**HANDING OUT SYRINGES TO ADDICTS IS A PERILOUS PATH**

By Curtis Hill, Indiana Attorney General

Trying to prevent the spread of disease among heroin users, Madison County officials for two years experimented with a needle “exchange” program. After observing negative consequences, they now have wisely backed away.

Nationwide, handing out free syringes and needles to addicts has become a popular tactic intended to reduce some of the harmful effects of substance abuse. The idea is to dissuade addicts from sharing and reusing contaminated needles. When implemented in a very limited and targeted fashion, this approach at times has produced positive results.

As Madison County saw, however, these programs come with risks.

"It leaves thousands of needles on the streets, in our parks, and on our street corners and our parking lots and our community. It was just unacceptable," Madison County Prosecutor Rodney Cummings recently told a news outlet.

The fallout from such programs sometimes extends outside the immediate communities as addicts from all over the state visit to acquire free paraphernalia -- either to transport elsewhere or use near the distribution sites. Most “needle exchange” programs distribute far more needles than they collect.

Indeed, the first step to operating an effective needle exchange program is to insist it be an actual exchange – a one-for-one trade-in of used needles for clean ones. Before the Madison County Council voted to withhold funding altogether, officials contemplated adopting such a policy.

Overall, Madison County officials came to discern the basic folly of distributing dangerous needles without any reasonable degree of accountability.

Indiana has now made it easier than ever to operate needle distributions. Prior to the passage and signing of HB 1438, state authorities required counties to apply for permission to distribute needles when local authorities believed public health crises justified it. HB 1438 removed this accountability measure.

Now, local communities may decide on their own to hand out needles without declaring an emergency. Going forward, Hoosiers deserve a careful accounting of the outcomes arising from this unrestrained approach.

The state first permitted a needle-distribution program in March of 2015 in Scott County. The purpose was well-defined: to slow a localized outbreak of HIV and hepatitis.

Though successful in slowing the spread of disease, the Scott County program also produced less desirable outcomes. Drug users receiving clean needles reported injecting themselves more frequently after the start of the program – from five times a day, on average, to nine times a day.

Increased drug usage, obviously, means increased likelihood of death from overdose.

Besides needles, many of the kits provided through distribution programs also include condoms, rubber tourniquets and metal cooking spoons with twist ties. Peering into the future, one easily predicts the addition of other items to this list – perhaps eventually including the drugs themselves.

Just this year, police in Durham, England, announced plans to give out free heroin to addicts as part of an effort to cut drug-related crime. With easy access to drugs, officials reasoned, addicts would be less likely to steal from innocent victims in order to support their habits.

In places such as Montreal and Vancouver, addicts must bring their own drugs but are permitted to shoot up in “safe consumption sites.” In the United States, authorities in Seattle and other cities have discussed similar setups.

One appreciates the good intentions behind any innovative strategy aimed at mitigating the devastation caused by drug abuse.

Looking ahead, let’s continue working to balance three prongs of attack -- prevention, treatment and law enforcement – in order to protect health and reduce crime.

Let’s extend compassion toward people gripped in the clutches of addiction -- literally a life-or-death struggle for many of our friends, neighbors and loved ones.

At the same time, let’s recognize the dangers of eroding personal accountability -- thinking twice before reducing penalties for breaking the law or removing stigmas associated with destructive behavior.

Solutions to Indiana’s drug problems will arise from the efforts of all Hoosiers working together toward a comprehensive approach and, like Madison County, learning lessons along the way.

***Curtis Hill is Indiana’s 43rd Attorney General.***