



The Times

Governor will push drug needle program

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By **ANGELA DELLI SANTI**

TRENTON - Gov. Jon Corzine will urge the Legislature to pass a law giving intravenous drug users access to clean needles and would consider using his executive power to force the issue if lawmakers fail to act.

In his first major interview since taking office, Corzine yesterday said he believes needle exchange programs save lives and establishing needle giveaways in New Jersey is a priority in his administration.

"Unless I find out new information, I'm going to be a very strong advocate," Corzine said. "We're losing lives every day we don't act."

Advocates have pushed for years for New Jersey to provide intravenous drug users with clean syringes, arguing that such access helps blunt the spread of HIV and AIDS. Some 39 states operate needle exchanges and nine others allow residents to buy needles without prescriptions. Only New Jersey and Delaware provide no access to clean needles.

Efforts to legalize needle exchanges in New Jersey have failed in the Legislature, where opponents have equated the programs to condoning illegal drug use and promoting violence in impoverished cities.

With needle-exchange legislation stalled, former Gov. James E. McGreevey used an executive order before leaving office in 2004 to authorize pilot programs in three cities. Legal challenges, including one from four state lawmakers, halted the programs in Atlantic City, Camden and a third, unnamed city, before they began.

Advocates were dealt another setback in August, when a state appeals panel struck down Atlantic City's effort to establish a needle exchange, ruling that such programs violate state drug laws.

McGreevey's executive order lapsed on Dec. 31 without a single clean needle being distributed.

Corzine, who took office Jan. 17, said he would consider issuing an executive order authorizing the programs if legislative efforts stall again.

He also acknowledged critics' concerns, including the objections of lawmakers who argued McGreevey overstepped his bounds by declaring a public health emergency. The new governor said he would listen to the arguments and wants to hear legislative debate.

"But I believe it is time, based on the information I have, for this legislation. We ought to be doing it relatively quickly and I intend to do so," he said. "Maybe there is a way to shape the legislation that actually deals with the concerns that have stood in the way of some people getting behind moving forward with this issue."

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