

Philadelphia to mull safe injection sites in opioid fight

19 May 2017, by Kristen De Groot

A task force charged with outlining ways for Philadelphia to combat its opioid epidemic has recommended the city consider allowing safe sites, where drug users could inject heroin.

Gov. Tom Wolf was on hand Friday as Mayor Jim Kenney outlined the task force's findings. Kenney convened the 23-member group in January.

"The opioid epidemic has been taking lives, destroying families and undermining the quality of life of Philadelphians across the city," Kenney said. "This report and its recommendations offer a roadmap as to how, together, we can take action and adequately address this problem to reduce use and the devastating loss of life this epidemic is causing."

Experts predict Philadelphia's opioid deaths this year will exceed 2016 numbers, reaching nearly 1,200 deaths, said Public Health Commissioner Dr. Thomas Farley, a co-chair of the task force,

Overdose deaths surged to 907 in 2016, a 30 percent increase from the previous year.

The task force's 18 recommendations include launching a media campaign about opioid risks, expanding the availability of the overdose-reducing drug naloxone and conducting a public education campaign about the life-saving treatment. But the most controversial is the suggestion to consider the implementation of a safe injection site.

Alicia Taylor, a spokeswoman for Kenney, said such safe injection programs have had success in places like Vancouver, Canada.

"However, there are serious legal, practical and law enforcement issues that have to be considered before one of these can be opened in Philadelphia," she said.

The nationwide opioid epidemic has pushed

elected leaders around the country to consider government-sanctioned sites where users can shoot up under the supervision of a doctor or nurse who can administer an antidote if necessary.

While such sites have operated for years in places such as the Netherlands and Australia, they face significant legal and political challenges in the U.S., including criticism that they amount to surrendering to an epidemic that should be fought with prevention and treatment.

The task force recommendation comes the same week a Philadelphia advocate for safe injection sites overdosed in the hard-hit neighborhood of Kensington, according to the Philadelphia Inquirer.

Paul Yabor, 55, had devoted much of his life to advocating for HIV and AIDS victims and drug users who inject. Since January, he was working to bring a safe and supervised injection site to Philadelphia.

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