

Through our work with Caracole last year, we learned more about the practice of harm reduction and the importance of increasing access to healthcare services. Harm reduction is a strategy that focuses on minimizing the risks associated with substance use, without necessitating the cessation of said substances. This involves the distribution of products such as fentanyl and xylazine test strips, Naloxone, HIV test kits, and sharps containers, which Caracole has been able to provide via a secure, anonymous, 24/7 access dispensing machine placed outside their office in Northside. However, according to Section 3719.172 of Ohio law, hypodermics (such as syringes) are not permitted to be dispensed by vending machines. Instead, they are provided via syringe services programs (SSPs), where people who inject drugs (PWID) can trade in their used needles and syringes for clean supplies. Attendance at SSPs has been shown to reduce HIV and HCV transmission by as much as 42% and 24%, respectively (Wodak et al., 2006; Mackey et al., 2023). Considering the lifelong burden of disease imposed by HIV, this intervention has significant ramifications for improving the overall health of individuals and their communities.

Despite the effectiveness of SSPs in preventing the spread of bloodborne pathogens, attendance at these programs is limited by external factors such as location and timing, with transportation being the most commonly cited constraint (Hamilton County Public Health, 2024). Hamilton County Public Health (HCPH) currently hosts syringe exchange programs from Monday to Friday in Over-the-Rhine, Lincoln Heights, Fairmount, Northside, and Walnut Hills (one location per weekday). However, the geographical coverage of these programs is not comprehensive, especially considering that former and current PWID have been shown to travel a maximum of 1.80 and 2.75 miles, respectively, to participate in SSPs (Allen et al., 2015). We identified zip codes 45202, 45211, 45212, 45219, 45231, and 45238 as areas that are especially lacking in SSP coverage. These zip codes include neighborhoods such as Downtown, Westwood, Cheviot, Mount Auburn, Mount Healthy, and Price Hill. According to the Hamilton County Community Needs Assessment 2024, Westwood in particular had one of the highest numbers of emergency department overdose visits over the past five years, which likely reflects elevated rates of drug use in this area. Furthermore, the closest SSP to this neighborhood (located in Fairmount, zip code 45225) exceeds the distance that the average PWID is willing to travel to attend an SSP, indicating that there is an unmet need for sterile syringes and other safer use supplies in this neighborhood.

To expand access to harm reduction services, we propose that an additional syringe exchange program be established in Westwood on Saturdays, pending local jurisdictional approval. By optimizing location and hosting the SSP at a time when most people are not at work, we can maximize participation in and impact of this preventive health service.

Commented [X11]: are these the updated locations?

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References:

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