

Colorado Health Network joins ACLU in legal action against City of Pueblo *Suit challenges the validity of municipal ordinance banning syringe access programs*

DENVER – Colorado’s leading non-profit focused on HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment has partnered with the ACLU of Colorado as a plaintiff in a lawsuit to challenge the validity of a municipal ordinance passed by Pueblo City Council on May 13 and enacted on May 16 that bans the creation, establishment, operation, or participation in a syringe services program within the City of Pueblo.

Syringe access programs (SAP) have been legal in Colorado since 2010. Colorado Health Network’s (CHN) SAP— Access Point — has operated in Pueblo since 2014. Since opening, new HIV infections due to injection drug use in Pueblo County have fallen 8% as compared to the prior eight years of available data. Additionally, overdose reversals reported by program participants have doubled (258 in 2020 to 515 in 2022) thanks to the program’s distribution of and training on the use of naloxone, a life-saving overdose reversal medication. SAP also enables connection to mental health care and referrals to treatment. In January, we launched Connection Point—our walk-in, no cost, no-insurance behavioral health services offered adjacent to SAP—in its first three months 289 participants talked with a therapist and 24 returned for continued engagement with counseling.

“This local data adds to a large body of national evidence that syringe access programs support public safety, improve public health, decrease costs to communities caused by HIV and Hepatitis C infections, connects folks to care, and ultimately save lives,” said Darrell Vigil, Chief Executive Officer of Colorado Health Network.

“Our program was supported by the Pueblo County Board of Health and remains publicly supported by medical professionals and addiction specialists in Pueblo,” added Vigil. “We recognize concerns raised by some members of City Council and asked the city to collaborate in good faith with us. Our only goal is to be a good community partner focused on improving public health. Sadly, data presented by CHN to the Pueblo City Council and our request to work collaboratively fell on deaf ears,” said Vigil.

Taking legal action challenging the ordinance is required to fulfil CHN’s non-profit mission and live our values. “Our organizational values call upon us to do this,” said Bill Mead, president of CHN’s Board of Directors. “We are committed to recognizing and challenging systems of discrimination and working to improve health equity for marginalized communities. It is clear to us that this ordinance is based on deeply held misconceptions and stigmatization of people struggling with addiction,” he added. “We did not ask for this fight, but we are proud to be part of it. Doing the right thing rather than the comfortable thing will always be our North Star,” said Mead.

“Pueblo’s decision ignores basic public health policy and the evidence-based programs that seek to ensure all Coloradans have access to essential healthcare, education, and harm-prevention,” said Tim Macdonald, ACLU of Colorado Legal Director. “Pueblo also violates state law in seeking to criminalize these public health programs. The State of Colorado understood that these programs help prevent the transmission of infectious disease, do not increase illegal substance use or crime, and dramatically increase the likelihood of people entering drug treatment and stopping the use of drugs.”

CHN was founded in 1983 at the height of the AIDS crisis and today serves more than 15,000 Coloradans through its services for people living with HIV, prevention programs to stop the spread of HIV and other health conditions, as well as harm reduction and overdose prevention efforts for people who use substances.