

**Finding dirty needles**  
**A Register-Guard Editorial**  
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If appreciative citizens have not yet presented HIV Alliance volunteer Joe Ferguson - the best used-syringe retriever money didn't have to buy - with a couple of pairs of needle-proof gloves, it must be because they missed reporter Jack Moran's story in last Sunday's Register-Guard.

Moran introduced readers to local hero Ferguson, a 38-year-old former Marine reconnaissance swimmer who spends hours of his free time each week searching for and disposing of used needles that have been discarded by drug users. He works barehanded with a "garbage grabber" tool to snag dirty needles.

With an estimated 10,000 injection drug users in Lane County shooting heroin and methamphetamine - often several times a day - Ferguson has his work cut out for him. He and his helpers on the Sana Neighborhood Needle Awareness Program cleanup crews have picked up and safely disposed of about 600 dirty needles since January. Each used needle is a potential carrier of deadly blood-borne diseases such as hepatitis C and HIV.

That might seem like a lot of hazardous waste being scattered throughout the parks, alleys and homeless camps in the Eugene-Springfield area. In reality, Ferguson retrieves just a fraction of what could be out there if it weren't for the enormously successful needle exchange programs offered by HIV Alliance and the Lane County Public Health Department.

HIV Alliance distributed 540,000 needles to injection drug users last year. About 98 percent were returned and exchanged for clean syringes. Such exchange programs play a major role in preventing the spread of HIV and hepatitis C that would result from drug users sharing dirty needles.

Not only do the programs reduce the spread of infection without increasing illegal drug use, they also provide an increasingly important avenue for addicts to learn about treatment options. Research confirms that outreach to drug users through needle exchange programs helps users reduce risky behaviors, inject drugs less often and enter substance abuse treatment.

Hepatitis C leads to chronic liver disease in 70 percent of those infected. An estimated 50 percent to 80 percent of injection drug users in the United States are infected with hepatitis C within five years of first injecting drugs. Treating a single case of HIV - the virus that causes AIDS - can cost upward of \$200,000.

That makes the HIV Alliance's \$145,000 a year needle exchange program a bargain that Lane County can't afford to pass up. But the Alliance's bare-bones funding doesn't leave a cent left over to pay for its needle cleanup program.

Ferguson and his fellow volunteers are making Lane County's parks and public areas safer for everyone, especially children.

Citizens could make the work safer for these volunteers by donating needle-proof gloves, biohazard containers or the money to purchase them.

To learn more, to volunteer or to report discarded needles, call the HIV Alliance's Neighborhood Needle Awareness Program at 510-1058. Few programs offer so much to so many for so little.