

Indiana allows needle exchange program to stem HIV outbreak

March 26 2015, by Rick Callahan



Indiana Gov. Mike Pence responds to a question during a news conference Wednesday, March 25, 2015, in Scottsburg, Ind. Pence held a news conference after meeting with local officials in Scott County about an HIV outbreak. (AP Photo/Darron Cummings)

Indiana's governor authorized a short-term needle-exchange program and other steps Thursday to help contain the spread of HIV in a county tied to 79 new infections since January, all of them linked to intravenous

drug use.

Gov. Mike Pence issued an executive order declaring a [public health emergency](#) in the Midwestern state's Scott County. He ordered the state [health](#) department to set up a command center to coordinate HIV and substance-abuse treatment and establish a mobile unit to enroll people in a state-run health program.

Most of the infections involve people who shared a syringe while injecting a liquid form of the prescription painkiller Opana, according to state epidemiologist Pam Pontones.

Indiana law normally forbids needle-exchange programs, which allow people to turn in used hypodermic needles and get clean ones in an effort to keep diseases such as HIV and hepatitis from spreading. Pence, a Republican, says he opposes them as part of anti-drug policy.

But the governor said he agreed to a limited exchange in Scott County because of the emergency nature of the infections. He said the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also recommended a needle-exchange program because all of the HIV cases have now been linked to IV drug use.

In addition, the state has launched a public-awareness campaign to focus on [drug treatment](#), infection prevention, safe sex, needle disposal and HIV testing and treatment.

Pence's executive order will run for 30 days, at which time he will consider whether to extend it for another 30-day period.



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The number of cases tied to the county is up from 26 a month ago and is expected to continue to climb.

The county typically sees about five HIV cases each year, health officials said this week.



Indiana Gov. Mike Pence makes a comment as Scott County Sheriff Don McClain listens during a meeting that Pence held with local officials in Scott County to discuss an HIV outbreak in the area, Wednesday, March 25, 2015, in Scottsburg, Ind. Pence is preparing to declare a public health emergency in the southern Indiana county where 72 cases of HIV have been confirmed. (AP Photo/Darron Cummings)

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