

Dirty needles: Cleaning up local parks

Springfield (KMTR), March 2, 2007 - Dirty, used hypodermic needles are littering park and public areas in the Eugene and Springfield in staggering numbers.

“This last month I’ve been out eight times and we’ve collected more than 350, besides today,” says Joe Ferguson.

Ferguson is a senior at the University of Oregon who, with other volunteers, is taking on the task of cleaning up the local parks, one at a time.

It all started after Joe took an internship with the HIV Alliance in Eugene. He began volunteering last year at the HIV Alliance, working on a community project to clean up used drug needles in the community. It was a small project at first. Then Joe took it to the next level.

“Last year, with Joe coming aboard and all his energy, we really started going out to some of these high-risk places,” says Forest Headley of HIV Alliance.

Joe says at the end of the three months they found 700 used needles in Eugene’s Neighborhood

On Friday, Joe found nearly a 100 needles in less than an hour in a local park. It was a search unlike any other.

From afar, Island Park in Springfield is a classic example of the beauty to be found in Lane County. But at close range—very close—it’s a classic example of a very ugly side of society.

“Everyone I talk to, they don’t believe it until I take them out,” said Joe as he started Friday’s search with local reporters along.

He made believers of them.

Like a storm slowly building there was just a trickle of needles in the first few minutes. Then it quickly grew to a downpour as needle after needle after needle was found

The most frightening part of Friday’s cleanup is that Joe was just searching the same spot a little over a month ago—when he collected more than 70 needles.

It’s not something that’s going away. Volunteers are finding new dirty rigs on a daily basis. Each needle is a drug problem waiting to snap at an unsuspecting person or animal.

“For most individuals the risk of infection is low, but it’s there,” says HIV’s Headly. “And that’s why we’re out here cleaning it up.”

The result is more than a clean park. For Joe Ferguson it's a clean conscience.

“The more I come out, the more it drives me,” he says.

After about an hour of searching at Island Park, Joe and the reporters found 92 needles—the most Joe has ever found in one search—just a month after his last search in that park.

Joe's internship with HIV Alliance is now coming to an end. They hope someone the community can pick up where he left off.

To report discarded needles or get more information on how to properly dispose of them, call the HIV Alliance at (541) 342-5088.