTY

Public Health – Seattle & King County staff administering COVID-19 vaccine to a local emergency responder.





Program

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van would be around late March. On March 25, Lubrano visited the Redondo Heights Park and Ride where the van would be available for exchanges.

Lubrano watched people come and go from the van, then walked up to the van herself. She told the worker she didn't have a needle to exchange, said she wasn't sure which needle she needed as someone else usually injects her arm, and that she uses heroin. Lubrano claims staff said it wasn't a problem and handed her a box of 100 clean syringes.

"No, never in my lifetime," Lubrano told the Mirror when asked if she uses heroin.

Lubrano said she was left shocked and speechless at the amount of syringes provided to her.

"The public health department is creating a public health crisis here by giving out these needles,' she said.

The next day, March 26, Lubrano visited the SCORE van at the 348th Street and 9th Avenue Park and Ride in Federal Way where she had scheduled another appointment.

This time she didn't approach the van "since I already had that experience," but recalled seeing similar sights: people

coming and going, getting needles and walking to the edge of the parking lot to inject drugs.

"I had to get pictures, I had to say this was my personal experience because, you know, my personal experience can't be refuted," she said.

Lubrano said the program is unconscionable, unfair and unsafe for those living in the community and for those tasked to clean up community sites where needles have been dumped, such as city or county maintenance workers.

The two Park and Ride locations she visited are King County Metro properties and are not owned by the City of Federal Way.

On March 28, Lubrano posted her findings to a private Facebook group and members demanded responses from local elected officials.

Replacement services lacking

The city does not support any of the "convoluted logic" the county health board has about giving out needles, said Steve McNey, communications and government affairs coordinator for the city.

"The City of Federal Way does not support this program — we do not like it," McNey said. "The City of Federal Way does not consent to this ... Seattle & King County Board of Public Health is giving us no advance warning that they're coming and we're not told about this in any wav."

Mayor Jim Ferrell said the city questioned public health officials about the program several times since they were made aware of a needle exchange program in Federal Way in late Dec. 2020. City officials reached out to public health, who stated the program did not visit grocery stores or businesses in Federal Way.

With the public health van seen just days ago, the mayor said he had to balance his responsiveness about the issue with accountability and thoughtfulness for the community members.

On March 29, Ferrell announced he will present a resolution at the April 6 city council meeting to oppose needle exchange programs in Federal Way. This resolution is a direct ask of public health to cease services in Federal Way.

The resolution, in part, states the city does not support the distribution of drug paraphernalia and hypodermic needles in parking lots and public spaces with no clear emphasis on exchanges or referrals and calls upon public health, or any other organization providing needles, to stop services in Federal Way until they can be conducted in a "manner that is mindful of the concerns of the



Needles littered the ground throughout a homeless encampment in 2019 at Federal Way's Hylebos Wetlands, which is public property.

people of Federal Way and in a manner calculated to reduce needle proliferation and encourage rehabilitation."

According to Ferrell, Public Health - Seattle & King County Director Patty Hayes agreed to suspend the needle exchange program services in Federal Way for the next several months on March 30. Public health confirmed the discussion on pausing services during a short period to allow for further conversations and education.

The city remains focused on how to best serve and assist the people in the community, but "giving out needles is not the way to do so," Ferrell said. In 2017. Federal Way outlawed safe injection sites within city limits.

When asked what services the city will provide or introduce to replace the needle exchange program now suspended, Ferrell said the city and the county will take the next several months to craft a more collaborative plan for services to assist individuals struggling with addiction.

In the meantime, Ferrell said he encourages drug users who previously relied on the needle exchange program to "get into treatment."

However, South King County does not have enough drug treatment resources and facilities for individuals with drug addictions, said Susan Honda, Federal Way City Council president and vice chair of the King County Board of Health.

If the SCORE program is not acting as a trust-building process, then it "needs to be revamped," she said.

The program has been in place for over 10 years. The resident's recent events are not reflective of the true needle exchange program and its aims to help the community, Honda said.

Honda said she understands the complexities of a drug addiction crisis, but the city officials and staff members need to immediately get to work on putting service options in place before taking away a program.

"I don't know stopping the needle exchange [program] will stop the problem in Federal Way," she said. "But we need solutions and we need to start now."

Planning for the future

With the suspension of the services, questions remain. How will drug users who rely on the exchange program obtain clean needles? Will the city see an uptick in illnesses or deaths among community members with drug addictions? Will drug users seek services in Auburn or Des Moines or Tacoma instead of Federal Way?

In order to address the lingering questions and plan for future services, Mayor Jim Ferrell said he will appoint a working group of residents and experts in the subject matter to guide upcoming services that connect scientific data, public health policy and community input.

The idea for a working group came from Honda, who will also be a co-chair. Those interested in serving on the working group are encouraged to email Ferrell at jim.ferrell@cityoffederalway.com. More information about the group will be presented at the Federal Way City Council meeting Tuesday, April 6.

Seattle – King County Board of Health

As there have been a number of recent questions to my office about actions by the Board of Health, I wanted to remind everyone that it is the Seattle - King County Board of Health that sets county-wide public health policy, enacts and enforces local public health regulations, and carries out other duties of local boards of health as specified in state law. I am not a member of the Board of Health.

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