

## SUPERVISED INJECTION SITES

### AAFP Position

The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) is committed to preventing the spread of HIV and Hepatitis B and C, as well as combatting opioid dependence and other substance use disorders. The AAFP supports syringe exchange programs, the passage of laws to accommodate those injection equipment programs, and supervised injection sites to reduce the risk of death from opioid overdose and engage individuals in treatment. Needle exchange programs and supervised injection sites reduce the transmission of disease, do not increase the rate of substance abuse, and increase the likelihood that individuals will enter drug treatment programs. The AAFP strongly opposes the illicit use of opioids and supports physicians' efforts to educate their patients on the harms of improper drug use and their treatment options.

### The Opioid Epidemic

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an average of 130 Americans die every day from an opioid overdose, six times the rate in 1999.<sup>1</sup> Opioids, when properly used, can be effective therapies to treat pain, but also can be dangerously addictive when abused or acquired illegally. Opioid misuse has led to some individuals to switch to cheaper or easier-to-obtain alternatives, such as heroin. According to a study in the journal *Addictive Behaviors*, those initiating drug use with heroin – as opposed to prescription opioids – jumped from 8.7 percent to 33.3 percent of all individuals entering substance abuse treatment from 2005 to 2015.<sup>2</sup>

### What are Supervised Injection Sites?

Supervised injection sites provide a place for individuals to consume pre-obtained drugs and are equipped with sterile injection supplies, overdose prevention literature, counseling, and referrals to treatment for dependent individuals.<sup>3</sup> These sites do not provide drugs to individuals; rather, they are equipped with trained staff and resources, including naloxone, to prevent overdoses and, in the unlikely event, death.

### Legal Obstacles

Despite significant public health research in support of safe injection sites, they remain controversial and illegal in the United States. Opponents of safe injection sites question whether the federal government should provide funding for these sites, suggesting that such support would incentivize harmful and unlawful behavior of opioid use. The Controlled Substances Act (CSA) prohibits individuals from possessing illegal drugs and facilities that allow the use of these drugs.<sup>4</sup> The courts have yet to decide if the CSA is a factor that will hinder the operation of supervised injection sites as they are intended to be a public health intervention.<sup>5</sup>

There are currently no approved supervised injection sites in the United States, although several cities

<sup>1</sup> "Opioid Overdose: Understanding the Epidemic." (2018). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/epidemic/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> Cicero TJ, Ellis MS, Kasper ZA. (2017). "Increased use of heroin as an initiating opioid of abuse." *Addictive Behaviors*. Web.

<sup>3</sup> Gostin L, Hodge J, Gulinson C. (2019). "Supervised Injection Facilities: Legal and Policy Reforms." *JAMA*. Web.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Cicero TJ, Ellis MS, Kasper ZA. (2017). "Increased use of heroin as an initiating opioid of abuse." *Addictive Behaviors*. Web.

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and states have proposed legislation to legalize these sites.<sup>6</sup>

### **Looking Ahead**

Legal challenges and misinformation are the main barriers to establishing supervised injection sites in the US despite public health research in support of these sites. Public health agencies and officials have taken steps to introduce harm reduction strategies to combat the opioid crisis including drug courts that screen for health needs and place individuals on pathways to treatment and rehabilitation, expanding syringe exchange programs, and expanding the availability of naloxone to reverse the effects of an overdose. The effectiveness of public health interventions, including safe injection sites, underscores the importance of treatment and recovery of, rather than punitive action against, individuals with substance use disorders.

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<sup>6</sup> Barry C, Sherman S, Stone E, Kennedy-Hendricks A, Niederdeppe J, Linden S, McGinty E. (2019). "Arguments supporting and opposing legalization of safe consumption sites in the U.S." *International Journal of Drug Policy*. Web.