Governor Gavin Newsom just signed the California budget, officially allocating $15.2 million to fund staff positions in harm reduction programs across the state. These staff positions, Harm Reduction Care Navigators, will connect people who use drugs with life-saving services such as syringe access, overdose prevention, drug treatment, and healthcare services.

In California, and the United States, accidental overdose is the leading cause of death for Americans under 50. In 2017, over 2,000 Californians died of a drug overdose, which is the highest sheer number of deaths in any state in the Country. In response to this, California invested $90 million in federal grant funding to dramatically expand opioid use disorder treatment across the state through Hub and Spoke and California Bridge programs. With this additional $15.2 million, the benefit of federal grants will expand to people often referred to as “hard to reach”, who are not likely to access new treatment programs without linkage and navigation. Staff at syringe access programs are best positioned to work with this group of people given their established trusting relationships. By adding the role Harm Reduction Care Navigators, syringe service programs will be able to hire a dedicated person who can effectively outreach to people who are not in treatment, provide health education information including overdose prevention, link people to health services, and provide assistance and support to participants navigating the complex medical and substance use disorder systems.

Harm Reduction Coalition & Drug Policy Alliance co-sponsored this request for the first time in 2018 but it was vetoed by Governor Brown. Both organizations “applauds Governor Gavin Newsom and the California Legislature’s $15.2 million investment in harm reduction programs,” stated Jeannette Zanipatin, CA State Director for Drug Policy Alliance. “These lifesaving measures include funding for treatment navigators to link individuals with treatment and provide on-going healthcare services to address the opioid crisis and reduce the number of overdose deaths in California.” We thank Governor Newsom for signing a budget that is inclusive of vulnerable Californians who are often overlooked and underserved. We also thank the Assembly budget subcommittee on Health and Human Services as well as Senators Mitchell and Skinner, for advancing this request. This effort was led by the California Syringe Exchange Programs (CASEP) coalition, which is made up of harm reduction providers from over 45 programs. Each program submitted a letter and at least 10 CASEP organizations had representatives visit with legislators and testify at budget hearings.

At Harm Reduction Coalition, “We spent a lot of time in 2017 listening to people who use drugs and people who run harm reduction programs to understand what was needed to truly reduce the health and social harms of drug use in communities, and we kept hearing one thing: more people to do the work,” says Dr. Taeko Frost, Western Regional Director of Harm Reduction Coalition, “Harm reduction programs and people who use drugs have been preventing overdose, HIV, hepatitis C, and keeping each other alive for decades with shoestring budgets. We shifted gears and prioritized bringing programs and people directly impacted together to
advocate for funding to build capacity of these programs with real resources: sustainable funding and recognition of the value of the work"

This was a collaborative advocacy effort, from the beginning to celebrating this victory. “We had providers travel to Sacramento from all over the state, taking time they don’t have, mostly unpaid time, to share their experiences with legislators and ask for support because they know that this funding will have a huge impact on the services they offer. This may not seem like a lot of money compared to other budget items, but every dollar matters to these programs. These people deeply care about their work and they deserve to have adequate resources,” says Jenna Haywood, Capacity Building and Community Development Manager, “The process has been about more than getting money into the state budget, it’s been about harnessing the power that we have collectively to make meaningful change in our communities.”

This is the first time since 2009, that California has supported staffing capacity for syringe services programs. “Ten years ago, I was working at a program in Santa Cruz and when HIV prevention funding was cut we lost all paid staff and our physical space. We continued providing services as volunteers and many programs across the state were left in the same position, providing the majority of people who use drugs statewide with resources, naloxone access and linkage to care without any staffing support” Savannah O’Neill, Capacity Building and Community Development Manager recalls “This budget request was led by those on the front lines, informed by community needs and the investment will financially support the expansion of harm reduction.” This monetary investment will fund 1-2 full-time positions in almost every one of the 47 syringe services programs that span the state.

In rural Northern California Counties, that have comparatively high overdose rates, this funding will make a dramatic impact. Mendocino County AIDS/Viral Hepatitis Network (MCAVHN), is only harm reduction provider in the County, and “for more than a decade, we have been unable to have face to face contacts with 65% of the people we serve; depriving them of essential connections and linkages to medical, behavioral and treatment services available in more populated areas of the county. The people we are unable to serve directly, are often living in remote areas with little or no resources, with no means to connect to life-changing or life-saving services and supports." Executive Director Dr. Libby Guthrie shares, "What the CORRE budget allocation in Mendocino County would do for us, to provide an outreach/health navigator to connect with folks in these remote areas, who are at highest risk of overdose and/or extremely poor health outcomes. This "small" change will provide a tremendous difference in those people's lives."

Brandie Wilson from Humboldt Area Center for Harm Reduction echoes the importance of investment in rural areas of California, “Rural services have historically been underfunded which has taken its toll on our welfare as a community and in turn why we have been so invested in this funding. This funding will ensure that we can hire a staff that is solely dedicated to address community concerns as well as be a champion for health for people who use drugs in rural Humboldt County.”
The Bay Area has a larger concentration of syringe services programs than other parts of the state, but in large cities like Oakland programs have still been historically underfunded. Harm Reduction Services Manager at HIV Education Prevention Project of Alameda County (HEPPAC), Denise Lopez agrees “This money will help to increase resources for harm reduction services, which is needed in the East Bay. Additional staff equates to expansion of services, a critical need to address the ongoing overdose and homelessness epidemics in our Oakland community. Furthermore the funds will help expedite people getting into care, ensuring successful retention in care.” The only other Oakland based program, Punks with Lunch, is all volunteer run, and the founder also states the positive impact this funding will have, “the funding will allow PWL/COHRT to expand our services to our marginalized underserved community. It is the aide that will drastically change what we can do for our folks.”

In the Central Valley there are only a few programs providing these life saving services, “This funding will be a game changer for our program. The Fresno NEP has been a volunteer run service for the entirety of it’s 24 year history. As a volunteer program we simply do not have the capacity to follow through with clients as much as we’d like. This funding changes that.” says Dallas Blanchard from Fresno Needle Exchange Program.

In Southern California, this funding would support established programs like LA Community Health Project, "This funding would allow us to expand services to our population, which includes some of the most marginalized individuals in Los Angeles county. Our population is 72% homeless, and while the homeless rate has increased by 16% since last year, and the need for services grows every year, funding becomes more difficult to secure. We serve 11,000 unique individuals annually, are desperately understaffed, and additional funding would help us immeasurably” says Executive Director, Michael Marquesen.

We expect to see the expansion of harm reduction services statewide, a more robust and coordinated system to link people to health care and drug treatment, and as a result of this initiative. To learn more about syringe access and harm reduction in California, please contact (Jenna Haywood & Savannah O’Neill at california@harmreduction.org)

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