

Denver trying again for possible 1st US drug injection site

November 27 2018, by Colleen Slevin

Despite federal opposition, Denver is trying again to become what could be the first U.S. city to open a supervised drug injection site, a strategy that some liberal cities have tried repeatedly to launch to reduce overdose deaths fueled by a nationwide opioid epidemic.

The Denver City Council voted 12-1 on Monday to approve a measure that would allow one site to open for at least two years under a [pilot program](#). But there are still several hurdles to clear.

The program must win approval from the state Legislature, which is now under Democratic control after this month's election. Earlier this year, the Republican-controlled state Senate killed similar legislation.

Despite the Democratic edge in the session starting in January, Democratic Gov.-elect Jared Polis has not taken a position on the issue and could veto the measure.

If successful, Denver could have the nation's first publicly sanctioned site for people to use heroin, methamphetamine and other illegal drugs under medical supervision, with staffers able to intervene in case of an overdose.

Supporters say it's a safer alternative for those who aren't ready for rehab, while opponents say it condones dangerous drug use. Facilitating the use of [illegal drugs](#) is a federal felony, and the U.S. government has indicated it wouldn't stand by if cities move to open such sites.

Other U.S. cities, including San Francisco, Seattle, New York and Philadelphia, have expressed interest in opening supervised [injection](#) sites. California lawmakers passed a measure that would have protected workers and participants in a San Francisco pilot program from state prosecution, but Gov. Jerry Brown vetoed it in September.

A private nonprofit is raising money for a safe injection site in Philadelphia but has pushed back its potential opening date from January to mid-March, the group Safehouse said. While Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner has said he won't prosecute anyone providing medical oversight at the facilities, state and federal officials have said they wouldn't be legal.

Former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, who serves on Safehouse's board, said he's willing to go to prison to try a new approach that may save lives in Philadelphia, which has the highest rate of opioid deaths of any large U.S. city. It had more than 1,200 fatal overdoses last year.

Drug overdoses were the second-leading cause of death in Denver last year, killing 201 people. They died in places like grocery stores, abandoned buildings and along a bike path, according to death records reviewed by Denver's Harm Reduction Action Center, the largest needle exchange in Colorado. It's offered to host the safe injection site.

Once users get a clean needle, they now have to leave the center, which is across the street from the state Capitol, and usually wind up injecting drugs in nearby alleys and streets, executive director Lisa Raville said.

The cities' efforts come as federal officials have vowed to crack down on injection sites. U.S. law includes a "crack house" statute that makes it a felony to knowingly maintain a place for using a controlled substance.

In an op-ed in The New York Times in August, days after California

lawmakers passed their measure, U.S. Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein said cities and counties that allow such sites should expect "swift and aggressive action" from the Justice Department.

In Denver, the measure's sponsor, Albus Brooks, said Tuesday that he's reaching out to the governor and legislative leaders to urge their support.

"I am very hopeful that these folks in the General Assembly will look at a 1,000 deaths from drug overdoses in our state (in 2017) and move quickly to pass this bill," said Brooks, who has said he learned how easy it was to become dependent on opioids while being treated for cancer.

Sen.-elect Brittany Pettersen, who sponsored the earlier statewide legislation, said she has bipartisan support for another attempt to allow at least one injection site. The suburban Denver Democrat thinks it's "highly likely" it will pass next year but downplayed the importance of the Democratic shift at the Statehouse.

"This is about keeping people alive today and ensuring they get the help they need tomorrow," said Pettersen, whose mother struggled with opioid addiction for years.

She and state Rep. Leslie Herod traveled to Vancouver, British Columbia, to learn about its supervised injection site last year. Advocates say no overdoses have been reported there or at about 100 publicly sanctioned injection sites in Europe, Canada and Australia.

The lone council member opposing the Denver proposal, Kevin Flynn, said he was concerned it wasn't aggressive enough in helping people get treatment.

"A safe injection site is not treatment. It's like bringing a lung cancer patient into a smoking room and giving him more cigarettes," he said.

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