

Greater Western Sydney Community Safety Disposal Project Report

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This Case Study is a condensed version
of the full Project Report



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Executive Summary

Wentworth Area Health Service received funding to auspice a Community Safe Disposal Project covering the three Area Health Services in the greater western area of Sydney, Wentworth, Western and South Western Sydney. This project was funded by NSW Health, and has been working closely with the fifteen Councils in the greater western Sydney area to improve the safety of the local communities by enhancing safe disposal options for needles and syringes.

This project commenced at the end of December 2002. All Councils were asked to submit an expression of interest (EOI) to place community sharps bins in public areas that would be convenient for residents to dispose of their household medical waste (sharps). The EOI included the opportunity to submit for funds for the first year's maintenance of the bins and the funds to promote safe handling and disposal of sharps within the community.

After meetings with the Councils of the greater western Sydney, five Councils submitted an EOI. Three Councils were interested in submitting an EOI but due to the short time frame of the project, they were unable to get the necessary internal approval in time. Inroads have been made with three of the Councils who in the past have been reluctant to be involved in Health initiatives.

This project has been an opportunity to form positive links with Councils. The coordinators of the three Area Needle and Syringe Programs will carry out the evaluation process at the end of the twelve months. They will be responsible for collecting the data from participating Councils. During the next twelve months of the project they will also be available as a resource and for consultation with the Councils. By increasing the options for safe disposal for household medical waste it is expected that there will be less sharps disposed of inappropriately i.e. in mainstream waste, through recycling services or discarded in public places.

The project has used the remaining project funding to buy fourteen community sharps bins to be distributed amongst the three Area Health Services for local project extension. It is expected that each local Area Health Service, Needle Syringe Program (NSP), will take up the opportunity that has been made by this project and work will continue with each Council on the issue of unsafe disposal of sharps.

Introduction

The three Area Health Services in the greater western area of Sydney received COAG funding (Illicit Drugs Diversion Initiatives - Supportive Measures for the NSP) to assist local Councils to manage sharps waste in a community setting by increasing disposal options for sharps users. This partnership project is between Wentworth Area Health Service, Western Sydney Area Health Service and South Western Sydney Area Health Service.

This project was designed to develop more effective partnerships between local Councils and the public health sector by undertaking risk assessments in local communities, and then funding and promoting sharps disposal facilities as a means of building safer communities. The project complements the Community Sharps Management Project being undertaken by NSW Health, and was implemented in the context of the NSW Health Circular 2002/93 - Community Sharps Disposal by Public Hospitals and Authorised Outlets of the NSW Needle and Syringe Program.

A key focus of the project has been to provide support and resources to Councils to encourage them to enhance safe disposal options for sharps used in both the treatment of medical conditions, and by injecting drug users. The collective term used for injecting equipment generated in a non-clinical setting is community sharps. The disposal of community sharps in municipal waste or recycling services is an increasing problem for Councils because of occupational health and safety issues for employees and contractors. Needle and syringe litter in public places also represents a significant workplace safety issue for Council activities such as cleaning, parks and gardens, and waste services, as well as being a public safety concern.

Throughout the greater western Sydney area, Councils provide varying options for residents to dispose of their community sharps. While some provide comprehensive services and sharps disposal infrastructure, other Councils do not provide any disposal options at all. This project has been designed to address the basic requirements of all community sharps users, by providing a coordinated and consistent approach to community sharps management.

All fifteen councils in the greater western area of Sydney were asked to submit an expression of interest for funding for the one-off replacement of old outdated bins, or the placement of new community sharps disposal bins in agreed locations. Submissions could also request funding for the first year's maintenance, as well as money for promotion of the community sharps bins.

The Project Background

There are fifteen Councils within the boundaries of this project, five within Western Sydney Area Health Service (Auburn Council, Baulkham Hills Shire Council, Blacktown City Council, Holroyd City Council, Parramatta City Council), three within Wentworth Area Health Service (Blue Mountains City Council, Hawkesbury City Council, Penrith City Council) and seven within South Western Sydney Area Health Service (Bankstown City Council, Camden Council, Campbelltown City Council, Fairfield City Council, Liverpool City Council, Wingecarribee Shire Council, Wollondilly Shire Council). There are varying levels of communication and collaboration between these Councils and the three Area Health Services. While some have close relationships with their Area Health Service, it has been reported that other Councils have been reluctant to enter into any partnerships with the public health sector, particularly on the issue of safe disposal of community sharps.

A project worker from the public health sector was employed to work with each of the Councils to build more effective partnerships, to fund the replacement or placement of community sharps disposal bins, and to coordinate more effective opportunities for positive publicity about this community safety initiative. It is considered that building stronger relationships between local councils and the public health sector, particularly the Needle and Syringe Program, will also create the potential to develop stronger relationships with other stakeholder groups in local communities.

The Household Medical Waste Survey conducted by NSW Health in late 2002 identified a growing concern expressed by Councils regarding the inappropriate disposal of injecting equipment. In NSW, approximately 17 million syringes and pen needles are distributed to insulin dependent diabetics each year and approximately 12 million syringes are distributed through the NSP and Pharmacy Fitpack Scheme. NSW Health estimates that 2/3 of these units end up in municipal waste. Providing more readily accessible community sharps disposal bins and promoting the safe disposal message are considered the best ways to minimise inappropriate disposal of sharps.

Project Rationale/Objective

This project was designed as a practical approach to the increasing problem that Councils are experiencing with the inappropriate disposal of community sharps. Twelve of the fifteen Councils responded to the NSW Health survey of services and infrastructure provided by NSW Councils for community sharps management. All twelve Councils indicated that they were having problems with community sharps disposal to varying degrees. It is envisaged that this project will bring together local Councils and the public health sector in more effective partnerships, and will build on and expand existing positive relationships with Councils.

The initial objectives set for the project were:

- Conduct a needs assessment through each Area Health Service local NSP and Local Council officials regarding the current status of disposal initiatives in each LGA, including the number and location of all Council bins.
- To support the development of community sharps waste disposal strategies by Local Councils across the greater west of Sydney that would co-ordinate the ongoing provision of disposal facilities for all sharps waste generated within the community setting.
- Funding was available for the one-off placement of existing disposal bins, and the supply of new community sharps disposal bins. These bins would be owned and managed by the Council.
- To develop a range of community information resources and training packages in conjunction with Local Council Health and Environment staff and health sector NSP staff to educate local communities across the LGAs in safe handling and proper disposal of sharps. To link local communities into currently funded disposal processes such as the local NSP staff and needle Clean-up Hotline.
- In conjunction with Local Councils Officers, Police and health sector NSP staff, to co-ordinate a range of community safety audits to map the location of any chronic sharps disposal “hotspots” in each LGA, and develop strategies for the Council officers and health sector NSP workers to respond to effective management of these locations.

The biggest hindrance to this project meeting these objectives was the time. Due to a project worker not being employed immediately, the timeframe of the project was reduced from twelve months to six months. The objectives were reviewed and prioritised. As NSW Health had already conducted a survey of services and infrastructure provided by NSW Councils for community sharps management it was decided to use this survey as the base line information instead of conducting a needs assessment.

The project also provided an additional incentive to Councils, in the way of providing funds for the first year’s maintenance and promotion of the bins. The community

sharps disposal bins are to be installed in agreed locations where they are accessible and convenient to the public (shopping centres, libraries, health centres, etc.).

The development of a range of community information resources and training packages was not attempted, as this objective would need much more time than allowed by the project. It is envisaged that having the Councils promote the community sharps bins to all sharps users will be a start in breaking down the barriers between the illicit and the licit sharps users.

The project was unable to directly address the issues of disposal strategies by Councils. This issue was deemed too difficult within the time limit of the project and the reluctance by Councils in general to acknowledge the problems associated with unsafe disposal of sharps. Within some Councils an infrastructure needs to be put in place and positive communication between the Council and the Health Service occur before policy development can take place.

However there are future opportunities for this process to be taken up by the local NSP workers particularly in areas where these problems occur and the local Council is reluctant to tackle it by themselves. By supporting residents through community groups i.e. Neighbourhood Centres, CDAT, local police etc. Councils may be open to practical solutions for this increasing problem.

Participating Councils

Of the fifteen Councils in the greater western area of Sydney only five Councils submitted an EOI.

Western Sydney AHS: Parramatta and Baulkham Hills Councils

South Western Sydney AHS: Bankstown and Wingecarribee Councils

Wentworth AHS: Blue Mountains Council

Each Council took a different approach when deciding on the number of bins and where to place them. Proposed bin locations and the type of promotion required were evaluated with the specifications of the bins. The relationship that each Council had with their Area Health Service's programs was also reviewed and ways that it could be improved were considered.

The evaluations of the project and comments from non-participating Councils appear below:

Parramatta Council

Number of bins: Three

Locations: Granville (South near railway station)
Guildford (shopping centre)
Parramatta (near library & town hall), adjacent to Church St Mall walkway

Promotion: Local newspapers, newsletter of general practitioners, posters, & magnets.

Maintenance: Yes

Promotion:

A range of print media such as printed promotional material, and local media to target the general community, medical sharps users and GP's.

This will include a media release for local newspapers and a newsletter for GP's.

They are also looking at producing a poster for community health centres and GPs.

Fridge magnets promoting safe disposal will be produced and supplied to GPs and primary health nurses at Community Health Centres.

All-weather vinyl stickers will also be produced and prominently displayed on the bins, promoting the bin as a receptacle for community sharps.

Comments:

Council already has several community sharps bins in place although they are directed at those who use sharps in public places. They decided to put bins in the three main shopping areas of the city, which is consistent with the criteria set out in the EOI application form. They are also seeking to develop a prototype bin for public toilets that are recessed into the wall to minimise vandalism.

Baulkham Hills Council

Number of bins: One

Location: Sutter Park, Old Northern Rd. Baulkham Hills

Maintenance: Yes

Promotion:

Posters/flyers to be developed and newspaper advertisements.

Comments:

There are no community sharps bins in this LGA apart from bins installed at shopping centres by Centre Managers. This site was chosen in consultation with Rhonda Loftus Community Health District Manager from The Hills Community Health Centre. It has also noted that there is no pharmacy that accepts community sharps in Baulkham Hills, although there are five such pharmacies elsewhere in the Council area.

Bankstown Council

Number of bins: Three

Locations: Cnr. Cottam Ave & Canterbury Rd. Bankstown
Bankstown Square (car park)
Community Lane Greenacre (car park)

Maintenance: Yes

Promotion:

Diabetes Australia-NSW newsletter & development of pamphlets.

Comments:

Bankstown Council chose these two sites in consultation with Diabetes Australia-NSW, using the number of people registered with the National Diabetes Services Scheme for each postcode. Bankstown and Greenacre were reported to be the areas with the highest number of people with diabetes. Two community disposal bins are to be situated within shopping centres convenient for residents. The other bin is in an industrial complex two streets from a shopping centre. It is reported that this is an area of street-based use that is frequented by sex workers at night, but during the day is close to a busy shopping complex.

The NSP worker at Bankstown has inspected the sites proposed and agrees with these locations.

Wingecarribee Shire Council

Number of bins: Four

Locations: Loseby Park, Bowral, opposite car park near hospital
Leighton Gardens, Moss Vale, opposite shopping centre
Stevens Park, Bowral opposite shops
Mittagong Oval next to Caravan Park and shops.

Maintenance: Yes

Promotion:

Advertisements on the local radio station, a media release, and in the Council newsletter.

Comments: Currently the area has four community sharps disposal bins in place, but apart from the one recently installed at the hospital the others can only be accessed during business hours.

The expression of interest also included two sites for community sharps bins at Sutton Forest (both service stations). These sites were inspected on the 7th May and it was considered that they don't have enough problems to warrant bins this size. Service station staff stated that the existing 1.4 litre bins in the toilets are all that is needed. In addition, another two sites were selected. The four areas chosen are close to areas that residents frequent (shops, recreational areas etc), and the bins can be accessed 24 hours a day. Council has documented evidence of the areas where sharps are disposed of inappropriately, and this was used to select the four locations. The new bins will complement the community sharps bins already in place.

Blue Mountains

Number of bins: Nil - Have only requested promotional expenses for the existing community sharps bins.

Promotion:

Newspaper advertisements.

Comments:

Blue Mountains Council is reluctant at this time to place extra bins in the area apart from what is already in place. The current bins are owned and operated by the Wentworth Area Health Service. It was also noted that the Council does not have an agreement with local pharmacies to accept community sharps for disposal. However to form a closer working relationship with Council and the NSP service it was decided in the spirit of the project that the submission would be approved. This will enable the NSP service to form further partnerships with Council. If there is a positive response from the promotion of existing bins Council may agree to install other bins that are more convenient for community sharps users.

Conclusion

This project was designed to target all members of the community who either inject illicit drugs, or are required to use injected medications in the home. It also provides community sharps disposal options for visitors to the region. Reducing the number of community sharps that are disposed of inappropriately requires readily accessible and affordable disposal options. Providing information to people using community sharps on the problems associated with unsafe disposal, and promoting the use of community sharps disposal facilities are also considered critical to developing a culture of responsible disposal.

Traditionally, public sharps disposal bins have been located in areas that have been known as ‘hotspots.’ These were areas of increased drug use where users injected drugs and often dumped their injecting equipment in the immediate vicinity. Public disposal bins designed to take fitpacks, were placed in these areas to promote safe disposal. However, the design and location of the bins may have had a negative impact on some communities. It has been constantly stated during the project, for example, that people with diabetes won’t use public disposal bins because they don’t want to be seen as illicit drug users.

A major barrier identified during the project has been the apparent inability of some Council officers to move away from the traditional approach of separating disposal issues associated with the two broad groups of licit and illicit users. In many cases there appears to be a reluctance to recognise that safe disposal is a risk management issue for Councils regardless of how or where community sharps are generated. The project has promoted the use of public place bins for all users as a means of removing the stigma often associated with bins provided for illicit drug users.

Within the greater western area of Sydney only Wingecarribee Shire Council has previously owned and operated community sharps disposal bins designed for use by all users of injecting equipment. While communities of the three Councils located in the Wentworth area have also had access to community sharps disposal bins, these are owned and operated by the Wentworth Area Health Service. Although these bins have been deemed to be successful with no significant problems, the majority of Councils within the boundaries of this project were still reluctant to install community sharps bins.

Pharmacies can provide an easy disposal option for people using injecting equipment. Some Guild pharmacies have been contracted by NSW Health to supply injecting equipment and disposal containers to drug users through the Fitpack Scheme. Other pharmacies have been contracted by Councils to accept used sharps for disposal from people with diabetes and others who use injected medications at home. Encouraging Councils to implement pharmacy disposal programs should be considered as an element of ongoing partnership strategies.

The challenge of promoting the community sharps bins has been addressed by plans to utilise a variety of media strategies, and also to target those who come into contact with sharps users and can have an impact on their behaviour (General Practitioners, Diabetes Australia-NSW etc). NSP services will also promote the locations of these

community sharps bins, as well as other disposal options and safe handling practices for all who come into contact with sharps.

The one project objective not partially or fully addressed was the development of community sharps disposal strategies by Councils. The six-month timeframe of the project was not sufficient to attempt this task, given the time required for policy development and the prevailing political climate in some Councils. However, a key objective of NSW Health's Community Sharps Management Project is to achieve a much greater degree of consensus on the role of Local Government in community sharps management, it is anticipated that this will promote a political climate more conducive to the future development of community sharps management strategies by the greater western Sydney Councils.

Although the project was limited to some degree by the shortened timeframe available, it demonstrated that changing the historical 'hands off' approach to community sharps management that is still practised by some Councils will take time. Developing the relationships required to achieve effective communication and collaboration between all Councils and Needle and Syringe Programs in particular will also be an ongoing process. It is considered that the project has contributed significantly to this process by establishing models of cooperation with five of the fifteen Councils that will serve as benchmarks for future service provision and infrastructure enhancement. The issue of safe and appropriate community sharps disposal (regardless of the source) should continue to be addressed and promoted in a positive manner if the Area Health Services are to assist Councils in building safer local communities.

Follow Up

The project is responsible for the ongoing evaluation as set out on the funding agreement. It is envisaged that the local NSP service will take on this responsibility, particularly as this project is intended to form stronger links with Councils. The NSP coordinator in the areas of the participating Councils would be expected to act as consultants and resource people throughout the next twelve months of the project. At about ten months into the project a letter should be sent to the participating Councils reminding them that data needs to be collected at the end of the financial year to ascertain the success of the project. The data needs to then be collected, collated and forwarded to the manager of HIV services of that area who in turn will evaluate the information.

Recommendations for Future Work

Working with Councils

- Develop a uniform approach to safe disposal that targets all sharps users in a positive manner.
- In those areas where there is little involvement between the Council and the public health sector there is an opportunity for NSPs to engage with Councils by providing information, training and resources as a means of developing closer relationships.
- Develop a web page or incorporate into Council web pages information about safe disposal of sharps and problems associated with the unsafe disposal of sharps.

Working with other Health Care Professionals

- Provide information on local disposal options to GPs (through Divisions of General Practice), Diabetes Educators, Pharmacists, and health care service providers.
- Develop a series of posters and accompanying pamphlets on safe disposal, disposal options, and what to do if there is a needlestick injury.
- Increase awareness of the problems caused by inappropriate disposal of sharps through a Discussion Paper. This could be presented at seminars/conferences by the local NSP of the LGAs that have been successful in obtaining a grant to install community sharps bins or encourage that Council to present a discussion paper at a waste management conference.

Working with Clients who produce Sharps

- Provide information on problems caused by inappropriate disposal and the local options available for safe disposal.
- Develop links with consumer organisations such as Diabetes Australia-NSW and the MS Society, local Councils, and local NSPs regarding safe disposal and the problems associated with unsafe disposal of community sharps.
- Continue to promote a safe disposal message to clients of the NSP, in particular advising of the problems caused by fits and fitpacks in Council recycling services.
- Use focus groups of people who use sharps at home to ascertain problems experienced with disposal of sharps and as means of educating this community on safe disposal.
- Develop a video on safe disposal to be shown in waiting areas of the local Council, Doctors surgeries or health care facilities. Educational videos could also be developed in different languages for those clients from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Working with Residents

- Approach neighbourhood centres, resident groups or other community groups and encourage them to advocate to Council for community sharps bins in areas where needed.

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