

CDC Study Links Rise in Hepatitis C Infections to Opioid Epidemic

NACCHO Supports Comprehensive Prevention and Treatment Services to Limit New Hepatitis C Infections and Address Substance Use Disorder

WASHINGTON, DC, UNITED STATES, December 21, 2017 /EINPresswire.com/ -- New research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), published today in the American Journal of Public Health, strongly suggests that the national increase in new hepatitis C infections is associated with the nation's opioid epidemic, posing a long-term public health threat. Particularly steep increases are seen among young people, white people, and women. Injection drug use is the primary risk factor for the spread of hepatitis C. The [National Association of County and City Health Officials](#) (NACCHO), representing the nation's nearly 3,000 local governmental health departments, supports comprehensive prevention and treatment services, including syringe services programs, to reduce harms from injection drug use and opioid use disorder.

Local health departments have a long history of addressing the hepatitis C, as well as HIV, prevention needs of persons who inject drugs, and are critical to the implementation and scale-up of comprehensive prevention services for people who use drugs. "Data have shown syringe services programs can limit the spread of infectious disease and protect public health," said epidemiologist Oscar Alleyne, DrPH, MPH, NACCHO Senior Advisor. In addition to providing sterile needles, syringes, and other injection equipment, these community-based public health programs also provide safe disposal containers for needles and syringes, hepatitis C testing, education about overdose prevention, and referral to substance use disorder treatment, as well as medical, mental health, and social services. These programs are critical, not just for addressing the spread of infectious diseases, but also for responding to the nation's opioid crisis. People who inject drugs are five times as likely to enter treatment for substance use disorder and more likely to reduce or stop injecting when they use a syringe service program.

In addition to ensuring access to syringe services programs to reverse these disturbing trends, we must also expand the availability of hepatitis C testing and ensure that individuals testing positive are linked to care and have access to curative hepatitis C treatment. Local health departments, alongside healthcare providers and community partners, must work together to establish integrated health services to reduce new infections and increase access to substance use disorder treatment.

For local health departments to provide these critical services, additional resources aimed at the local level are needed. Federal funding for hepatitis at the CDC is insufficient to address the growing need in the current parallel epidemics of hepatitis C and opioid use disorder. Further, access to treatment can be challenging, due to costs and other restrictions, which is especially true for persons who inject drugs. In many states, Medicaid programs have discriminatory restrictions that restrict people who inject drugs from receiving treatment.

Failure to act on the findings of this study will have significant consequences for our communities. "Without appropriate federal, state, and local funding and public policies, local health departments will struggle to implement effective public health interventions to prevent and treat viral hepatitis," said

Alleyne. “We created an online educational series to increase the knowledge and capacity for local health departments to address hepatitis C. These are practical examples of how local health departments can leverage existing resources to support and promote sensible policies aimed at treating hepatitis C. And, of course, we will continue to call attention to the fundamental role of local health departments in battling infectious disease threats as the first line of defense in protecting community health.”

To read NACCHO’s policy statement on Syringe Services Programs, click [here](#).

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About NACCHO

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) represents the nation’s nearly 3,000 local governmental health departments. These city, county, metropolitan, district, and tribal departments work every day to protect and promote health and well-being for all people in their communities. For more information about NACCHO, please visit www.naccho.org.

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