



Trump surgeon general criticizes supervised injection sites as opioid crisis response

Kimberly Leonard

January 15, 2020

The Trump administration is maintaining opposition to facilities that allow people to inject illegal drugs with the oversight of medical providers.

Surgeon General Jerome Adams said Wednesday that there are compelling legal and scientific reasons to disapprove of such facilities, known as supervised injection sites.

"I'm not bashing any particular person or group ... but the truth is, I have looked at the data, and I have seen little to no data suggesting they are overall more effective than expanding syringe services programs" where people can obtain clean needles for drug use, he said at an event held at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington.

Adams cautioned members of the audience not to use the term "safe injection sites" to describe the facilities.

"Safer doesn't mean safe," he said. "People can still leave and fall or drive away and crash." He described his experience visiting a supervised injection site in Canada, where he saw people inject drugs and then drive away.

Adams instead backs needle exchange programs, also known as "syringe exchange services," to help the Trump administration reach its goal of ending HIV transmission within a decade. He said he worried that communities would conflate needle exchanges with supervised injection sites and give up on the idea of supporting any measures that would help reduce drug use and infectious diseases. Even needle exchanges are banned in 20 states.

"The two are different, and we want to optimize the things that we know work before we start having conversations about more controversial interventions," Adams said.

He spoke Wednesday as Philadelphia is planning on opening an injection site despite opposition by the Trump administration. The facility will contain information about where people can seek treatment and will also provide people with clean needles to avoid the spread of HIV, hepatitis C, and infections caused by dull needles. Medical staffers will be nearby, prepared to revive people who overdose with the reversal drug naloxone.

Certain communities see the sites as a way to reduce mortality from opioids, which caused 47,600 deaths in 2017. The Justice Department sued Philadelphia under the Controlled Substances Act, arguing that a provision in the law makes it illegal to have a place that is used to make, store, or distribute illegal drugs.

Adams has pushed more people to stock naloxone, which is also distributed at needle exchange sites, and has repeatedly stressed in his role that he sees addiction as a disease that can affect any family. The support for needle exchanges represents a shift in positioning for Republicans, who for decades expressed concerns that such programs would sanction drug use.