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New York Plans to Install ‘Vending Machines’ With Anti-Overdose Drugs

In addition to naloxone, a medication used to reverse opioid overdoses, the machines will distribute free syringes, toiletries and safe-sex kits.



Every four hours, someone in New York City dies from a drug overdose, according to health department data. Credit...Ryan Christopher Jones for The New York Times

By **Isabella Grullón Paz**

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New York City health officials have announced a plan to install 10 “public health vending machines” that would dispense sterile syringes, an anti-overdose medication and other “harm reduction” supplies to help neighborhoods that have been hit hard by drug overdoses.

The vending machines, which are planned for neighborhoods in all five boroughs, will also carry toiletries and safe-sex kits, according to Michael McRae, acting executive deputy commissioner of the

city's health department. All items in the vending machines will be free, he said, adding that the department hoped to have the vending machines on the street this year.

"This is really about expanding access to health and wellness services," he said of the initiative, a \$730,000 pilot program seeking up to six contractors.

The main purpose of the vending machines is to curb overdoses across the city by increasing the availability of [naloxone](#), a drug that works to quickly [reverse the effects of an opioid overdose](#). "[Every four hours](#) there's an overdose here," Dr. McRae said. "This is something that doesn't allow for people to die every hour."

As they have [across the country](#), opioid deaths in New York City, have risen significantly during the coronavirus pandemic. There were 2,062 overdose deaths in the city in 2020, according to [data published last year](#) by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene — the highest total since reporting on overdose deaths began in 2000 and over 500 more than in 2019.

"Overdose deaths in New York City are not equally distributed citywide, with some groups and neighborhoods disproportionately experiencing increases," the nonprofit Fund for Public Health in New York said last month in a [request for proposals](#) from organizations interested in taking the lead on the project. The fund, which issued the request on behalf of the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, set a Jan. 20 deadline for proposals. The health department will award the contracts on Jan. 31.

According to [2020 health department data](#), overdose deaths among white New Yorkers had decreased during the preceding three years, while rates among Black New Yorkers had increased in the previous year, and rates among Latinos had increased for five consecutive years.

Residents in impoverished Black and Latino neighborhoods like Mott Haven in the South Bronx and East Harlem in Manhattan reported the highest rates of unintentional overdose deaths in 2020.

"Structural racism in drug policy and enforcement has been linked to decreased access to services, poorer health outcomes and increased overdose risk," the request said.

The solicitation for proposals identified several neighborhoods as priorities for the machines, including Central Harlem and Union Square in Manhattan, Far Rockaway in Queens, Stapleton in Staten Island and East New York in Brooklyn.

Access to clean needles is important to prevent the spread of H.I.V. and hepatitis C as well as skin and soft tissue infections, Mike Selick, an associate director at the National Harm Reduction Coalition, said on Thursday.

"We know that syringe access is effective; this is just another form of it," he said in an interview. Syringe access programs are a [proven way to slash H.I.V. infection rates](#) by limiting the reuse of contaminated needles, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Proposals like New York's are "about making the material, the health equipment and the health supplies accessible to the people who need it the most, where they're already at, on their schedule and on their timeline, and without the stigma or shame," Sheila P. Vakharia, deputy director for research and academic engagement at the Drug Policy Alliance, said on Thursday.

In New York State, people can already get up to 10 clean syringes at pharmacies participating in the state's [Expanded Syringe Access Program](#). But according to Dr. Vakharia, many drug users would

rather avoid a face-to-face interaction with a pharmacist, and many pharmacies are closed late at night, when drug use is more prevalent and people need safe supplies the most.

The same goes for access to naloxone, she added. "It's a medication that should be readily available and accessible to people when they need it the most, and it doesn't hurt if we can make it more readily available," she said.

Critics of the proposal have said that the vending machines fail to address the most critical issues around addiction.

"I agree we cannot ignore the devastating data on drug addiction and overdoses without doing more," Councilman David Carr, a Staten Island Republican who represents one of the neighborhoods prioritized in the plan, said in an email on Thursday.

"But I feel it is irresponsible to simply place vending machines filled with syringes and Narcan in neighborhoods, without providing addicts the support and real assistance they need," he added, referring to a brand-name version of naloxone.

But advocates of the plan maintain that installing the vending machines is "the smart thing to do."

"We don't want it to be easier to get dirty needles," Mr. Selick, of the National Harm Reduction Coalition, said. "We don't want it to be easier to get drugs on the street than it is to get the help and the supplies and the good information that you need to know."