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VERN PIERSON, DISTRICT ATTORNEY

November 9, 2023

Tomas J. Aragon
Director and State Public Health Officer
California Department of Public Health
P.O. Box 997377, MS 0500
Sacramento, CA 95899-7377

Subject: Re-Authorization of the Sierra Harm Reduction Coalition Syringe Services Program in El Dorado County

Dear Mr. Aragon,

Pursuant to my constitutional duties as the Elected District Attorney, as well as the responsibilities and authority that flows from Government Code sections 26500 et seq. as the chief law enforcement official in El Dorado County, I am writing to notify you that my office strongly opposes the application from Sierra Harm Reduction for a Syringe Services Program in El Dorado County. The establishment of such a program would lead to the improper disposal of an enormous quantity of used syringes and the congregation of drug addicts near schools, parks, and playgrounds. It would also increase litter and the pollution of our local environment and waterways including Lake Tahoe which is a major tourist attraction and one of the largest fiscal contributors to the county. Finally, any benefits from such a program in the reduction of infectious disease deaths would be outweighed by the increase in overdose deaths caused by the program especially given the rise of synthetic opioids like fentanyl.

The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) as evidenced by previous meetings regarding this topic has confirmed that they have no verification or accountability for syringe returns from syringe services programs. The Sierra Harm Reduction Coalition acknowledges in its own application for re-authorization that it measures its waste recovery in weight and not by the number of needles collected. The Sierra Harm Reduction Coalition also admits that the distribution of syringes to drug users will increase from 100,000 to 150,000 syringes in the span of just one year. There is no transparency or accountability to ensure that this large quantity of syringes, which is evidently increasing year by year, is collected and disposed of in a safe and secure manner. Moreover, previous syringe services programs in the cities of Santa Ana and Seattle have shown that such a program increases litter and unsafe disposal of needles in those areas.

The establishment of a syringe services program in our county would also increase drug addiction and overdose deaths caused by the ingestion of illicit drugs such as the synthetic opioid fentanyl which is 50 times more potent than heroin. A lethal dose of fentanyl can be as small as only a few grains of salt. Over 42% of illicit fentanyl seized by the DEA contained a lethal dose and many people are unaware that the drugs they ingest contain deadly fentanyl. In El Dorado

County there were 43 overdose deaths last year. In 2020 alone, 3,946 people died of fentanyl related overdoses in California which is a 146% increase from 2019. Overdose deaths in El Dorado County alone increased by 500% from 2019-2021. CDPH argues that such a program would decrease deaths from infectious diseases such as HIV or Hepatitis. However, there were only 3 deaths caused by HIV and approximately 9 deaths from Hepatitis in that same year.

In a study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research entitled “*Are Syringe Exchange Programs Helpful or Harmful? New evidence in the Wake of the Opioid Epidemic*” by Analisa Packham at Vanderbilt University, Ms. Packham presented concrete evidence to prove that needle exchange programs increased rates of opioid-related mortality and hospitalizations and were not as effective as other programs in reducing infectious disease deaths because of the likelihood of increase in opioid related mortality caused by such a program.

The unfettered use of fentanyl and other illicit drugs has fueled an epidemic of crime and homelessness in this state. Between 2014, when Proposition 47 and the decriminalization of hard drugs in California was passed, and 2021, homelessness in California increased by 51% compared to other states. Violent crime in California has also risen dramatically in comparison to other states. The proposed syringe services program would only further lead to an increase in drug addiction, overdose deaths, homelessness, violent crime, and the pollution of our environment and tourist attractions. The County of El Dorado has made great strides in both decreasing homelessness and distributing Narcan and other overdose prevention tools. The proposed program would only undermine these efforts. In short, the proposed syringe services program would be an overall detriment to the health, safety, and welfare of the citizens of El Dorado County and we oppose such a program.

Sincerely,



Vern Pierson
El Dorado County District Attorney