



**Testimony in Opposition of LD 219:
An Act to Limit Hypodermic Apparatus Exchange Programs to a One-for-one Exchange**

March 17, 2025

My name is Tess Parks. I am the Policy Director of the Maine Recovery Action Project (ME-RAP), a grassroots network of Mainers working on community and public policy based solutions to substance use. I am testifying in **strong opposition of LD 219** on behalf of our statewide team of organizers.

We recognize that the primary goal of LD 219 is to reduce the amount of improperly discarded syringes in our communities. We agree with that goal. No one wants syringes in our streets, parks, or neighborhoods. **Public safety is a shared priority.** However, LD 219 would undermine the effectiveness of the very programs that are designed to reduce syringe waste and increase safe disposal options.

Needs-based syringe exchange services are considered best practice, while restrictive models have been shown to increase the spread of infectious diseases and increase the risk of costly medical complications. Syringe service programs are essential to connecting individuals to care and treatment. In the midst of an opioid epidemic, we must ensure these programs have the flexibility to meet the needs of their participants rather than placing unnecessary barriers in their way.

Now is the time for policy solutions that balance the well being of participants of SSPs and the broader public health and safety of our communities.

Fortunately, Representative Rana of Bangor has introduced two bills this session that will come before this Committee that aim to reduce improperly discarded syringes without posing other public health risks. These bills will support increasing safe disposal options without restricting access to life-saving harm reduction services. We look forward to conversations about these bills over the next few weeks.

We also applaud the innovative approach of Portland's syringe buyback program, funded through opioid settlement dollars. In the six weeks following the program startup, there was a 58% increase in syringes collected at the exchange overall¹. Furthermore, staff observed a 76% reduction in the number of improperly discarded syringes that they collected in the community six weeks into the program (1,677 to 387). This program has been allocated roughly \$1,000 a week to operate. These results prove that it is possible to address syringe waste without imposing harmful restrictions on SSP services.

Finally, we understand the frustration of communities affected by improperly discarded syringes. We are frustrated too. However, we must trust the expertise of public health professionals. We urge this committee to reject LD 219 and **instead pursue innovative, evidence-based policy solutions** that address community concerns while protecting public health and safety.

I thank you for your time and am willing to answer any questions.

¹ <https://portlandme.portal.civicclerk.com/event/7211/files/attachment/25399>

Tess Parks
Policy Director, ME-RAP
tess@me-rap.org

City of Portland | Health and Human Services

Maggie McLoughlin, *Director*



To: Health and Human Services & Public Safety Committee
Councilor Anna Bullett, Chair

From: Bridget Rauscher, Director of Public Health

Date: March 11, 2025

Re: Progress on Sterile Syringe Program Evaluation

MEETING DATE

March 11, 2025

AGENDA ITEM

6. Staff Update re: Syringe Services Program

PURPOSE

To update the Health and Human Services and Public Safety (HHS & PS) Committee on progress made by Health and Human Services (HHS) and other Departments on addressing needle waste in the City of Portland and provide an update on the operations of the Portland Syringe Services Program (the Exchange).

COMMITTEE WORK PLAN/CITY COUNCIL GOAL ALIGNMENT

The HHS & PS Committee 2025 workplan includes the topic of “addressing the opioid epidemic” as its top priority for the year.

BACKGROUND/ANALYSIS

An increase in syringe litter, particularly in the neighborhoods of Bayside, East Bayside, and Parkside as well as many concerned citizens reporting syringe waste in different and varying locations in those neighborhoods led to a syringe services operational improvement plan implemented in fall, 2024. In previous meetings, the HHS Department presented a plan aimed at: decreasing the number of improperly discarded syringes, improving the efforts to collect data and the quality of data to improve the accuracy of our information, and responding to community concerns regarding safety. An update on progress was provided at the HHS & PS Committee meeting November 12th, 2024.

This memo serves as the second update on the implementation of the SSP operational improvement plan. We have seen progress in each of the objectives. The salient benchmarks achieved as of the publication of this memo are summarized below:

SSP Operational Improvement Plan

Objective 1	Decrease the number of improperly discarded syringes
Strategy 1	Strengthen client education about proper syringe disposal and incentivize clients to return their used syringes
1.1 Progress: Completed/Ongoing	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implemented SSP client education aimed at increasing safe syringe disposal Implemented a syringe redemption pilot project modeled after successful programs in Boston and New York City, approved by Portland City Council - detailed later in this memo Launched Harm Reduction Ambassador Program Improved ratio of safely returned/disposed syringes 	
Strategy 2	Develop a multi-pronged approach to syringe pick-up operations
1.2 Progress: Completed/Ongoing	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased syringe clean-up by Public Health staff from 5-7 to approximately 12 hours/week. In addition to building in an extra hour each weekday, staff are also increasing syringe cleanup during scheduled harm reduction outreach and other community-based work. Staff pay special attention to areas indicated by GIS mapping of improperly disposed syringes. Harm reduction ambassadors provide additional cleanup efforts 3-5 hours/week, as available The Public Works Department has increased the number of staff trained to properly collect and dispose of syringes. Added five community sharps containers, with four additional containers planned, in locations identified both as areas of need and within previously planned vault bathrooms, and replaced three community sharps containers in disrepair Distributed 1,083 sharps containers to clients from August 1, 2024 - March 4, 2025 	
Strategy 3	Hold community conversations with Harm Reduction Program clients
1.3 Progress: Completed	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Held 3 focus groups with 27 SSP unique clients regarding barriers to usage of community and/or personal sharps containers, as well as alternative solutions to reducing syringe litter that would be more manageable for clients. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> While a range of feedback was received, there was a common theme related to individual fear, shame, and stigma related to their substance use, resulting in quick disposal of syringes, regardless of access to sharps containers. As such, the harm reduction team will work to create educational opportunities for members of the public addressing SUD-related shame and stigma. These may take the form of online training, community meetings, social media campaigns, etc. Additionally, harm reduction staff will continue to seek client feedback on service provision, access to safe disposal, and referrals for substance use and/or mental health disorder treatment. 	
Objective 2	Improve data systems to provide more accurate information and evaluate program efficacy
Strategy 1	Standardize information on syringes collected on City property by City personnel
2.1 Progress: Completed	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Held initial interdepartmental leadership meeting on 8/14 to discuss collaborative efforts to improve consistency in data collection and reporting related to syringe litter cleanup. Met with frontline Parks, Rec & Facilities and Public Works staff directly involved with syringe litter cleanup. Received feedback on experience, suggestions for improved collection and collaboration, and requests for additional safety equipment. Identified and addressed inconsistencies in reporting and use of ArcGIS across relevant departments. 	
Strategy 2	Improve client data collection efforts
2.2 Progress: Ongoing	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporated municipality and/or zip code of residence into the data collection tool used for each exchange. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> From 8/1/24 - 3/4/25, 97% of respondents (4,804 unique clients) reported living in a zip code within Portland. Of that, 90% of respondents (4,321 unique clients) report their zip code as 04101. The remaining 3% (126 unique clients) report living in either Westbrook or South Portland. Analyzing data comparing frequent exchange users reporting Portland zip codes and volume of syringes distributed to and collected from these clients in an effort to identify disposal trends. Determined that exchanges made during outreach yielded, on average, fewer returned syringes per exchange than on site exchanges. Began tracking the outcomes of referrals for clients working with patient navigators. A related report is forthcoming from our contracted evaluation team at the Catherine Cutler Institute. 	
Strategy 3	Improve documentation, training, and management practices to create and transform collected information into a live dashboard.
2.3 Progress: Ongoing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Harm Reduction and data management staff continue to meet regularly to collect and analyze data to improve coordinated service delivery, identify areas of need ("hotspots"), target outreach services (syringe cleanup, overdose prevention/naloxone distribution, syringe exchange as allowed, patient navigation services, etc.). Improved data collection to meet minimum standards adopted by HHS. 	
Objective 3	Respond to community concerns re: safety
Strategy 1	Attend neighborhood association meetings in areas with increased reports of improperly disposed syringes to solicit feedback, share improvement plans, and present information on residential and business reporting and pick-up options.
3.1 Progress: Completed/Ongoing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attended the Bayside Neighborhood Association meeting on 9/3, to address the problem at hand, provide education and safety strategies, answer relevant questions and concerns, and receive feedback from community members. Members of BNA inquired about scheduling an overdose recognition and response training. Training has been scheduled. 	
Strategy 2	Promote syringe reporting resources to Portland businesses and residents.
3.2 Progress: Ongoing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Updated promotional materials to include access to education on safe collection of sharps on private property. Working to create social media campaigns and website updates for businesses to obtain safe collection education and equipment from Portland Public Health. 	

SYRINGE REDEMPTION PILOT PROJECT UPDATE

January 14 - February 21, 2025

Syringe Redemption Program

The Syringe Redemption Pilot Project, as outlined in the improvement plan, was implemented as a result of opioid settlement funds allocated by the City Council on September 9, 2024.

Results

The syringe redemption program has demonstrated a substantial increase in the number of syringes returned to the Exchange. In the four weeks prior to the program, 47,520 syringes were returned across all exchanges, compared to 91,185 syringes in the four weeks after. Similarly, in the six weeks prior to the program, 76,554 syringes were returned, whereas 120,793 were collected in the six weeks following the program.

The median number of syringes returned per program participant was 200 (SD = 49.5), with 73% (162/221) of participants returning 200 syringes, 20% (44/221) returning 100-199, and 6% (15/221) returning 1-99 syringes.

There are additional indications of reductions in improperly disposed syringes. During the same hours of operation, staff collected 76% fewer improperly disposed needles in the six weeks after program start up as compared to the six weeks before program start up (1,677 to 387), indicating a marked decrease in improper disposal.

These findings suggest that the program effectively increased syringe returns while reducing environmental contamination.

Operational Constraints Impacting Results

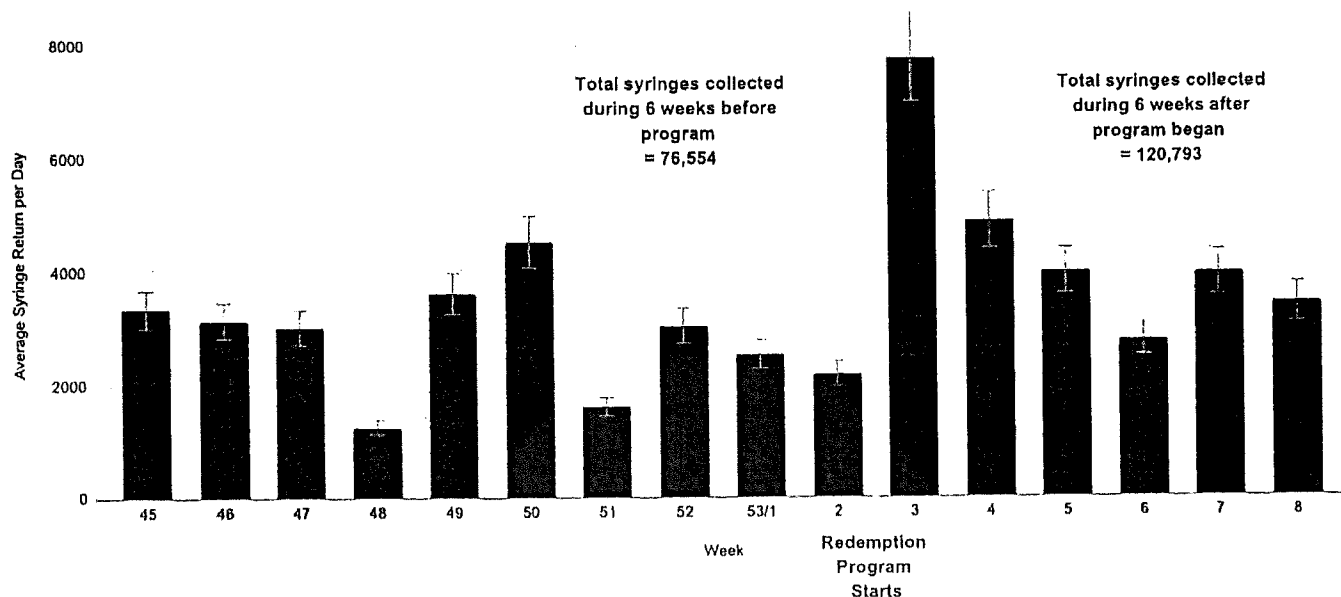
The program faces structural constraints that limit participation, as the current enrollment represents only a fraction of the NEP and is further restricted by weekly and individual maximums. Due to demand compared to availability of funds, operations have been limited to six hours per week across three days. Individuals who cannot attend within these windows may be turned away, and access is further constrained by holiday closures, inclement weather, and the seasonal decline in January exchanges.

Metrics

- 156 unique clients enrolled in the program.
- 38,252 syringes have been collected between January 14 and February 21, with \$3,852 paid out to participants.
- 58% increase in syringes collected at the exchange overall in the six weeks following the program start (76,554 pre-program vs. 120,793 post-program).
- 19% (42 encounters) returned more than 200 syringes, exceeding the maximum weekly redemption amount.
- 34% (76 encounters) involved clients collecting syringes from the ground, with 56 specifying a location.
- 15% (32 encounters) received Narcan during the redemption exchange.
- 9 encounters resulted in referrals to HIV and/or HEP-C testing following a redemption encounter.
- 5 encounters led to recovery-related service referrals, and 16 clients were referred to patient navigator services for general additional support.
- All 156 newly enrolled clients received training on safe syringe collection.
- Average compensation per participant: \$20, aligning with the median number of syringes returned.
- 76% reduction in observed improperly disposed syringes by exchange staff. 1,677 improperly discarded syringes were collected by city staff in the six weeks before the program, decreasing to 387 improperly discarded syringes in the six weeks after the program.
- The majority of program participants are unhoused (48% N=105) or have unstable housing (27%, N=56)

Average Syringe Return per Day per Week, Portland Public Health Needle Exchange Program

*Weeks of the year = 11/4/24-2/21/25; Week 53/1 represents the last week of 2024 and first week of 2025 12/29/24-1/4/25



* Syringe return presented in average per day to adjust for frequent exchange closures due to holidays and weather events in the weeks pre/post program'

2024 SYRINGE SERVICES PROGRAM ANNUAL REPORT

November 1, 2023 - October 31, 2024

All clients served	5,055
Total enrolled	4,705
Total syringe exchanges	8,620
# Syringes distributed	952,411
# Syringes collected	577,517
Total Referrals	6,034

FISCAL IMPACT

N/A

CONCLUSION(S)

At this time, Public Health staff are confident that the objectives detailed in the SSP Action Plan are contributing to an overall reduction in the improper disposal of syringes in Portland. Most of the identified strategies have been implemented and results are yielding improvement. However, there are factors that require additional time and more robust data to provide an accurate reflection of the efficacy of the SSP Action Plan. An example of this includes seasonality.

PRIOR COMMITTEE REVIEW

HHS & PS Committee - October, 2024

PREPARED BY

Bridget Rauscher
Public Health Director
Health and Human Services