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DOH report identifies opportunities to eliminate Hepatitis C among vulnerable communities

Report centers on perceptions of treatment access among people who use drugs

HONOLULU, HI – In a new report, the Hawai'i Department of Health (DOH) confirmed that syringe exchange programs provide important opportunities to eliminate infectious diseases like hepatitis C. Syringe exchanges not only prevent infections from spreading throughout the community, but also serve as essential health hubs for people who use drugs. This landmark report used qualitative research methods to seek guidance from people who use drugs on ways to increase the use of curative hepatitis C treatment.

In Hawai'i, people diagnosed with hepatitis C may die 20 years earlier than other state residents, according to previous research. The disease burden is especially high among people who use drugs, with more than half of syringe exchange clients infected with hepatitis C at some point in their lifetime. Although hepatitis C is curable with well-tolerated, all-oral medication, many people in Hawai'i report not seeking treatment.

To better understand hepatitis C treatment barriers, DOH conducted interviews with syringe exchange clients in early 2023. The resulting report—*"I Wanna Live a Full Life: Perceptions of Hepatitis C Treatment Access among People Who Use Drugs in Honolulu, Hawai'i"*—is the first DOH-led research project that centers on the voices of people who use drugs to guide public health programs.

Based on the interviews, the most important findings from the report include:

- **People who use drugs are concerned with health and disease prevention**, although their knowledge about hepatitis C varied.
- **Co-location of hepatitis C treatment and other services at syringe exchanges** is an important opportunity to improve health outcomes.
- **People who use drugs respond to visual, directive messaging**, especially print materials distributed by syringe exchanges.
- **Perceived stigma around substance use and hepatitis C** are ongoing barriers to healthcare.

“The findings of this report reiterate the importance of seeking community voices to ensure effective public health decision-making,” said Diana Felton, chief of the Department of Health Communicable Disease and Public Health Nursing Division. “The voices of local people who use drugs are essential for identifying meaningful opportunities to eliminate hepatitis C in Hawai‘i.”

This report was the result of a multi-sector collaboration between DOH and external partners, including Johns Hopkins University’s Bloomberg School of Public Health, Hep Free Hawai‘i, and the Hawai‘i Health & Harm Reduction Center. Most especially, this report relied on the time, experience, and expertise of local syringe exchange participants, whose voices were essential to ensuring that DOH responds to community needs. To read the report and related materials, visit <https://health.hawaii.gov/harmreduction/people-who-use-drugs-talk-about-hep-c/>.

For local hepatitis C screening and immunization resources, visit www.hepfreehawaii.org.

This report aligns with *Hep Free 2030*, the statewide strategy to eliminate viral hepatitis in Hawai‘i by 2030, which was developed by DOH in collaboration with Hep Free Hawai‘i and over 160 community stakeholders. For more information on hepatitis elimination efforts in Hawai‘i, visit www.hepfreehawaii.org/hep-free-2030.

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