

Case Study for Using Interviews: VOCAL-NY Syringe Access Report

Method Used Interviews

Background on Organization and Issue

Voices of Community Activists and Leaders (VOCAL-New York), formerly New York City AIDS Housing Network (NYCAHN), is a statewide grassroots membership organization building power among low-income people who are living with and affected by HIV/AIDS, drug use and incarceration, to create healthy and just communities. VOCAL accomplishes this through community organizing, leadership development, participatory research, public education and direct action.

New York has led the nation in reducing HIV transmission among injection drug users (IDUs) through various syringe access efforts, including syringe exchange programs (SEPs) and the Expanded Syringe Access Program (ESAP) initiative. These lawful programs, which allow properly documented participants to possess sterile or used syringes, reduce the spread of HIV and other blood borne illnesses and improve overall public health. However, for years, the New York State Penal code did not recognize the Public Health Law exemptions that allow SEP's to operate and consequently, many lawful SEP participants were subjected to harassment, arrest or even incarceration, significantly reducing the effectiveness of these programs.

Members of VOCAL identified syringe access and safe disposal as a priority issue in early 2008 after many reported being harassed and sometimes arrested for lawful syringe possession when stopped and searched by the police. More than just an annoyance, VOCAL leaders suspected that the Penal Code and law enforcement practices increased the risk of HIV and HCV transmission because drug injectors may be afraid to use syringe access and disposal programs. In order to thoroughly and accurately describe the impact of current policies and practices, VOCAL members decided to conduct a research project, led by users, to document these problems and develop grassroots solutions.

Below is a description of the VOCAL-NY syringe access research project, based on the Participatory Action Research guiding framework (see Tool 2.1 and 2.2).

WHAT....

Were the Organizing Goals connected to this research?

- To expand access to sterile syringes, encourage proper disposal of used syringes, and improve health outcomes for drug users in New York State.
- To pass state legislation that would align the NYS Public Health Law with the Penal Code, more clearly ending the criminalization of syringe possession.
- To humanize and build the power of drug users in NYS.
- To educate lawmakers, law enforcement and other parts of the justice system about the importance of syringe access in improving public health and safety.

Overall questions did VOCAL want to answer through their research?

- What experiences do SEP participants have with police in relation to possessing new and used syringes?
- What impact do the practices of law enforcement have on drug users access to clean syringes and ability to safely dispose of used syringes?
- What are the experiences of drug users with harm reduction programs?
- How are the practices of law enforcement towards drug users related to patterns of gentrification in New York City?
- Information did VOCAL need to collect to answer these research questions?
- Stories from participants in Syringe Access Programs to document the need to expand syringe access.
- Stories from participants in Syringe Access Programs to show the negative effect of police practices on access to syringes.
- Secondary data about police practices and syringe access to support participant's stories.

WHY....

Is this research useful or important for VOCAL?

- Internally: to develop the leadership of VOCAL members by deepening their understanding of policy related to syringe access and training them in research methods; to build the base of VOCAL members through outreach; allow VOCAL members a space to tell their stories and share their experiences.
- Externally: to educate law makers, law enforcement, public health officials and others about the impact of police practices on access to syringes and safe disposal; to get media attention towards the need for syringe access; to pass legislation reconciling the NYS Penal Code with the Public Health Law regarding possession of new and used syringes.

WHO...

Are the Stakeholders in this Issue?

- Drug users, participants in Syringe Access Programs, public health practitioners and agencies working to decrease the spread of HIV, Hepatitis C and other blood borne illnesses (SEPs, ESAPs, etc).

Was VOCAL trying to influence?

- Members of the NYS Assembly and Senate, the NYS governor, NYS Division of Criminal Justice Services and all NYS policing agencies, NYS prosecutors, the NYS Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the NYC Mayor.

HOW...

Did VOCAL gather information (what methods did they use)?

- VOCAL used one on one interviews to capture the stories and experiences of Syringe Access Program participants. This method was chosen because of the personal nature of the information that was discussed and the stigma that surrounds injection drug use. It was also important that current and former drug users were trained to conduct the interviews, to make those being interviewed more comfortable when discussing their drug use and interactions with the police.

How Research Supported VOCAL's Organizing Efforts

In 2010, The Syringe Access bill AB8396/ SB5620, sponsored by Assembly Members Richard Gottfried and Joseph Lentol and Senators Tom Duane and Eric Schneiderman, passed both houses of the NYS legislature and was signed into law by Governor Paterson. The bill finally aligns the Penal Code with the Public Health Law nearly twenty years after syringe access first became legal in New York, which will reduce both police harassment and unlawful arrest of drug injectors who carry new and used syringes. VOCAL members engaged in consistent advocacy to pass this bill, including regular visits to Albany. The syringe report and the stories and data it includes were used as a part of this advocacy strategy and provided evidence of the need for and importance of this legislation.

Read the report here: http://www.cdp-ny.org/report/Stuck_in_the_System.pdf