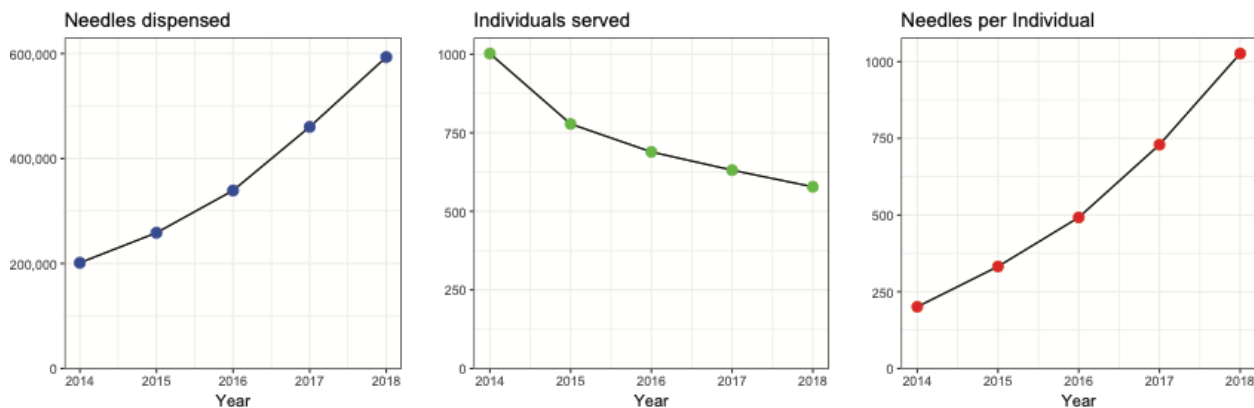


Among the diverse inhabitants of the Monterey Bay Area are many habitual users of intravenous drugs. As a result, the disposal of used syringes is a challenge affecting the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary. Many needles end up in waterways which drain into the sea, and in September 2019 a Santa Cruz community group reported that they had found more than 36,000 needles over six years, including 700 in one day. Countless others remain in the environment.

Both Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties operate harm reduction programs intended to stem the spread of hepatitis and HIV by providing intravenous drug users with clean needles and means to properly discard used ones. The programs also offer counseling and assistance referrals to those struggling with drug addiction. Data collected by the county programs speak to the scope of the environmental problem posed by discarded needles and suggest routes to mitigation.



In Santa Cruz County¹, needle distribution has tripled from 200,000 in 2014 to nearly 600,000 in 2018, yet in the same period, the number of people directly served by the program has declined from 1000 to fewer than 600. This discrepancy is because the number of needles given to each person in a year has risen from 200 to more than 1000. Currently 60% of visitors receive say they are obtaining needles “for others” and receiving more than 100 needles in a visit. In March 2019, 110 people received 61,000 needles — an average of 570 per person in one month.

In Santa Cruz County, large supplies of needles are received by drug users and non-users for secondary distribution to third parties. The indirect recipients are not accounted for, nor are they offered other services by county health officials. In contrast, in Monterey County the 2018 needle distribution served six times the number of visitors with five times fewer needles: 114,000 to over 3700 clinic visitors.

After use, some fraction of the hundreds of thousands of needles distributed end up in backyards, watersheds, and ultimately on beaches and in the waters of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary. Surfing, swimming, wading, and building sandcastles become

hazardous activities. In a bid to reduce harm to a segment of the population, minimally supervised syringe distribution puts millions of residents and visitors at risk.

While many contaminants impact Sanctuary waters, used syringes are a particularly dangerous form of pollution. Unfortunately, the disposal of this biohazard waste — needles containing heroin and laced with potentially infectious blood — is in the hands of thousands of people unable or unwilling to locate a safe disposal site.

It is urgent that city, county, state and federal agencies work to reduce the number of syringes entering the Sanctuary. We ask for efforts to increase accountability in syringe services, balancing effective access to safe needles with policies that incentivize safe disposal and reduce opportunities for trafficking in needles. Some potential interventions, such as tracking needles to locate major sources of pollution, may come with additional administrative burdens, but we hope that this investment will be seen as worthwhile.

The goals of this statement are to raise awareness of the scale of this issue, to promote consideration of the net community health among both intravenous drug users and non-users, and to encourage immediate action and devotion of resources to mitigating the problem. Improperly discarded needles directly affect critical ecosystems within the Sanctuary and the health of those visiting; it is our duty to protect both.

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<http://www.santacruzhealth.org/HSAHome/HSADivisions/PublicHealth/SyringeServicesProgram.aspx>