

Pinpointing needles

By Jack Moran

The Register-Guard

Published: Sunday, March 18, 2007

Copyright 2007 The Register-Guard. All Rights Reserved.

Joe Ferguson sniffs out discarded hypodermic needles like a bird dog tracking game.

Aggressive and single-minded in his search, the burly, 38-year-old former Marine reconnaissance swimmer is hell-bent on cleaning up parks and neighborhoods throughout the Eugene-Springfield area where drug users toss needles after shooting up.

"This has become my passion," said Ferguson, who began volunteering last year with the Eugene-based HIV Alliance. He goes about his work with his three children and pets in mind, figuring he's doing his part to make the community safer for those unaware of the danger posed by contaminated needles littering parks and alleys.

"I just see it as one of those things where you're either part of the solution or part of the problem," he said.

"I decided to be part of the solution."

At least twice a week, Ferguson dons a bright yellow vest and makes his rounds as a leader of the Sana Neighborhood Needle Awareness Program. Sometimes he goes alone, although the tours usually include one or two other HIV Alliance volunteers.

The small group finds an astonishing number of used needles.

Focusing primarily on Eugene's Whitaker neighborhood, Glenwood and west Springfield, the Ferguson-led cleanup crews have picked up and safely disposed of about 600 dirty needles - or "rigs" - since January.

"They are everywhere," Ferguson said. "Not just under the bridges and in the alleys. They're in our parks, all over the place. When I started, I had no idea it would be like this."

The needle problem is a fallout of the epidemic of injected drug use. The HIV Alliance estimates there are 10,000 intravenous drug users in Lane County. Most of them shoot heroin and methamphetamine.

On a related note, federal agents last week broke up a sophisticated drug ring in Eugene and Springfield that they said was distributing 55 pounds of heroin and 15 pounds of meth a month in the southern Willamette Valley.

The primary threat associated with discarded needles is the possibility that a person or animal could get stuck and contract Hepatitis C, a potentially fatal blood-borne disease. The risk of contracting HIV after coming into contact with a dirty needle is lower because the virus cannot survive for long outside the human body.

"Needle sticks don't always result in a (disease) transmission," Lane County Public Health nurse Betsy Meredith said. "But there is a risk, and the risk is high."

Homeless camps

Before Ferguson - a University of Oregon student who originally decided to get involved with the HIV Alliance for his senior project - brought fresh energy into the nonprofit agency's cleanup program, volunteers picked up hypodermic needles only when called upon by local residents who discovered them near their homes or elsewhere. The organization lacked the manpower to do much more.

"It's really taken shape since Joe started," said Forest Headley, who accompanies Ferguson on cleanup patrol, in addition to running the HIV Alliance's needle exchange program for intravenous drug users.

"Joe's got good energy and he's a lot different than most of the volunteers we have," said Headley, noting that most people who volunteer at the agency are young women.

"He's definitely unique to this field. Most people here aren't comfortable going into homeless camps and other high-risk areas. Joe's comfortable going anywhere."

Perhaps the biggest risk Ferguson and Headley face when they do needle patrol is the possibility they could get stuck. They do the job barehanded, carefully using a "garbage grabber" tool to pick up dirty rigs and drop them into biohazard containers, which they take to Sacred Heart Medical Center in Eugene for incineration.

HIV Alliance officials are seeking donations to buy a few sets of needle-proof gloves and other supplies, with hopes of expanding the unfunded program.

"It's time for the community to step up," agency spokeswoman Etopi Fanta said. "Because we're doing this to make it safer for them."

High-risk neighborhoods

Many of the needles discovered by Ferguson, Headley and other HIV Alliance volunteers are in areas where curious children and animals can roam.

Whitaker resident Melanie Harris is well aware of the potential danger posed by the needles.

"My friend's kid came walking up to her out here with one just a few weeks ago," Harris told HIV Alliance volunteers who picked up several so-called "sharps" last Wednesday in an alley next to her house.

The 8-year-old boy's mother "totally tripped," Harris said. "She was like, 'Arghh! Put that down!' That's what makes it so scary, the fact that there are lots of kids around."

The 90-minute trek through Whitaker last week yielded 57 needles, including more than a dozen in Washington-Jefferson Park. That's more than Ferguson's group found during previous searches in the area. But it's nothing compared with the 92 dirty rigs volunteers discovered earlier this month in Springfield's Island Park.

In Springfield, Willamalane Park & Recreation District crews regularly pick up used needles while cleaning up public spaces throughout the city.

Damon Crume, the district's horticultural program manager, said popular Island Park along the Willamette River "is the worst" when it comes to drug users tossing dirty needles.

"It's discouraging to know there's that much of it going on," said Crume, whose crews have days where they find more than 100 needles in the park.

Crume welcomes the help of HIV Alliance volunteers. City parks officials in Eugene feel similarly.

"If we've got other people out there who can pick these things up safely, then we're all for it," said Richard Zucker, the city's parks amenities supervisor.

Zucker, whose crews work seven days a week to clear trash from parks and riverfront areas, said needle pickup is a regular part of the job. About 1,400 used rigs were retrieved by city workers from July 2005 to June 2006 in spots along the river frequented by transients and drug users, he said.

"It's a major public health and public safety problem, and that's why we're out there," Zucker said. "Not just to make the parks look good, but to make them safe."

Accidents sometimes happen with the city pickup crews.

City parks maintenance manager Kevin Finney recalled an instance about two years ago when a seasonal worker lifted a trash bag from a can and was stuck by a protruding needle. The woman tested negative for any blood-borne disease.

"There are a lot of needles out there, and that sort of thing happens occasionally," Finney said. "When it does, we take it seriously."

Needle drop boxes

Cleanup patrols aren't the only way local agencies are working to rid neighborhoods of used needles.

Throughout the week, HIV Alliance and the county Public Health department offer needle exchanges, and a pair of 24-hour needle drop boxes have been set up in Eugene in recent months.

Trent Seager, who heads Public Health's HIV and Hepatitis C prevention program, said the county has several more of the metal boxes ready to be installed elsewhere.

Seager said about 250 used needles are deposited into the health department's drop box each month, with several hundred more dropped into the container outside the HIV Alliance office on Garden Avenue near the University of Oregon.

Meanwhile, Ferguson and his cleanup crew circulate fliers around the community to increase awareness of the service they offer. Anyone who finds dirty needles in their neighborhood can call the agency and get them removed.

The work is appreciated by Whitaker resident Marie Silva, who poked her head through her fence last week when Ferguson and Headley patrolled an alley behind her house. They found about a dozen needles there.

"It is so awesome that you guys are doing this," Silva told the volunteers. "Thank you. Thank you for helping clean up this neighborhood."

HOW TO HELP

The HIV Alliance's Neighborhood Needle Awareness Program seeks help to expand its services in Lane County. Call 510-1058.

Donate: The Eugene nonprofit group needs to buy needle-proof gloves, biohazard containers and other supplies. Another need is a reliable van or car to transport volunteers around the Eugene-Springfield area for cleanup work.

Volunteer: The group patrols parks and neighborhoods, picking up discarded hypodermic needles. Volunteers may work only a few hours each week.

Connect: Community organizations, businesses and residents should call the HIV Alliance if they find discarded needles.