Lowell and Lawrence
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New toll in opioid crisis: HIV rise

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Needle exchange aims to curb HIV, other diseases

By Todd Feithers, tfeithers@lowellsun.com

LOWELL -- The intravenous use of opioids like heroin and fentanyl causes dozens of deaths each year in the city, and in no evidence began to emerge of a resurgent and connected threat.

After recording just six new diagnoses of HIV among patients who reported drug use from 2014 to 2016, the Lowell Community Health Center saw the number of new cases jump to 14 last year. It was part of a statewide increase in HIV cases connected to the opioid epidemic, but Lowell and Lawrence have been particular hot spots, according to Thomas Stopka, a professor of public health at Tufts University.

"We’re seeing what we were fearing: that if HIV gets into these social networks that are high risk it can spread rapidly," he said.

To prevent that from happening, Stopka and a coalition of local academics, public health workers, and city officials are looking at used needles, a public health threat in their own right, as an opportunity rather than just dangerous trash.

With the help of a $255,000 grant from the University of Baltimore, they began a bricks and mortar needle exchange program last month in the Life Connections Center at 100 Appleton St. Open for several hours on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, it will supplement the mobile needle exchange effort the center runs on Mondays and Wednesdays.

Over several decades, multiple studies have shown that needle exchange programs are effective at preventing the transmission of infectious diseases.

Opioid Crisis Fuels A Spike In HIV Infections, And Experts Fear There’s More To Come

As two cities in Massachusetts struggle with an outbreak, the powerful synthetic fentanyl may be mostly to blame.

"With fentanyl, they pick them up off the street, unfortunately, the transmission of fentanyl carries a risk of HIV," Stopka said, "and it’s taken our public health community a little bit aback."

Lowell and Lawrence have had 23 HIV diagnoses across Massachusetts, a large portion of the state in recent months.

"We’re seeing with the efficiency virus, can lead to a lag in our public health response," Stopka said.

The state DPH is asking for a stronger surveillance channel, a move that officials hope will bring clearer answers.