HARM REDUCTION AND HIV/STI PREVENTION

The intersection of HIV, other transmissible diseases, and opioid overdose rates presents a complex public health challenge. Modes of HIV transmission include exposure to blood and other bodily fluids that contain the virus. As a result, people who inject drugs are at higher risk of acquiring and transmitting diseases such as HIV and viral Hepatitis. Eliminating future transmission of HIV relies on the expansion of harm reduction programs as outlined in the initial statewide Getting to Zero Illinois plan to end the HIV epidemic by 2030 ¹.

According to the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, harm reduction is an evidence-based approach that empowers people who use drugs with life-saving tools and information to create positive change in their lives. Strategies include prevention, risk reduction, and health promotion, aiming to minimize negative consequences of behavior risks through evidence-based intervention, education, and support. This approach effectively mitigates transmission risks and reduces overdose rates.

Opioid Overdose Rates and the Role of Substance Use ², ³,

In 2022, Illinois experienced 15,286 non-fatal overdoses and 3,261 fatal overdoses. The state’s most populous county, Cook, experienced the most fatal overdoses in 2022 (2,000). Fatal overdoses due to opioids impacted every corner of the state from Rockford (Winnebago), the Collar Counties, Springfield (Sangamon), and down to the Metro East region (Madison and St. Clair). While the opioid epidemic affects all communities, it also disproportionally impacts communities of color specifically Black Illinoisans. Black Illinoisans only comprise 12.4% of the state’s population⁴ but in 2022 accounted for nearly 50% of all reported overdoses (9,095).

Overdose Prevention Sites as a Solution

Harm reduction interventions like overdose prevention sites and syringe service programs, help to reduce HIV transmissions among other benefits including prevention of other blood borne viruses such as Hepatitis B and C, prevention of fatal overdoses, reduction of encounters with the criminal legal system, and the reduction of social exclusion. 5 6.

WHAT ARE OVERDOSE PREVENTION SITES?

Overdose prevention sites are healthcare facilities that offer various services, including medical supervision of drug use to monitor patients, administer first aid, and prevent fatal overdose and infection. These sites also form useful education networks to increase safety and has proven to also reduce the rates of needle sharing 8. Licensed staff at an OPS help provide sterile use supplies, prevent fatal overdoses, and when appropriate link clients to treatment, housing, HIV/STI testing and prevention, social services, and recovery support programs.


Acknowledging the intersection between HIV, other transmissible diseases, and fatal overdose rates, and by implementing evidence-based harm reduction strategies, we can work towards a safer and healthier future for all. AIDS Foundation Chicago is proud to work alongside Illinois advocates, lawmakers, and people with lived experience to champion legislation that would establish the first Overdose Prevention Site pilot in the state.

Together, we can make a difference in reducing the impact of HIV, transmissible diseases, and fatal overdose rates in communities across Illinois

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