

This is Lieutenant Roger McCort from The Salvation Army in Eureka with today's Community Comment.

The litter associated with drug use has become a major problem over the last few years. The streets and alleyways of our cities and towns have syringes, needles, and other paraphernalia lying in almost every gutter and shadowed corner. Anyone who spends time in our parks or hiking our trails finds this toxic debris wherever they go. It is a huge and often frightening problem. Parents worry about kids being exposed to contaminated needles, broken glass from pipes, or the various forms of human waste abandoned by those who are either incapable or unwilling to clean up after themselves.

In part because the cleanup is difficult and time consuming, government agencies have done little to alleviate the problem. Dozens of local individuals and groups have made efforts to take up the slack, collecting tens of thousands of needles and tens of tons of trash, but there seems to be a never-ending supply of garbage being dumped and only a finite number of volunteers and hours.

We need to either drastically reduce the number of drug users or isolate them in a way which encourages them to clean up after themselves – or at least minimize the area that discarded materials will escape into the general public.

So how do we do that?

No concentration camp or work farm idea is worth considering. Even if they could pass constitutional muster, which they cannot, there is no such thing as a forced recovery from addiction. You can require someone to go to treatment, but they need to want to escape from their addiction or they will return to it shortly after their release.

Prison isn't an option, as it is difficult to even get drug users ticketed at this point. If we reclassified drug use as a violent crime – which it is – we could get people locked up, but it still wouldn't compel them to accept treatment.

Opening more recovery programs could help, but the challenge is convincing people to walk through the doors. That takes relationship building, and a concerted effort to let people who have traded their souls for the momentary freedom from pain offered by their drug of choice, know that change is possible, and that they are worth the effort. Because they are.

At this point, it leaves us with one highly unpopular option. Safe-injection sites.

Opponents say that safe-use sites are an ethical quagmire. They quickly jump to argue that these sites are enabling and that they encourage and coddle drug users, leading to more consumption rather than less.

But this is no new idea. Fifty years of data is available, which shows two things to be incontestably true:

Opening a safe-injection site while increasing policing of illicit drug use outside of such sites leads to a dramatic decrease in public drug use. That means less people shooting up in alleys, parks, public restrooms, or your backyard. It also means a reduction in emergency overdose treatments and fewer lives lost to overdose.

This won't solve the problem of drugs, but it will encourage addicts to seek the treatment they need, and keep them alive long enough to persuade them to go. Hopefully.

One more thing these sites do: They control the waste left behind. Needles stay in the site. Trash is collected on-site. Restrooms are provided. Our streets are safer, cleaner, and less likely to infect us. Doesn't that sound like an improvement?

Grace and peace to you. This has been Lt. Roger McCort with the KINS Community Comment.