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Whitman becomes 'dumping ground' for needles


Officials say addicts dump syringes on streets, in park

By **Allan Stein**

ENTERPRISE CORRESPONDENT

Posted Jul 08, 2011 @ 06:00 AM



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WHITMAN — Selectman Daniel Salvucci said the town is becoming a dumping ground for heroin users who discard used hypodermic needles and syringes without any concern for public health.

Salvucci, Police Chief Christine May-Stafford and state Rep. Geoff Diehl met Thursday at Diehl's legislative office in Whitman to discuss the problem and brainstorm possible solutions.

"My fear is that kids walking in the park – 5-year-olds – will pick them up. We have got to do something," Salvucci said. "I think we are getting more (needles and syringes) because the heroin problem has exploded."

Salvucci said he approached area legislators about the problem two years ago hoping to spur action on Beacon Hill. But the issue fell by the wayside, he said.

Meanwhile, there have been many documented police reports of residents finding hypodermic needles or syringes carelessly discarded on public streets or in the town park, the chief said.

"The illegal disposal of needles in our park and on our streets is a problem," Salvucci added. "It's not just Whitman. It's all over."

Salvucci said he blames the federal Clean Needle Act, which gave heroin users open access to hypodermic needles and syringes in pharmacies without a prescription.

The goal of the program was to prevent the spread of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS and is prevalent among heroin users, who often share dirty needles.

He said the federal law, despite its good intentions, produced the unintended effect of creating a health hazard caused by discarded used needles and syringes for many communities overrun with heroin use.

He cited an incident two years ago involving a Whitman police officer who was pricked by a hypodermic needle in the line of duty and had to be tested.

Fortunately, the officer did not get sick, she said.

On Tuesday a Weymouth parent reported that her 10-year-old daughter was pricked by a needle at Avalon Beach in Quincy Point during a fireworks display last Saturday night.

In 2006, May-Stafford said, state law decriminalized possession of a hypodermic needle or syringe as long as it did not contain illegal drug. Many people who possess needles and syringes are diabetics or have some other medical condition requiring injection of medicine, Salvucci said.

"I, at least, think there should be a penalty for having an uncapped needle. That is the biggest safety concern," the chief said. "You have to be sympathetic to the children."

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Diehl said the federal clean needle program has not been funded and communities are now left to fend for themselves.

"It is a local issue. What is the federal government going to do to keep needles off of our streets?" he said.

May-Stafford said that in many instances police officers have been dispatched to retrieve discarded needles and syringes, which are then safely disposed of as medical waste.

The consensus of Thursday's meeting was that heroin users care only about getting high and not where they dump their used needles and syringes. Therefore, tracking the behavior is difficult. And expecting heroin users to show care and use caution is unrealistic.

Salvucci said the laws governing the possession and disposal of needles and syringes should be re-examined and changed if necessary to protect the public.

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