



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Gustavo Rivera

## NYS Syringe Access Legislation Introduced to Reduce HIV and Hepatitis Infections

GUSTAVO RIVERA January 15, 2015

| ISSUE: **HEALTH, AIDS/HIV**

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*Bill would repeal criminal law on syringe possession and improve access through pharmacies*

*Proven means of preventing HIV and hepatitis C transmission; Syringe decriminalization associated with reduced needle-stick injuries to law enforcement officers in other states*

**NEW YORK, NY** – State lawmakers, healthcare providers, and community members gathered today to mark the introduction of legislation to remove barriers to sterile syringe access by repealing the criminal law on syringe possession and loosening restrictions on pharmacy sales. Syringe access programs have operated with state support since 1992 and are credited with reversing a widespread HIV epidemic among people who inject drugs.

**Senator Gustavo Rivera** (D-Bronx), a sponsor of the legislation, said that “syringe access programs across our State have prevented countless people from contracting HIV or hepatitis, yet outdated laws still stand in the way of many getting access to the harm reduction services they need. The uptick in heroin drug use and our state’s efforts to eradicate AIDS as an epidemic make it the ideal time to remove barriers that hinder the full potential of this highly successful program. Simply put,

increasing access to sterile syringes is good public health policy that has the potential to save numerous lives.”

“The syringe access program was a great step for public health, enacted with courageous help from then-Gov. George Pataki. It saves lives and helps prevent spread of HIV and Hepatitis C. We need to save more lives by building on its proven record,” said **Richard N. Gottfried, Chair of the Assembly Committee on Health** and the Assembly sponsor of the bill. “We need to protect people from being arrested for possession of legally-obtained syringes, and we need to repeal outmoded restrictions on this sensible public health policy.”

More than 40 organizations from all parts of the state have formed a coalition to back the legislation. Members of the coalition noted the well-documented, statewide resurgence of heroin and other injection drug use in recent years and called for renewed attention to ensuring that law and policy do not prevent people from accessing syringes or the services they are connected with, such as drug counseling and treatment, mental health care, and housing placement.

“It is time for the state of New York to close the loopholes and ensure that there is not one single person arrested for syringes,” said **Terrell Jones of VOCAL-NY and NY Harm Reduction Educators**. “Arrests create fear among people who inject drugs and that fear will make people less likely to use new syringes or to return used syringes to the exchange.”

“This legislation is not only good for everyone in the community,” said **Tracie M. Gardner, Co-Director of Policy at the Legal Action Center** and a member of Governor Cuomo’s task force on ending the AIDS epidemic. “One way is in protecting police: after Connecticut decriminalized syringes, people who inject drugs became more willing to reveal syringes before a search, which resulted in a 66% reduction in police needle-stick injuries. And with more syringes available, fewer people will be infected with hepatitis or HIV, meaning less chance of transmission even when needle sticks occur.”

**Howard Josepher**, President and CEO of Exponents, a leading drug treatment expert, noted the importance of syringe access as the crucial first steps towards the maintenance of good health and recovery from drug addiction. "Syringe programs are one of the best tools we have for engaging a hard to reach population. For many active drug users, they are the first step towards turning their lives around. Syringe access helps to keep drug users engaged and healthy until they are ready for treatment."

"New York's criminal law on syringe possession must be done away with if we are going to end the HIV/AIDS epidemic," said **Robert Cordero**, **president of BOOM!Health** and a member of the governor's Task Force on ending the AIDS epidemic. "While the state funds the distribution of millions of syringes per year as a public health measure, police in some jurisdictions continue to arrest thousands of people each year for syringe possession. This bill is a common sense solution to a problem that deters people from getting the help they need."

Summing up the issue, **Senator Brad Hoylman** (D-Manhattan) said that "we need to continue to do everything we can to combat infections like HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis, and studies clearly show that supporting syringe access programs are an effective, commonsense way to do that. Syringe access programs save lives, save taxpayer money and connect drug users to critical healthcare and treatment services. I'm very grateful to Senator Rivera, Assembly Member Gottfried and VOCAL for their work on this legislation, which is long overdue and will go a long way toward protecting communities throughout New York."

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