

Sharp move: Needle drop boxes working

TL Health, AIDS Foundation keep hundreds of used syringes off street

BY HEIDI SWILLINGER

To a casual passer-by, it looks just like a hole in the wall — or, to be more specific, a hole in the door. You'd never guess that it's actually a simple but controversial method for safely disposing of used syringes — the first 24/7, no-questions-asked drop box in the city.

And since it and two others were installed last winter, the number of used needles littering the streets of the Tenderloin has gone down by 37.

The drop box, a San Francisco AIDS Foundation initiative, has collected 1,000 syringes since going into action — rigs that might otherwise have ended up in the gutter or in the hands of an addict desperate enough to use someone else's needle with the potential to transmit HIV or hepatitis C.

Soon after the drop box opened at 117 Sixth St., Tenderloin Health installed boxes at either end of an alley in the Tenderloin called Continuum Way, located outside 255 Golden Gate Ave. between Leavenworth and Hyde. Although there's been no formal fanfare or advertising, the boxes are netting 800 syringes a month, according to Colm Hegarty, director of resource development and public relations.

Syringe-collection numbers are also on the rise at Tenderloin needle exchange sites, where IV-drug users can trade used syringes for clean ones. But rather than diverting collections from needle exchanges, the drop boxes may be drawing syringes that might otherwise have been disposed of improperly, say spokesmen at both Tenderloin Health and the San Francisco AIDS Foundation.

It's possible they are being used by people who don't want to be identified as IV-drug users. "You see addicts from all walks of life," says Daniel Madrigal, a health educator at Tenderloin Health. "IV use isn't strictly a homeless thing, or a black thing. We see young kids, businessmen, people who are completely functional and use substances intravenously."

Keith Hocking, director of volunteer-based programs at the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, estimates there are 16,000 intravenous drug users in the city.

No matter where the syringes are coming from, the fact that they are ending up in drop boxes rather than on the street or in a dumpster is good news.

The San Francisco Clean City Coalition, a non-profit that collects used needles from Tenderloin streets, reports that 650 fewer needles were found March through July, compared with the same period last year (see chart).

"The pilot needle disposal boxes appear to be making a noticeable difference in the Tenderloin, and warrants a conversation for further boxes in strategic locations," Clean City Coalition Director Gia Grant wrote in an email to the Central City Extra. "The presence of thousands of used needles in a dense neighborhood full of children and seniors merits the attention of a serious public health issue."

Disposing of syringes in the central city

24/7 drop boxes:

- 117 Sixth St.
- Continuum Alley (outside 255 Golden Gate Ave.)

Needle exchanges:

- San Francisco AIDS Foundation: 117 Sixth St., 10 a.m.-noon Tuesdays; noon-2 p.m. Fridays; 3-11 p.m. Saturdays; 234 Eddy St., 6-8 p.m. Fridays; parking garage at 50 Ivy St., 7-9 p.m. Mondays
- Hemlock Alley, between Post and Sutter, 7-9 p.m. Thursdays;
- Tenderloin Health: 183 Golden Gate Ave., 6-8 p.m. Wednesdays; 2-4 p.m. Sundays
- St. James Infirmary: 1372 Mission St., 1-6 p.m. Tuesdays; and 815 Hyde St., Second Floor, 4-6 p.m. Thursdays ■

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PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

This drop box for used syringes is one of two installed by Tenderloin Health on the outer wall of 255 Golden Gate Ave. The boxes have collected 800 syringes a month since February.

Gary Longoria, who has worked near Continuum Way since September 2007, agrees the drop boxes are making a difference. Longoria is also an IV-drug user — he needs insulin to manage the diabetes he's had since infancy. When he started working in the area, he was struck by the number of syringes in the street — the same type he depends on for survival.

"It's something I tend to notice," he says. "I used to see those all the time — but I'm not seeing as many since Christmas." The Continuum Way drop boxes were installed in February.

Adam Solorzano also sees the benefits. He's director of operations at JCDeCaux, the company responsible for maintaining the city's street toilets. Improperly discarded needles are particularly hazardous for the workers who clean toilets in the Tenderloin, says Solorzano. "We've had two needles in the last six years," he says. The injured employees, who no longer work for DeCaux, have been monitored regularly and appear to be in good health, he says.

Although Solorzano can't quantify, he confirms that his workers have noticed fewer needles being discarded at Tenderloin public facilities since the drop boxes were installed. "I definitely would encourage more (boxes)," he says. "Anything that would reduce that risk is a huge help."

Attitudes like Solorzano's are a vindication for health workers beleaguered by people who oppose drop boxes and other efforts to promote safe drug use. "There's a real case of 'not-in-my-back-yard,'" says Dave Ellison, spokesman for the San Francisco AIDS Foundation. "People think a box is going to draw needle users there." The reality is that the agency focuses on neighborhoods where IV users already congregate. "We don't come to neighborhoods where there are no drugs," he says. "We're solving an existing problem."

If all goes according to plan, the city will jump on the bandwagon and install two more drop boxes in a few months — one near Glide Memorial Methodist Church, and possibly one in the Mission District, depending on results of a study by the Department of Public Health.

"We've heard that the 24-hour (drop box) is working quite well," says Grant Colfax, DPH director of HIV prevention. In part as a response to a 2007 series of reports by San Francisco Chronicle columnist C.W. Nevius about the prevalence of discarded syringes, the agency is funding a survey of 1,000 city blocks. So far, Colfax reports, "Only one syringe was found where it was deemed to pose a significant hazard to the public." Still, he says, "We feel like syringe access obviously saves lives, and we need to make sure people have a safe way for disposing of syringes."

The drop boxes are the answer, as far as one IV-drug user is concerned. "If they're there, people will use them. If not, they just throw (their syringes) in the streets," says Jeffery, who asked to be identified by first name only.

Drop boxes' impact

Syringes collected in the Tenderloin by Clean City Coalition

	2007	2008
March	385	180
April	363	196
May	394	239
June	290 (plus 400 in boxes*)	262
July	288	205
Totals	1,720	1,082
	(plus 400 in boxes)	

*The 400 additional needles were in needle disposal boxes that were left on the sidewalk for pickup by Clean City. ■

About a year ago, Jeffery saw a JC DeCaux worker cleaning the facility at Civic Center. The worker reached into the toilet with a clawlike device and pulled out a handful of syringes. The sight surprised and disgusted him, and drove home the hazards that improper disposal can pose to other people. He says he's gone out of his way to deliver used rigs at drop boxes and needle exchange sites ever since. "I think there should be more drop boxes," he says. "I'm all over the city — not just here."

He says he's familiar with the NIMBY arguments used by people who don't want to improve safety for injection-drug users.

"I understand a person who doesn't shoot not wanting a (needle drop box) in their community," he says. "But people are going to shoot anyway. We need them." ■

Peer Support Line

575-1400

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Self-Help*

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