

Leon County Commission votes to adopt needle exchange ordinance

[Nada Hassanein, Tallahassee Democrat](#) Published 3:52 p.m. ET Dec. 11, 2019 | Updated 3:53 p.m. ET Dec. 11, 2019



Miami-Dade County is currently the only municipality in the state that has a clean needle exchange program.

(Photo: Joe Raedle, Getty Images)

A local law that would allow Leon County to start a needle exchange program to help prevent hepatitis and HIV infections among drug users was adopted at the Leon County Commission meeting Tuesday night.

Commissioners voted 6-1 in favor of the ordinance that allows the county to move forward to find a partner organization to implement a clean needle exchange program — since state law prevents government money from funding one.

Aiming to reduce blood-borne infections among injection drug users, exchange programs offer sterile syringes and safe disposal of used ones at mobile health units or at a fixed location. Building "a bridge to drug treatment" is another goal.



Miami-Dade County is currently the only municipality in the state that has a clean needle exchange program. The grant-funded program is run by the University of Miami.

According to Big Bend Community Based Care data reported by the county, 45 injection drug users in Leon County were admitted to treatment so far this year. From 2015 to 2017, 76 people died of drug overdoses, according to the Florida Department of Health.

Though 81 new HIV cases were diagnosed last year, the department reports only one case in the past five years in which the virus was transmitted through injection drug use.

The Leon County Commission voted 6-1 to adopt an ordinance Tuesday night that allows the county to move forward to find a partner organization to implement a clean needle exchange program. (Photo: Alicia Devine/Democrat)

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Florida has been grappling with an outbreak of hepatitis A, a virus that infects the liver. In Leon County, four new cases of this strain of the virus were diagnosed over the past five years — 22 total, including Hepatitis B and C.

Nick Maddox was the sole commissioner to vote against the ordinance.

"I come from a community where I watched people die because of drug use, and I understand that this may actually help with HIV and other things like that," he said.

But because drug counseling services would be available but not required for drug users using the program, he said he couldn't support it.

"I can't support optional," Maddox said. "Too many family members had 'options' ... I've watched too many people die as a result of options."

County Commissioner Kristen Dozier countered, "To get them in the door, just to talk to someone, is a step" in the right direction, she said. "It's not the only tool in the toolbox."

Bruce Grant, a Tallahassee substance abuse prevention worker, told commissioners he "strongly" opposes the ordinance.

"Needle exchange programs enable illicit drug use — they do nothing to address the underlying disease of addiction," he argued.

But Florida State University's Leslie Beitsch, chair of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine, said otherwise.

"There is no evidence out there that syringe exchange programs lead to a cycle of addiction," Beitsch said.

"In fact, the evidence is quite the contrary: That, in fact, they lower the likelihood of people remaining on addiction because there are referral programs that are baked into the ordinance."

