

# Needles and the damage done: As discarded syringes litter Sacramento, opioid coalition ponders a response

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Sacramento County Opioid Coalition advised elected officials to increase disposal sites a year ago

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**Dealing with gross stuff is part of the job** for Hector Ortiz, a garbage and recycling hauler employed by Sacramento County. But a nationwide opioid epidemic has added a perilous wrinkle to his work.

On November 20, 2017, the senior collection equipment operator was on his usual route in Orangevale, when he saw a piece of foam stuck to his truck and pried it off. That's when he felt the prick: a needle piercing his gloved finger.

Ortiz thought of his wife and four kids.

"I had to wait seven days for the results. That was the most stressful thing," Ortiz recalled. "It's scary, man. I'm thankful everything was negative. But I have to go back and test six months later. You don't know if something's building up. You don't know."

Ortiz, who dodged two more needles this month, isn't the only collateral victim of improperly discarded hypodermic syringes.

Littered in alleyways, on hiking trails and along riverbanks, spent needles have become increasingly visible around Sacramento, say politicians and regional parks and recycling officials. The problem became so prolific inside McKinley Park's public restrooms last fall that the Sacramento City Council spent \$50,000 to install a needle grinder in the sewer system.

Meanwhile, the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors is awaiting an official recommendation from its Opioid Coalition. In a February 2017 report, the group of health, environmental and waste staff told supervisors that what works in other jurisdictions is making disposal sites abundant. The report recommended an ordinance requiring take-back bins at pharmacies and allowing clinics to offer needle exchanges, and is now researching what other counties have done.

The law requires that used needles be placed in puncture-proof biohazard containers. However, syringe-users—a population that spans diabetics to intravenous drug users—often don't have an easy way to properly dispose of them.

The California Product Stewardship Council, which has supported efforts to make the makers of carpet, fluorescent bulbs and mattresses responsible for the disposal of their products, has taken the same approach toward needle waste. The council backed successful ordinances in Alameda and Santa Cruz counties requiring pharmaceutical companies and other syringe manufacturers to pay for their collection and disposal. Heidi Sanborn, council director, thinks the same should happen in Sacramento.

"Why does our law enforcement and waste system have to pay for medical waste?" Sanborn posed. "Every year, the waste stream gets more hazardous."

The city of Sacramento passed an ordinance in 2010 requiring hospitals, medical offices, veterinary clinics and other needle suppliers to collect and dispose of used syringes. Violators face fines ranging between \$250 and \$25,000 per day.

The problem, Sanborn said, is few syringe-users, businesses and hospitals know of the requirement. The city was unable to immediately say how many organizations comply with the ordinance.

Harm Reduction Services allows people to trade in their used syringes for clean ones at its Oak Park location. Executive director Melinda Ruger said many who do so report being shooed away by hospital or pharmacy staff, who instead refer them to mail exchanges or faraway recycling facilities. Ruger's clinic disposes of thousands of pounds of needles monthly.

"For many people, the barrier is the door," Ruger said. "The city ordinance was like others in other cities—one passed without follow-up."

Ruger also serves on the Opioid Coalition and has pushed for outdoor needle exchanges in the past to reduce the spread of Hepatitis B and other bloodborne diseases. But the idea has faced resistance from local governments that portray the exchanges as encouraging illegal drug use, she said.

Sacramento County Supervisor Don Nottoli said he will follow up with the coalition. “The costs are hidden for disposing of pills, sharps and other unsecured products,” Nottoli said. “We need to fix this in a cooperative fashion.”

County spokeswoman Brenda Bongiorno said the coalition has been considering the issue since its 2015 inception.

Three years ago, the Galt City Council adopted a needle-disposal ordinance similar to Sacramento’s after some local high school kids toured Cal-Waste Recovery Systems and bore witness to the amount of needles being landfilled. “They raised the consciousness in the community,” said Cal-Waste owner Dave Vaccarezza.

Yet syringes remain a problem, says Vaccarezza, whose nephew was pricked by a needle while working at the waste collection and processing plant. “We still have to shut down our lines three to four times a day for needles,” Vaccarezza said.

Fifty-one people died of opioid overdoses in Sacramento County in 2016, according to the state’s Opioid Overdose Surveillance Dashboard.

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