

Needle Distribution Program – Information sheet

Why it matters?

Needle Distribution Programs (NDPs) are a proven strategy to prevent spread of disease, reduce healthcare costs, and support access to addiction treatment services. Contrary to common misconceptions, these programs reduce improperly discarded needles and do not increase drug use. By providing access to sterile equipment and harm reduction education, NDPs play an important role in protecting community health and reducing the strain on the health care system.

What is the Needle Distribution Program (NDP)?

The NDP provides education and sterile equipment to people who use drugs to reduce the spread of blood-borne infections (HIV, Hepatitis C) and promote safe disposal of used equipment.

Needle Distribution Programs are sometimes known by other names such as Needle Syringe programs.

Why do we do it?

Needle Distribution Programs are necessary to prevent the spread of HIV among people who use drugs. Needle Distribution Programs have the greatest impact in preventing the transmission of HIV associated with injection drug use and the World Health Organization (WHO) strongly recommends that all individuals who inject drugs should have access to sterile injecting equipment¹.

The program is particularly important for our region because of high rates of substance use and high rates of sexually transmitted infections^{2,3}.

Does it work?

Yes. There is strong evidence that NDPs are essential for prevention^{3,4}. They have been shown to:

- **Reduce the transmission** of blood borne infections (particularly HIV), among people who use drugs. It may also reduce the spread of other infectious diseases.
- **Lower risky behaviours** related to unsafe drug use such as sharing used needles.
- **Decrease the number of improperly discarded needles** in public spaces by encouraging and supporting the return of unwanted or used needles.
- **Provide an entry point** for treatment services, primary prevention, and education on overdose prevention and response.
- **Improve access to health and social services**, connecting individuals to additional support systems.
- **Increases likelihood that clients will enter treatment services and stop using drugs**
- **Reduces overdoses, drug toxicities, and related fatalities** by promoting safer drug use and overdose prevention strategies

NDPs **do not** encourage drug use and **do not** increase crime in the surrounding neighbourhood.

The NDP empowers individuals and provides a safe, non-judgmental environment, offering connection, support, education and services.



Is Northwestern Health Unit mandated to provide the Needle Distribution Program?

Northwestern Health Unit is mandated by the Ministry of Health under the [Ontario Public Health Standards](#) (2018) to take actions to prevent the spread of specific infectious diseases, including HIV and Hepatitis C, by implementing programming that includes harm reduction. This includes “ensuring access to sterile needles, syringes, and safer drug use supplies”.

One of the most effective ways to prevent HIV and Hepatitis C in the population is to provide harm reduction services such as needle distribution programs and naloxone access.

How can municipalities support harm reduction programs?

Supporting NDPs is a proactive approach to improving public health, reducing costs, and enhancing community safety. Municipalities can:

- Collaborate with public health units to ensure access to harm reduction resources.
- Support and help maintain safe disposal sites.
- Encourage and support staff and residents to safely pick up needles.
- Spread evidence-based information on NDPs when faced with complaints or criticism.

References

1. World Health Organization. *Consolidated guidelines on HIV, viral hepatitis and STI prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care for key populations*; 2022
2. Northwestern Health Unit. *NWHU Infectious Disease Surveillance Report, July 2023*. [Infectious-Disease-Surveillance-Report-2023.pdf](#).
3. Northwestern Health Unit. *Mental Health Survey 2022/23 Report, 2023*. [Mental Health Survey 2022/23 Report - Northwestern Health Unit](#).
4. CDC. *Syringe Services Programs; Feb 2024*. [Syringe Services Programs | Syringe Services Programs \(SSPs\) | CDC](#)