

# Catholic Charities in Albany launches needle-exchange program

ALBANY, N.Y. – It will take a few courageous people to get the ball rolling on a new needle-exchange program instituted by Catholic Charities of the Albany Diocese, according to the agency's AIDS Services director.

Just one intravenous drug user entered the white, unmarked van parked in an Albany neighborhood on a recent Monday. That person received a sterile needle and information about Project Safe Point's available services, which range from needle disposal to addiction recovery aid.

Project Safe Point staff members asked about the type of drugs used, the size of the needle used, where the client had been disposing of needles, the level of drug use, whether the client had ever been treated and when the client would return.

Establishing trust with enrollees will be about simply being there, said program director Angela Keller. The van will be parked for 15 hours a week in two Albany neighborhoods.

"They hopefully get a feeling that we're not there to judge them," Keller told The Evangelist, Albany's diocesan newspaper. "Being treated in that respectful way will hopefully build trust."

Needle-exchange programs have reduced the number of new drug-related AIDS cases by 43 percent, according to New York State Department of Health studies. Catholic Charities AIDS Services in the Albany Diocese studied such programs for five years and consulted law enforcement, public health officials, substance abuse treatment providers and others before launching Project Safe Point.

The new program is funded by a \$170,000 grant from the New York State Health Department and designed after 17 similar programs in the state.

Staff members from the AIDS Council of Northeastern New York will join Catholic Charities staffers in the \$83,000 van to screen and test clients for HIV, hepatitis and

sexually transmitted diseases and provide information about treatment options.

Catholic Charities will work with agencies to distribute syringe vouchers that can be redeemed at designated pharmacies, which will also hand out treatment literature.

If a client appears hungry or homeless, Catholic Charities will respond with food vouchers or other forms of help.

People can also safely dispose of used needles in the van in hopes of reducing the risk of children stepping on them in playgrounds, Keller said.

“It is about the safety of the person, but it’s also about the safety of the community,” she said, calling Project Safe Point a public health initiative.

Objections to the program have come from those fearful it would encourage drug use. But studies show similar programs nationwide do not increase drug use or recruit first-time users; they actually can help illegal drug users quit, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Web site.

The Albany Diocese’s official statement on the new program noted that “it may appear to some that we are complicit in the evils of drug use. However, the church has long recognized that it is impossible to completely disassociate oneself from evil in all forms, and still participate in the world and offer meaningful help to those in need.

“To guide us, the church provides us with the principles of permissible cooperation in evil and the counseling of the lesser evil. The sponsorship of the Catholic Charities in the Project Safe Point, then, is based upon the church’s standard moral principles,” it said.

The diocese has a Christian obligation to care for the suffering and those marginalized by society, the statement said.

Robert Doherty, director of St. Peter’s Addiction Recovery Center in Guilderland, said he understands why people would oppose the program before reading the facts.

“It’s almost counterintuitive,” Doherty said. “You don’t want to tolerate unlawful

behavior. But in this particular issue of needles, if clean needles are available, it helps the general community not to spread disease.

“We don’t want to encourage anybody to use drugs, but a needle-exchange program gives you an opportunity to interface with people you wouldn’t otherwise,” he said.

The program is open to all syringe users, from young athletes who share needles to use steroids to an elderly person with diabetes who reuses a needle to inject insulin.

“It’s not just the stereotypical drug user that people think of,” Keller said.