

Philadelphia wants safe injection sites to help opioid fight

January 23 2018, by Kristen De Groot

Philadelphia wants to become the first U.S. city to allow supervised drug injection sites as a way to combat the opioid epidemic, officials announced Tuesday, saying they are seeking outside operators to establish one or more in the city.

Public Health Commissioner Dr. Thomas Farley said the sites could be "a life-saving strategy and a pathway to treatment," and would be just one piece of the city's overall plan to fight the epidemic.

"No one here condones or supports illegal drug use in any way," Farley said. "We want people saddled with drug addiction to get help."

Safe injection sites are locations where people can shoot up under the supervision of a doctor or nurse who can administer an overdose antidote if necessary. Critics have argued the sites may undermine prevention and treatment, and seem to fly in the face of laws aimed at stopping use of deadly illicit drugs.

Philadelphia has the highest opioid death rate of any large U.S. city. More than 1,200 people fatally overdosed in Philadelphia in 2017, one-third more than 2016.

The city hopes to hear from operators interested in setting up the injection sites—which they are calling comprehensive user engagement sites—where the city would provide outreach services.

Other cities have proposed similar safe havens. No U.S. city has established such a site, though Seattle has set aside \$1.3 million to create a safe injection site there. Injection sites are operating in Canada and Europe.

Officials from Philadelphia visited Seattle and safe injection sites in Vancouver, where Farley said they have reduced overdose deaths, the spread of diseases like HIV and hepatitis C, and created safer neighborhoods that are free of used-needle litter.

It's not clear how the federal government would respond if Philadelphia gets a safe-injection site. Nearly three months ago, President Donald Trump declared the U.S. opioid crisis a public health emergency.

Philadelphia Police Commissioner Richard Ross said he was initially dead-set against injection sites but now is keeping an open mind if they can truly save lives. He said he still has a lot of questions about how it all would work but added: "We cannot just throw our hands up and say, 'That's not my problem.'"

Mayor Jim Kenney wasn't at the news conference but Farley said the Democrat supports the recommendation.

Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro said sanctioning such sites presents public safety concerns and changes in state and federal law would have to be made in order for them to operate legally. The Democrat also expressed doubt that the sites are an effective path to treatment.

"There is no safe way to inject heroin, fentanyl and carfentanyl," he said in a statement. "These are dangerous drugs with devastating consequences."

House Speaker Mike Turzai, who is running for the Republican nomination to challenge Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf, called Philadelphia's safe injection plan misguided and a violation of federal law.

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