



Information from the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health Regarding Harm Reduction Services in Santa Monica

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (Public Health) is committed to engaging community members and receiving feedback about harm reduction services offered in Santa Monica and across Los Angeles County.

Public Health continues to operate its harm reduction services in Santa Monica. These services are protected by State statutes, (as indicated below), and prevents cities from disrupting harm reduction services provided by Public Health.

Harm reduction services represent an important tool and component of the multi-pronged provision of prevention, treatment, and recovery needed to address the overdose crisis and other threats to health and wellbeing throughout California. The goal is to reduce the toll of substance use disorders on our communities and associated fatalities. Recent data shows that there has been a plateauing of overdose fatalities in Los Angeles County between 2022 and 2023.

Harm Reduction Services in Santa Monica

Public Health's Bureau of Substance Abuse Prevention and Control (DPH-SAPC) contracts with the Venice Family Clinic to operate an overdose prevention program that outreaches to Santa Monica residents in need of services. These services are provided up to three hours a week in Santa Monica and are provided directly where people who may benefit from harm reduction services are located.

Venice Family Clinic has recently observed a decrease in the need for park-based harm reduction services. For this reason, the weekly three hours of harm reduction services are not offered exclusively in local parks but will also be offered inside clinical settings. Services are offered on a limited basis within Santa Monica parks, (i.e., Reed Park, Tongva Park, and Palisades Park), when there are people in the parks who would benefit from harm reduction services.

DPH-SAPC and Venice Family Clinic have made changes to harm reduction services in Santa Monica in response to requests from the City of Santa Monica and the Santa Monica City Council. DPH-SAPC remains committed to collaborating with local leaders to offer these data-informed public health interventions that save lives, while also being responsive and receptive to community feedback.

The range of harm reduction services offered through DPH-SAPC contracts in Santa Monica include:

- Outreach and engagement to discuss the ways an individual can decrease their risk for overdose and to provide connections with treatment. People who are interested in substance use treatment are referred to the Venice Family Clinic substance use treatment SUMMIT program. Hygiene kits are also offered. When people require additional medical interventions, Venice Family Clinic's homeless outreach unit is dispatched to provide care directly to their patients at the patient's location.

- HIV and viral hepatitis testing via Venice Family Clinic’s Common Ground program.
- Overdose prevention services including the distribution of both intranasal and injectable naloxone to reverse opioid overdoses. Venice Family Clinic distributes approximately 60 naloxone doses each month within the city of Santa Monica, averaging approximately 12 overdose reversals. These overdose reversals equate to lives saved per month. These are lives that would not have been saved had these services not been offered. Venice Family Clinic also collects and exchanges used syringes to ensure they are properly disposed of, and offers sharps containers with sterile syringes, empty sharps containers, and injection equipment including alcohol swabs, cotton, sterile water, and band-aids. Venice Family Clinic serves approximately 100 individuals per month in Santa Monica and distributes approximately 100 syringes per month.

More About Harm Reduction Services

Los Angeles County is currently experiencing the worst overdose crisis in our history and our efforts are making a difference to turn the tide, as indicated statistically with a leveling off of overdose fatalities in Los Angeles County between 2022 and 2023. (Data Report: Fentanyl Overdoses in Los Angeles County, July 2024)

Community-based overdose prevention efforts, specifically inclusive of harm reduction services, are critical to save lives and improve public health and safety. Harm reduction is grounded in empathy, respect, and compassion to meet people who use drugs wherever they are in their recovery.

Harm reduction involves a suite of evidence-based services focused on reducing the negative consequences associated with substance use, including preventing and reversing overdose. Harm reduction services are offered without preconditions, in recognition that many people are not willing or able to stop using substances. Evidence-based harm reduction services include connections to medical, mental health, substance use treatment services, peer engagement, distribution of the opioid overdose reversal medication naloxone, distribution of fentanyl and xylazine test strips, infectious disease testing, syringe services programs, and more. In fact, people using harm reduction services are five times more likely to participate in drug treatment and three times more likely to reduce or stop injecting than those who have never accessed harm reduction services. (Data Report: Fentanyl Overdoses in Los Angeles County, July 2024)

Altogether, these harm reduction services are well demonstrated to reduce overdose deaths, reduce the public use of injectable drugs, reduce transmission of communicable diseases (e.g., HIV/AIDS and viral hepatitis), increase access to substance use services, reduce the use of emergency medical services, and increase public safety. For example, in high-risk populations, upwards of 20% of naloxone doses distributed may result in overdose reversals, meaning that a life can be saved for every 5 doses of naloxone distributed. (Data Report: Fentanyl Overdoses in Los Angeles County, July 2024)

Because harm reduction services often engage people who do not always pursue health or social services and who are at increased risk of experiencing overdose, including people experiencing homelessness, it is a well-established best practice to provide mobile harm reduction services directly to people where they physically are. Public health is always open to engaging with local officials and community members on how to best improve our harm reduction programs.

Harm reduction syringe services contracted through the County are compliant with and protected under California law (Health & Safety Code § 121349) and harm reduction programs in Los Angeles County can obtain certification through the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, which has operated a harm reduction syringe services certification program since 2005.

California Health and Safety Codes that allow Public Health to continue providing harm reduction services in Santa Monica

- **Health and Safety Code (HSC) Section 11364** governs the possession of drug paraphernalia. Adults age 18 and older may possess syringes for personal use if acquired from a physician, pharmacist, authorized syringe exchange program (SEP) or any other source that is authorized by law to provide sterile syringes or hypodermic needles without a prescription. There are no limits on the number of hypodermic needles and syringes adults may possess for personal use. Additionally, it is lawful to possess hypodermic needles or syringes that are containerized for safe disposal in a container that meets state and federal standards for disposal of sharps waste, such as a standard sharps container distributed by SEPs.
- **HSC Section 121349.1** states that SEP participants shall not be subject to criminal prosecution for possession of needles or syringes or any materials deemed by a local or state health department to be necessary to prevent the spread of communicable diseases, or to prevent drug overdose, injury, or disability acquired from an authorized SEP.
- **HSC Section 11364.7(a)** establishes that no public entity, its agents, or employees shall be subject to criminal prosecution for distribution of syringes or any materials deemed by a local or state health department to be necessary to prevent the spread of communicable diseases, or to prevent drug overdose, injury, or disability to participants in SEPs authorized by the public entity.
- **HSC Section 121349 (b)**: In order to reduce the spread of HIV infection and bloodborne hepatitis among the intravenous drug user population within California, the Legislature hereby authorizes a clean needle and syringe exchange project pursuant to this chapter in any city, county, or city and county upon the action of a county board of supervisors and the local health officer or health commission of that county, or upon the action of the city council, the mayor, and the local health officer of a city with a health department, or upon the action of the city council and the mayor of a city without a health department. Here, the County does have an action from the County BOS, so it would appear that HS 121349(b) applies.