TuSalud

California's $15.2M Plan for Harm Reduction and Syringe Services Includes Latinos

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January 30, 2020 By Trent Straube

California is getting serious about supporting harm reduction efforts across the state, including those for the Latino population. State health officials selected the national Harm Reduction Coalition (HRC) to oversee a statewide $15.2 million plan to expand and support syringe service programs, such as the ones offered at Bienestar, the community-based organization focused on Latino and LGBT people.

Funded for four years by the California Budget Act of 2019, the plan is titled the California Harm Reduction Initiative (CHRI, pronounced "cheery") and aims to provide syringe programs with more harm reduction care navigators, technical assistance and staff who can reach those not connected to treatment and connect them to care, syringe access and overdose prevention.

In California, and across the nation, accidental overdose is the leading cause of death for people under 50, according to an HRC blog post announcing the initiative. In California alone, over 2,000 people died of drug overdoses in 2017.

The allocation of money for CHRI marks the first time in 10 years that California has funded staff at syringe service programs, notes a separate press release. Of the total $15.2 million in funding for CHRI, $12.6 million will go toward staffing at syringe service programs, and $1.8 million will be allocated for technical assistance and program administration. (No details were available concerning the nearly $1 million remaining.)

Officials from the California Department of Public Health, Office of AIDS made the decision to select HRC to lead CHRI.

Members of the California Syringe Exchange Programs (CASEP)Courtesy of Harm Reduction Coalition

“CHRI is a critical investment in harm reduction services that we haven’t seen for more than a decade in California,” Monique Tula, HRC’s executive director, said in the post. “Ending HIV, hepatitis and overdoses among people who use drugs won’t happen without sustainable funding. In one of the defining crises of our time, public officials in other states must demonstrate the same commitment to expanding harm reduction programs because lives depend on it.”

HRC describes itself as “a national advocacy and capacity-building organization that promotes the health and dignity of individuals and communities impacted by drug use. Our efforts advance harm reduction policies, practices and programs that address the adverse effects of drug use including overdose, HIV, hepatitis C, addiction, and incarceration. Recognizing that social inequality and injustice magnify drug-related harm and limit the voice of our most vulnerable communities, we work to uphold every individual’s right to health and well-being and their competence to participate in the public policy dialogue.”

“Harm Reduction Coalition has a proven track record as a technical assistance provider in a broad range of harm reduction topics, from overdose prevention to best practices for syringe services programs,” said Marisa Ramos, PhD, the interim chief of California’s Office of AIDS, in the blog announcement. “The recent success of their HepConnect project, which has awarded more than $5.3 million in grant funding to 44 projects in five states, has given HRC extensive experience in directly supporting harm reduction organizations. We are excited to partner with them on this important initiative to improve the quality, capacity and reach of syringe service programs in California.”

The California Syringe Exchange Programs (CASEP) coalition campaigned for several years to get the state to budget significant funding for harm reduction efforts.

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