HIV and Hepatitis C, both highly infectious diseases, continue to spread in some states and among some parts of the population. Much of this is attributed to the sharing of hypodermic needles used in the administration of illegal narcotics. In regards to Hepatitis C, for example, the Centers for Disease Control states that “most people become infected...by sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs”.

The general consensus in the public health community is that needle exchange programs contribute to harm reduction in preventing the spread of infectious diseases. Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Professor Chris Beyrer, MD, MPH is among those who support such programs. “Now is the time to implement needle and syringe exchange programs, wherever they are needed. We can’t put politics above public health. We have a cheap tool to prevent this,” he said. However, some state leaders regard needle exchange programs as morally wrong and undercutting anti-drug messages.

“I don’t believe effective anti-drug policy involves handing out drug paraphernalia,” Gov. Mike Pence told the Indianapolis Star early in a highly-publicized 2015 HIV epidemic in southern Indiana. Pence had opposed using federal funds for needle exchange programs as a member of Congress. He eventually compromised on a 2015 bill that allows for needle exchange programs after a declaration of a public health crisis by the state.

Four states, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky, passed laws in their 2015 legislative sessions that explicitly allow needle exchange programs as a means to prevent and control potential public health crises. They joined 14 states that had laws explicitly allowing needle exchange programs. Two more states, Florida and Utah, passed needle exchange legislation during their 2016 legislative sessions, bringing to total to 20 states. Additionally, four other states introduced similar legislation in 2016. In Georgia, Virginia, and West Virginia the legislation failed to pass; in North Carolina it is still under consideration.
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[5] https://iga.in.gov/legislative/2015/bills/senate/461#document-d1a62251