

Med student helps pass legislation creating needle-exchange program

Joseph Zeballos-Roig, Senior Staff Writer 1:38 p.m. EDT April 6, 2016



(Photo: Courtesy of the FSU College of Medicine)

For FSU students in Tallahassee, the opportunity to influence legislative events at the nearby Capitol may seem distant and remote. With classwork, part-time jobs and extracurricular activities, how can one person juggle multiple responsibilities and still have time to make a difference on an issue they're passionate about?

Recently, fourth-year FSU medical student John Dudley navigated classwork and residency training to do something extraordinary at the Capitol. Working alongside University of Miami medical student Hansel Tookes III, Dudley helped pass the Infectious Disease Elimination Act, a bill aimed at creating a five-year needle-exchange pilot program in Miami-Dade County, allowing intravenous drug users to exchange used, dirty syringes for clean ones.

Having been shot down by the Legislature the past three years, the bill was passed this year and signed into law by Gov. Rick Scott on March 23.

Since beginning his medical studies at FSU, Dudley says he's been mindful of the dual role of doctors in the fields of individual health and public health. After meeting Tookes at a Florida Medical Association conference in 2012 where he presented the needle-exchange proposal, Dudley became involved with the issue since he believed he could make a difference in the lives of others.

"Florida is the number one state for new HIV cases and Miami-Dade County is the municipality leading the country in new HIV cases," Dudley says. "It's one of those things where if you have the ability to make a change, then you have the obligation to do so. Being in Tallahassee, I could go to class in the morning and head over to the Capitol."

While the logic of giving drug users clean needles seems counterintuitive, Dudley explains that the program allows doctors crucial access to people who are in dire need of help to end their heroin addiction.

"A primary task of the program is preventing HIV. What this does is that it gives access to health-care professionals to a segment of the population which never has access. And when they come in, we can give them medical literature and information about programs to get them off drugs." Dudley says. "We have this in over half of the states and research shows that it works really well. In Washington D.C., a similar program reduced new HIV infections by 80% in that population."

Cobbling together support in a legislature under Republican control, Dudley says, was the hardest part. The bill faced stern conservative opposition on moral grounds and other lawmakers were reluctant at the idea of using taxpayer money to fund the program.

"Initially, it was mostly legislators saying 'I don't want to have anything to do with needles and drug abuse,'" Dudley says. "We asked what their reservations were and got down to the grittiest of details. Two years ago, we started getting their attention when an analysis done by a Senate committee showed that if we could have prevented 10% of those cases, it would have saved the state \$126 million."

Despite repeated setbacks, Dudley and Tookes fine-tuned their strategy and built momentum over the years. Throughout their legislative journey, they remained optimistic since they knew their bill would eventually save "thousands of lives."

"With one bill like this, you can save more people than a doctor can save in their entire career by prescribing medication. And that's the beauty of public health," Dudley says.

Originally envisaged as a statewide program, the needle-exchange program had to be watered down to a pilot program limited to one county "in order to make people more comfortable," Dudley says.

"Miami-Dade County needs the program badly," Dudley says. "But at the end of the five-year period, we're going to look at the data, show it can help and make it statewide."

Noting his own legislative experience, Dudley urged FSU students to seize the advantage of living in Florida's capital city and influence events at the Capitol.

“When we started it, people said you don’t have a shot in hell to pass it in this state,” Dudley says. “But we did and it was just a couple of persistent medical students that stuck to it. To the students of FSU I say, ‘You’re right there.’ If you find something you’re passionate about, go talk to somebody about it, write a bill and make it happen. The only person that is capable of making a difference is you.”

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