

FLORIDA AGENDA

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Fight against HIV: needle exchange

Congress lifts federal funding ban on programs

By DMITRY RASHNITSOV

A promise made by United States President Barack Obama during his election campaign is coming to fruition, after the U.S. Congress voted to lift federal funding restrictions on needle exchange programs last week. Obama is expected to sign the legislation

just after the New Year.

The move is a major step in the fight towards fighting HIV infections in the U.S. Opponents of needle exchange programs say providing needles to drug addicts encourages drug use; however, AIDS activists are cheering the move, saying it legitimizes programs that studies have shown help to reduce greatly HIV infections.

"It humanizes the issue rather than criminalizing the behavior," said South Florida AIDS activist Michael Rajner. "There are a lot of people who take great strides to making sure that people are getting clean needles."

Despite knowing the risks involved, intravenous drug users often experience addictions so powerful they are compelled to share needles to inject drugs, thereby passing blood from one user to the next.

For more than two decades, needle exchange programs in 33 states have provided clean needles to intravenous drug users as a way to reduce the transmission of HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C. A backlash from opponents forced officials in President Bill Clinton's administration to ban federal funding, and programs have relied solely on state and local funding.

In South Florida, needle exchange programs operate on the down-low, away from the watchful eye of law enforcement.

For the past three years, George Gibson has operated Flashlight of Hope, Inc. a needle exchange program in Miami. Gibson goes out once or twice a week at night to places where intravenous drug users hang out, and gives out clean needles to people as well as free condoms and offers them counseling and information about how to help get them clean.

"Sometimes you can gain their trust and they will take you back to their home and you can start going and meeting them there," Gibson said.

Gibson said all of the funding for 'Flashlights' comes from the North American Syringe Exchange Network (NASEN).

Representatives from NASEN did not return phone calls before publication, but according to their website, they offer grants of up to \$15,000 per year for organizations looking to start needle exchange programs in their city. A startup kit of 14,000 syringes and other supplies to be able to take used needles costs about \$1,200 through NASEN's bulk buying procedures.

According to the Miami-Dade County

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