

Commissioners receive HIV/Hep C update from Indiana State Health Department

Written by Marty Randall

Friday, 10 November 2017 11:36 -

Dennis Stover had some interesting statistics to report to Scott County commissioners at their meeting on Wednesday, November 1.

Stover serves as director of HIV/STD/Viral Hepatitis efforts for the Indiana State Health Department (ISHD), and he's been keeping a close eye on what is being accomplished by the local Health Department and other agencies fighting the HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) and Hepatitis C outbreaks in Scott County. Each quarter since the start of the first major rural outbreak of the diseases in 2015, IDHD officials have visited Commissioners on a quarterly basis to keep them abreast of the situation.

Stover said he's been impressed with local reports. "You're seeing fewer people with abscesses coming to your (hospital) emergency room, and your reports of heart disease are reduced as well. Those are all good signs that individuals are getting better care," Stover started off.

The state director said a lack of positive returns on HIV tests performed at Scott Memorial is another good sign. "You have experienced no 'spikes' in the number of new cases. Right now, you're getting one to two over two months or so and three 'positives' per month as an average. These figures show the effectiveness of local programs in place to help them," Stover related.

A part of those programs is the syringe exchange program in place. "People are scared of exchanges until they actually see their effectiveness in slowing the spread of HIV," the director stated. "It's working," he told Commissioners Kelley Robbins, Bob Tobias and Mike Jones.

He said he was also pleased to see the new program for women recovering from drug use at Englishton Park. patients there are referred by other agencies or doctors. Fayette County also has beds in its detox/treatment facility for Scott County women, he advised. "What the ISHD is

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doing is planting 'seeds' around the state to curb and stem the tide of drug abuse," Stover explained. Cooperation between counties is essential in recovering from the tide of drug abuse.

He commended local Health Department staff for their continued efforts in working with HIV-positive people and their families through the One-Stop Shop that operates each Wednesday in Austin. The modular unit just east of the shop building will soon be open to help the community even more in its recovery from the 2015 outbreak.

ISHD has received a \$26 million federal grant, all of which will be used for HIV primary care in Indiana, Stover said. "We also continue to work closely with your Sheriff (Dan McClain) and the programs at your county jail. Sheriff McClain has been a tremendous help," he advised.

Inclosing, Stover said he wanted to thank the Commissioners for their support. "I understand that you have filed a lawsuit against drug manufacturers, so we hope that some dollars from that suit will be coming your way as well," he said.

Stover agreed with Commissioner Robbins when Robbins pointed out that some doctors have over-prescribed pain killers, which brought the drug situation to a crisis level, as recognized by President Donald Trump recently.

"Those doctors need to take more time with their patients to learn how to effectively treat pain issues. Of course, we've learned dentists are some of our worst offenders," Stover related.

He said he applauded local officials in doing what they can in the fight to bring Scott County back to normalcy. "We drove through a couple of neighborhoods before coming to this meeting, and I was pleased to see the areas in much better shape," he said.

Robbins also pressed the ISHD official for more money to address mental health issues, an area he said that "...has been neglected for a long time." Stover paused and told the Commissioners, "We have become very positive thinkers as far as mental health dollars go. We hope to see more improvement going forward."

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Commissioner Tobias asked how many HIV-positive individuals are in Scott County presently. That number is 227, Stover said. “We have 45 of those that are not virally suppressed, but we know the more your local people work with them, the better chance we have of getting them into a medical program that can suppress the HIV and give them a better life,” Stover stated.

A total of 17 people known to be HIV-positive have died since the 2015 outbreak, Stover went on. “Those deaths are not necessarily from HIV or AIDS, but anyone with a immunodeficiency condition is prone to other diseases which can claim their lives,” he explained. Overdose victims are coming from non-HIV residents, it was learned.

Commissioner Jones is a First Responder and has been on many medical calls where Narcan has been administered to overdose victims, which has revived them. “I’ve been on dozens of runs and I’ve never once heard anyone say he or she will never OD (overdose) again, that they’re through with drugs,” he told Stover. “It’s like Narcan is a temporary bandage that you can give them, but it’s not going to solve the problem.”

Jones said he’d like to see more legal action taken against those who overdose. “We know they’re using illegal drugs, so they should be charged,” he contended.

Stover said those who use such drugs have altered their thinking so much that “...they really don’t think like we do. They don’t see those consequences. And it takes about ten months of being off drugs before they get back to even a little bit like they were before. That’s why we have to keep working on the problem, so more don’t become addicted,” Stover concluded.