

# Project NEXUS: Findings from a Survey among Underrepresented People Who Use Drugs – 6 U.S. Syringe Services Programs

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13<sup>th</sup> Annual National Harm Reduction Conference, San Juan, Puerto Rico

# CDC is increasing its support of harm reduction through current and future programs.

Project NEXUS is part of a larger initiative from the CDC to:

- Eliminate injection drug use associated infections
- Improve health outcomes for people who use drugs



Increasing the coverage and capacity of harm reduction programs

Establishing coordinated surveillance, monitoring and program implementation

# What is Project NEXUS?

- Survey among people who use drugs to assess:
  - Drug and sex behaviors
  - Access and use of prevention services
  - Prevalence of HIV and HCV infection
- Implemented through select syringe services programs (SSPs)
- Findings will be used to tailor local prevention activities for people who use drugs



# Partnerships

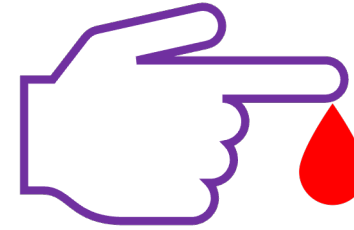
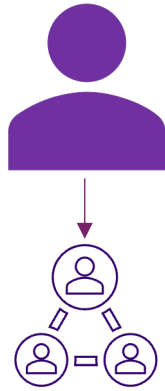
- University of Washington
- North American Syringe Exchange Network (NASEN)
- Dr. Don Des Jarlais, New York University
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



# Methods Overview

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# So Here's What We Did...



**SSP selection** via  
NASEN directory  
+ RFP

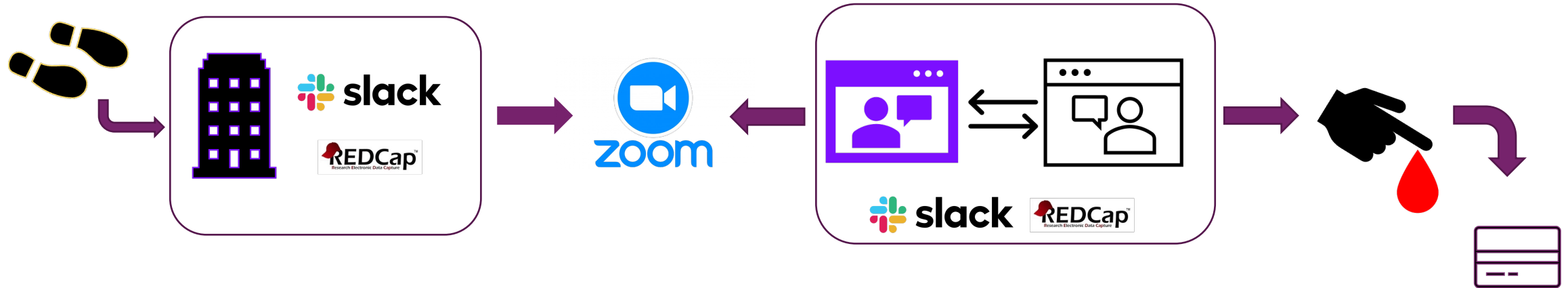
**Direct SSP recruitment**  
+ peer network  
referrals

**Virtual health survey**  
+ SSP specific questions  
administered via Zoom

**Rapid HIV+HCV testing**  
at SSP + specimen  
collection for HCV viral load  
testing

**Linkage**  
to HIV/HCV care

# ...but how'd you do it?!



- 1<sup>st</sup> { • SSP Client recruited
- 2<sup>nd</sup> { • Alert UW via Slack
- 3<sup>rd</sup> { • Register in REDCap

- 1<sup>st</sup> { • Set-up NEXUS screener
- 2<sup>nd</sup> { • Allow in Zoom + Welcome
- 3<sup>rd</sup> { • Scripted intro + screen + permission + core/local

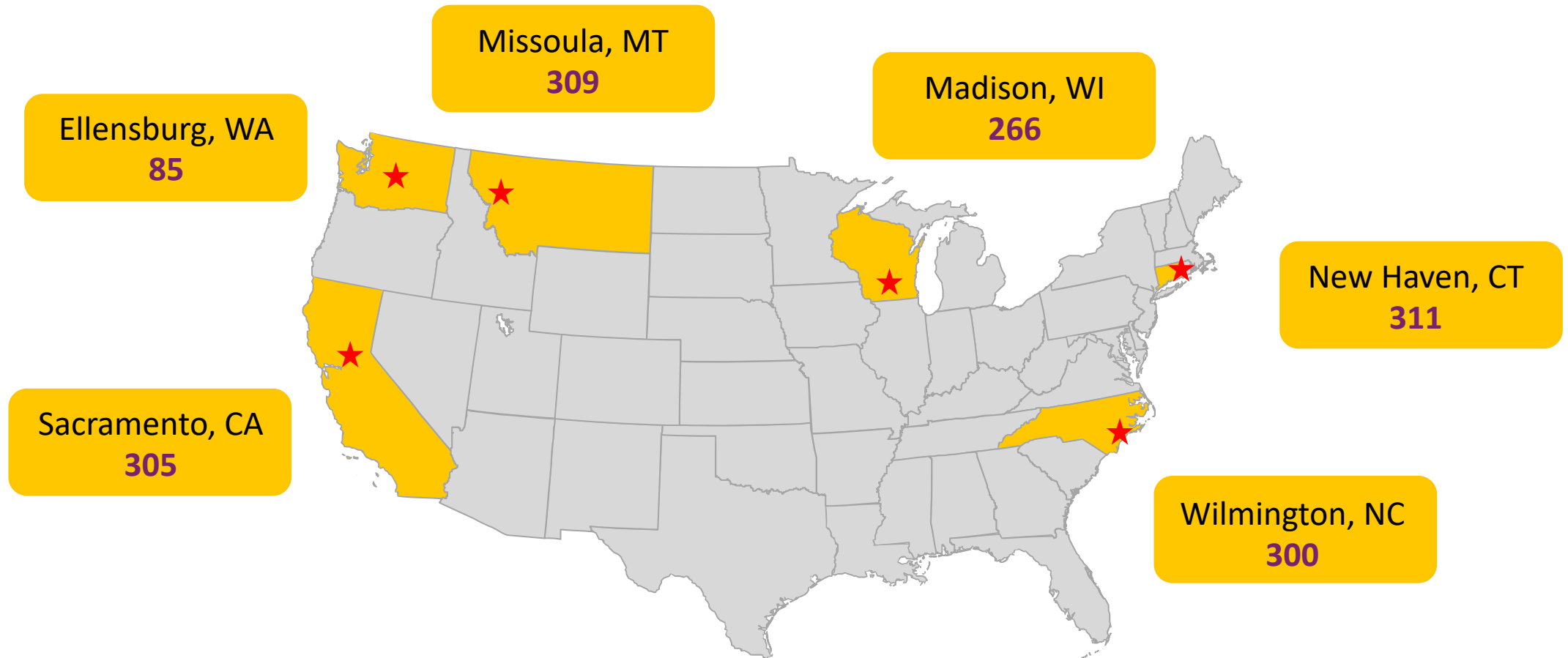
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# Project NEXUS Key Findings

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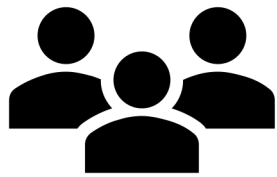


# Six geographically diverse SSPs recruited >1500 people who use drugs between 2021-2022

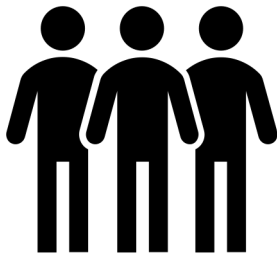


Total Completed Surveys: **1,576**

# Disproportionately affected racial/ethnic groups were well-represented in our sample



- 62%** Men
- 37%** Women
- 1%** Trans men, trans women, non-binary, genderqueer



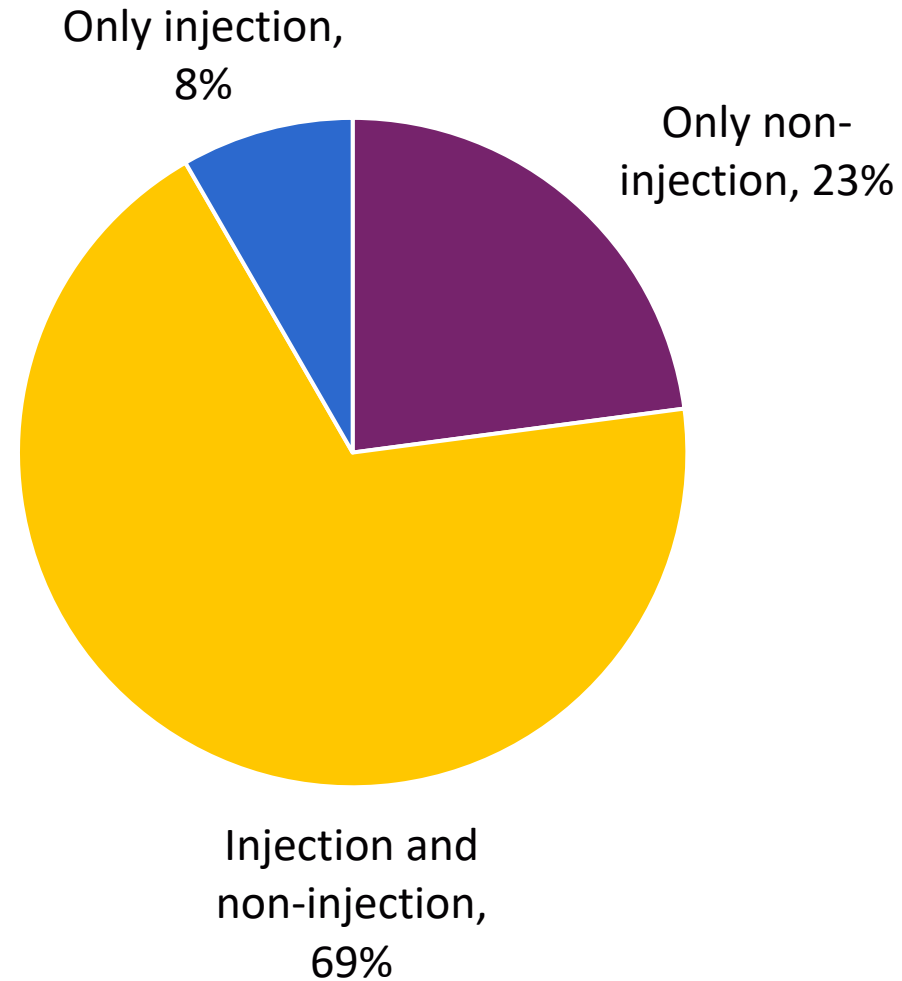
- 15%** American Indian or Alaska Native
- 1%** Asian
- 25%** Black or African American
- 14%** Hispanic/Latino
- 2%** Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- 65%** White

48% had any BIPOC identity



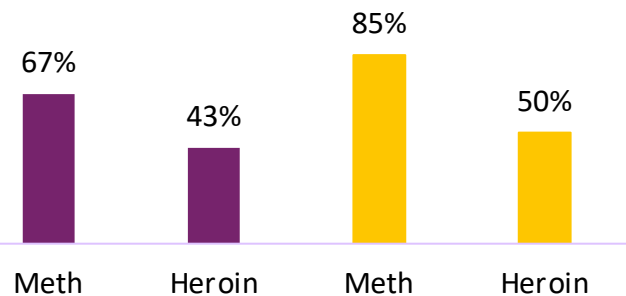
**68%** Experienced homelessness in the past 6 months

# The majority of participants reported both injection and non-injection drug use within the past 6 months

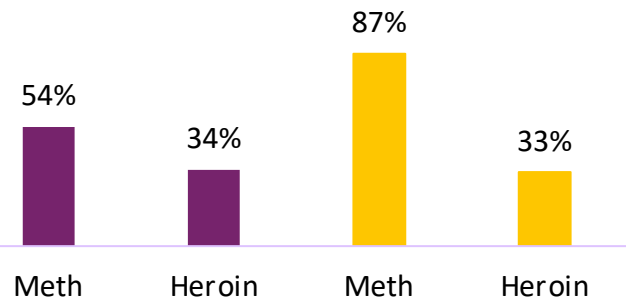


# Methamphetamine use was higher among Western sites

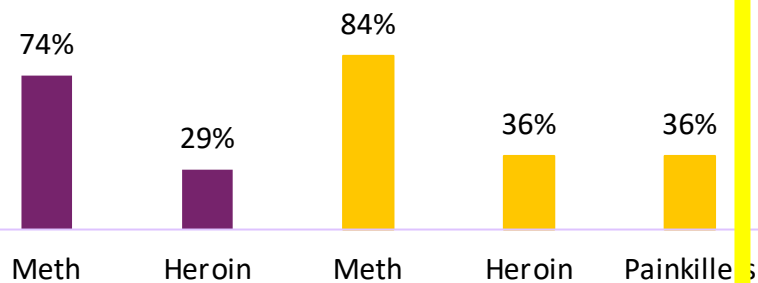
### Ellensburg, WA



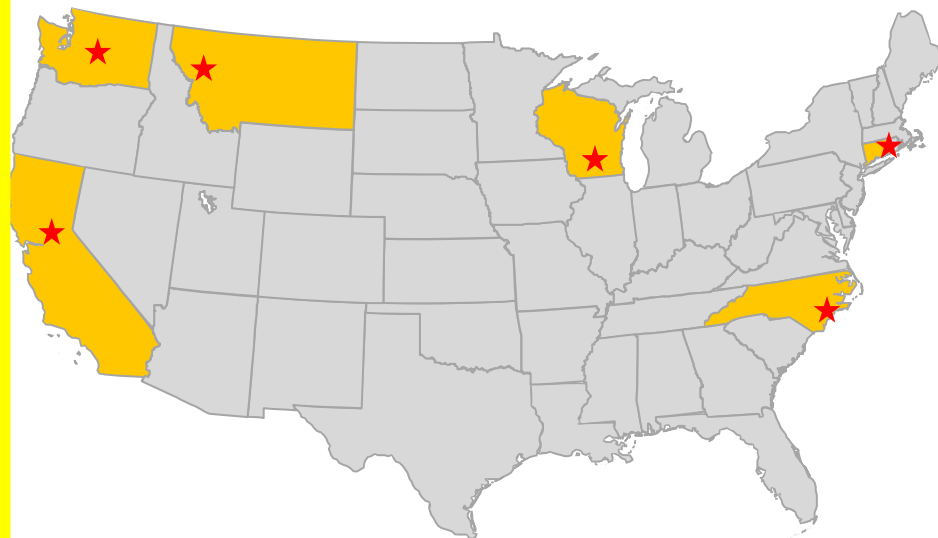
### Sacramento, CA



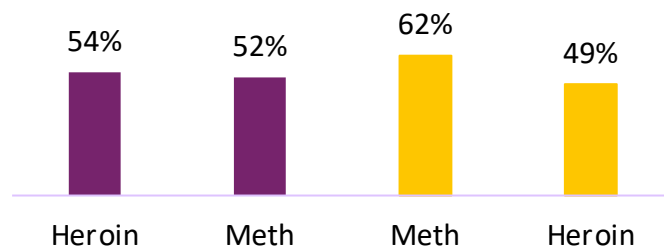
### Missoula, MT



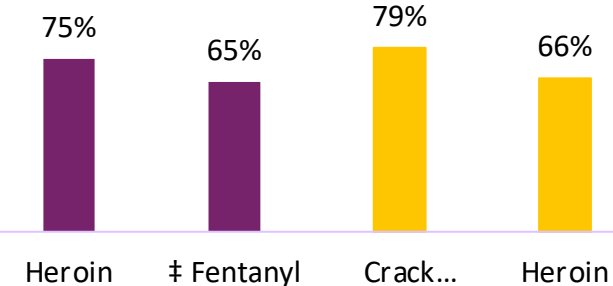
■ Most used injected drugs  
■ Most used non-injected drugs  
 ‡ Used by itself or with other drugs



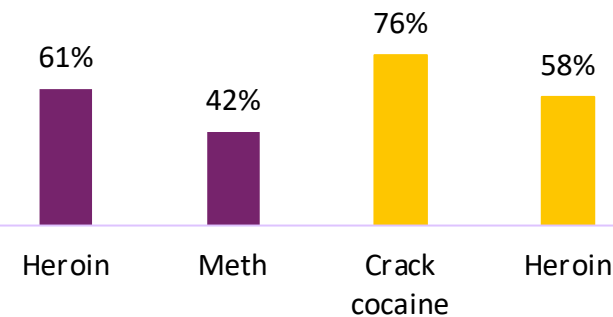
### Overall



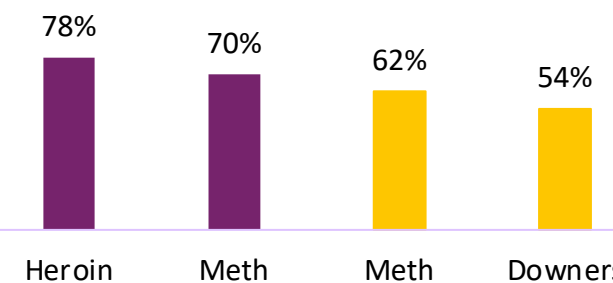
### New Haven, CT



### Madison, WI



### Wilmington, NC



# HIV/HCV Testing and Prevalence Data



## HIV Testing History

**80%** had ever tested  
**28%** had tested in the past year



## HIV Prevalence

**3.3%** HIV+ overall  
**2.5% – 4.5%** range

vs.

**6%** among PWID in 23  
cities (NHBS) in 2018



## HCV Prevalence

**21%** chronic HCV  
**1%** acute HCV  
**9% – 38%** chronic or acute HCV

# Opioid overdose was more common than stimulant overdoses

In the past 6 months, among people who used each drug...



**31%** Opioid overdose

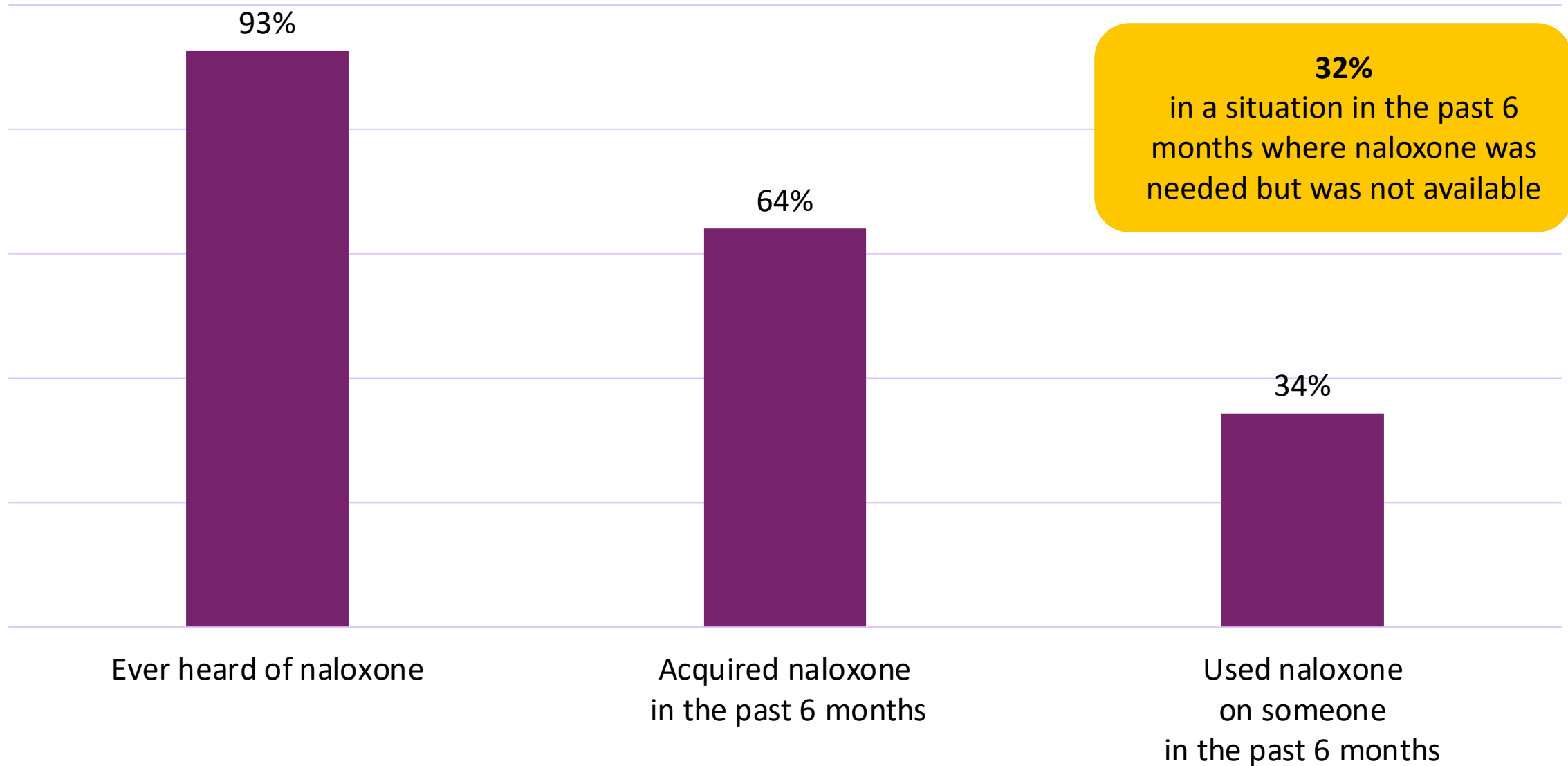


**9%** Bad reaction to methamphetamine



**8%** Bad reaction to cocaine

# Most people who used drugs had acquired naloxone but there is still a substantial unmet need



# Project NEXUS Partner Site Experiences

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# Never Share Syringe Exchange

Ellensburg, WA



# Project NEXUS at *NEVER SHARE SYRINGE SERVICE PROGRAM*



*Kittitas County Public Health Department  
at United Methodist Church  
Ellensburg, WA*



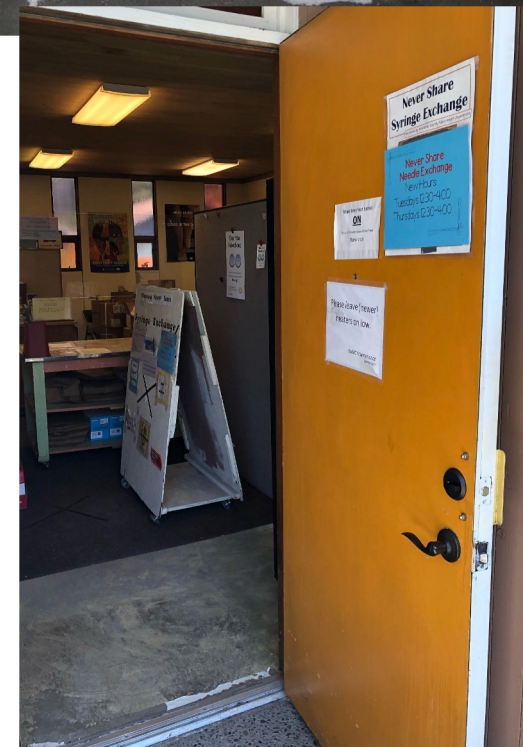
# How we got here...

- November 2020: 1st site randomly selected from NASEN directory to be a Project NEXUS enrollment site.
- December 2020: first Zoom meet with UW team & Kittitas County Public Health Department (KCPHD) Directors to explain Project NEXUS + explore feasibility with current Church space and facility.
- January 2021: protocol training and project ramp up.
- June 15: **'Go Live'** with Project NEXUS



# Major Lesson Learned: Be & Stay Flexible

- Impact of COVID-19 surges and infections on NEXUS
  - Created staff absences & enrollment pauses.
    - Added an outdoor tent with daily set up/tear down with space heater.
- Prepare for extreme temperatures:
  - Bottled water, heater and hand warmers to aid testing
  - Air conditioners inside for triple digit summer heat
- Scheduling NEXUS appointments did not work.
- Participants were very open to SSP based HIV/HCV testing.
- Lower than anticipated flow of SSP clients & NEXUS referrals
  - “Hired” Outreach workers to assist in recruiting peers to participate in NEXUS.



# Project NEXUS Impact on NEVER SHARE



- **Increased hours**
  - Previous: One day, 2.5 hours, per week (Thursdays, 12:30 - 3pm)
  - Current: Two days, 14 hours, per week (Tuesdays & Thursdays, 9am - 5:00pm)
- **25% increase in traffic of unique individuals**
  - Compared to previous 3 years, due to 2021 implementation of NEXUS.
  - 2022 double unique individuals at Never Share compared to 2018, 2019 & 2020
- **Increased KCPHD Harm Reduction Specialist hours from 20 to 32 hrs/week**
- **Offered free HIV & Hepatitis C testing**
  - Developed referral plan for participants with reaction test results
  - Set groundwork for continued HIV/HCV testing post Project

# Project NEXUS Impact on NEVER SHARE



- **Overlapping with hours** of neighboring service programs:
  - Clothing Bank, NA, & Shelter - all (including ours) housed on the Methodist Church campus
- **Increased distribution of Naloxone kits**, overdose prevention education, & harm reduction supplies
- Increased opportunities for **referrals to treatment** resources when appropriate
- **New & expanded community partners** through increased staffing & regular weekly presence
- **Increased collaboration with hosting Church facility**, Ellensburg United Methodist Church (EUMC)

# Some Local Findings...

- **Increased Risk of Overdose**
  - Persons who inject drugs reported they often use alone.
  - Persons surveyed reported using mixtures of Fentanyl mixed with other drugs.
- **Adverse Childhood Events & Trauma**
  - Reported by over half (*as high as 62% for some indicators*) of our sample.
  - Supports the need for trauma informed care in our community when working with persons who use drugs.
- **Improving Never Share Syringe Exchange Services**
  - Participants wanted more days/hours open to increase availability of services.
  - This was made possible with NEXUS funding and the support of KCPHD, but consideration for further expansion of day/hours open and outreach.

# North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition

Wilmington, NC

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PROJECT

# NEXUS

WWW.NCHRC.ORG

*One doesn't have to operate with great malice to do great harm.*

*The absence of empathy and understanding are sufficient."*

CHARLES M. BLOW

This project was established to measure the impact of syringe service programs (SSPs) among people who use drugs (PWUD), the University of Washington and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conducted a multisite survey for SSP participants and their peers. The aim of this project was to strengthen SSP capacity to collect data for the purpose of improving local services to PWUD and understanding the health, behaviors, and challenges facing PWUD living in underrepresented areas.

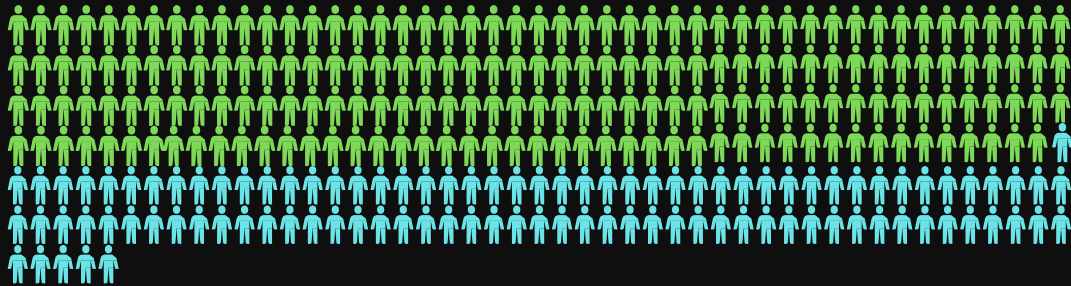
# ROLL WITH THE PUNCHES

## HOW OUR PARTICIPANTS WERE IMPACTED

WE ASKED 303 PARTICIPANTS HOW MONEY PROBLEMS ARE AFFECTING THEIR MEALS AND HOUSING

ALMOST 25% PARTICIPANTS SAID THEY'D BEEN EVICTED IN THE LAST 6 MONTHS.

**62%** OF PARTICIPANTS TOLD US THAT THEY'D SKIPPED MEALS RECENTLY BECAUSE OF MONEY PROBLEMS.



ABOUT 2 OUT OF EVERY 3 PARTICIPANTS SAID THEY'D RECENTLY MOVED IN WITH SOMEONE ELSE BECAUSE OF MONEY PROBLEMS.



4 out of 10 people said they'd recently gone a whole day without eating.



# FINDINGS

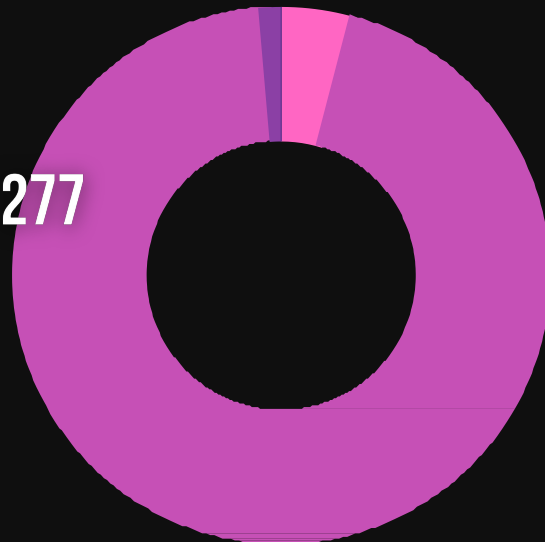
RAPID HIV Test Completed - 293

Reactive 4.1%

**REACTIVE 12**

**NON-REACTIVE- 277**

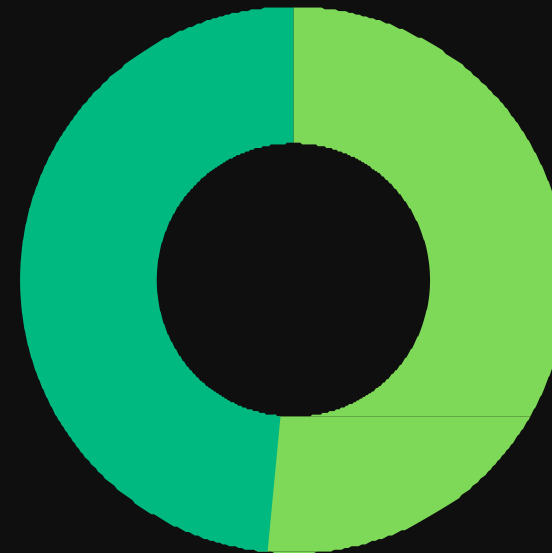
**INVALID-4**



Non Reactive  
94.5%

Rapid HCV Antibody Test Completed - 297

Negative  
48.5%



Positive  
51.5%

**POSITIVE- 152**  
**NEGATIVE- 145**

VONI SIMPSON – LINKAGE TO CARE MANAGER – VONI@NCHRC

POWERPOINT CREATED BY ALICIA BRUNELLI - TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE COORDINATOR - ALICIA@NCHRC.ORG

# Yale Community Health Care Van/SSP

New Haven, CT

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# Project NEXUS

## The Community Health Care Van

*New Haven, CT*

A partnership of the Community Health Care Van Syringe Service Program (CHCV SSP), Yale School of Medicine (YSM), the University of Washington (UW), and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Angel Ojeda

Yale SCHOOL OF MEDICINE



# Implementation

(storefront location, New Haven CT)

## Overall challenges:

- Crowd control
- Personnel coverage during omicron surge

## Survey & testing challenges:

- People sleeping during interviews
- Privacy during interviews, given high traffic office
- Needed to provide drinks and snacks

## Post survey challenges:

- Participants impatient to leave
- Referral and payment issues

## Benefits:

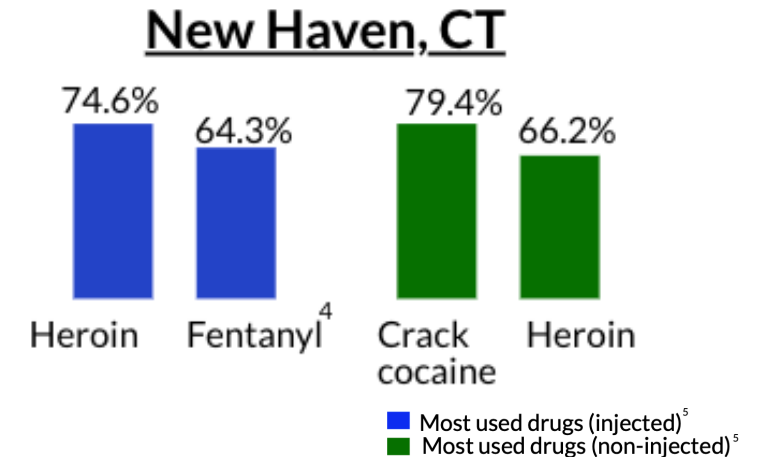
- Referrals to other studies increased
- Referrals to CHCV services increased
- Increased knowledge of SSP services



# A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

## Heroin and Fentanyl were the two most injected drugs by NH NEXUS participants in the past 6 months.

- 74.6% of participants reported injecting Heroin by itself.
- 64.3% of participants reported injecting Fentanyl by itself or in combination.
- The high rate of Fentanyl use may contribute to high overdose rates.
  - On average, each individual NEXUS participant witnessed 3 overdoses in the last 6 months.
  - 97.1% of participants had heard of Naloxone.
  - 77% of participants who had received Naloxone and saw someone overdose in the past 6 months used it to help someone who was overdosing.



### During the past 6 months

#### (*Omicron surge*):

- 45.8% of NEXUS participants (n=48) said Fentanyl was easier to get.
- 39.6% (n=48) said that their ability to get Fentanyl was about the same.

# NEXT STEPS

Using NEXUS data to propel other projects...

Support for Harm Reduction Dispensing Units  
(Vending Machines)

- 36.4% of New Haven NEXUS participants had used a needle someone else had injected with in the past 6 months.
- Among those who shared their needle AFTER injecting with it (n=74), they shared with a mean number of 2.18 people.

Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) for drug checking

- Allowing us to determine chemical make up of product that participants voluntarily share for testing purposes.
- *Does drug testing mirror what participants reported using during NEXUS?*



# VIVENT HEALTH

Madison, WI

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# Project NEXUS Implementation

**Location:** Vivent Health – Madison

- **Our Mission:** To be a relentless champion for people affected by HIV and do all we can to help them thrive, because we believe every person has value and should be treated with respect.

**Timeframe:** December 2021-July 2022

Team: 3 Prevention Specialists, 1  
Prevention Supervisor, 1 Research  
Supervisor



# WISCONSIN PREVENTION PROGRAMS

- LifePoint Syringe Service Program
- Opioid overdose training
- Counseling, testing and referral (CTR)
  - HIV, HCV, Syphilis
- Condom distribution
- Outreach
- PrEP
- Research

# VIVENT HEALTH HIV MEDICAL HOME



The Vivent Health HIV Medical Home features our full-service pharmacies, and integrates medical, dental and mental health care with case management and social services provided by a team of professionals dedicated to patient care. We are pleased to provide all this care to you directly or in collaboration with our key partners.

## MEDICAL

High-quality, integrated primary care and HIV treatment customized to meet individual needs of people living with HIV to ensure the best clinical outcomes.

## LEGAL

Dedicated representation to make sure people living with HIV are treated fairly and their rights are protected, including appeals of the denial of public and private benefits, cases of discrimination and advance directives.

## BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Inclusive individual and group therapy, psychiatry, drug treatment and neuropsychological testing to improve quality of life and overall wellness.

## CASE MANAGEMENT

Assist people living with HIV with access to quality health care, affordable medications, enrollment in benefit programs, housing, food, legal and other community resources.

## PHARMACY

Full-service pharmacy where all prescriptions are filled, regardless of ability to pay, in addition to in-depth education, adherence counseling, home delivery and financial assistance.

## HOUSING

Provide residential housing, rent and utility assistance to people living with HIV so they can have safe, stable and affordable options.

## DENTAL

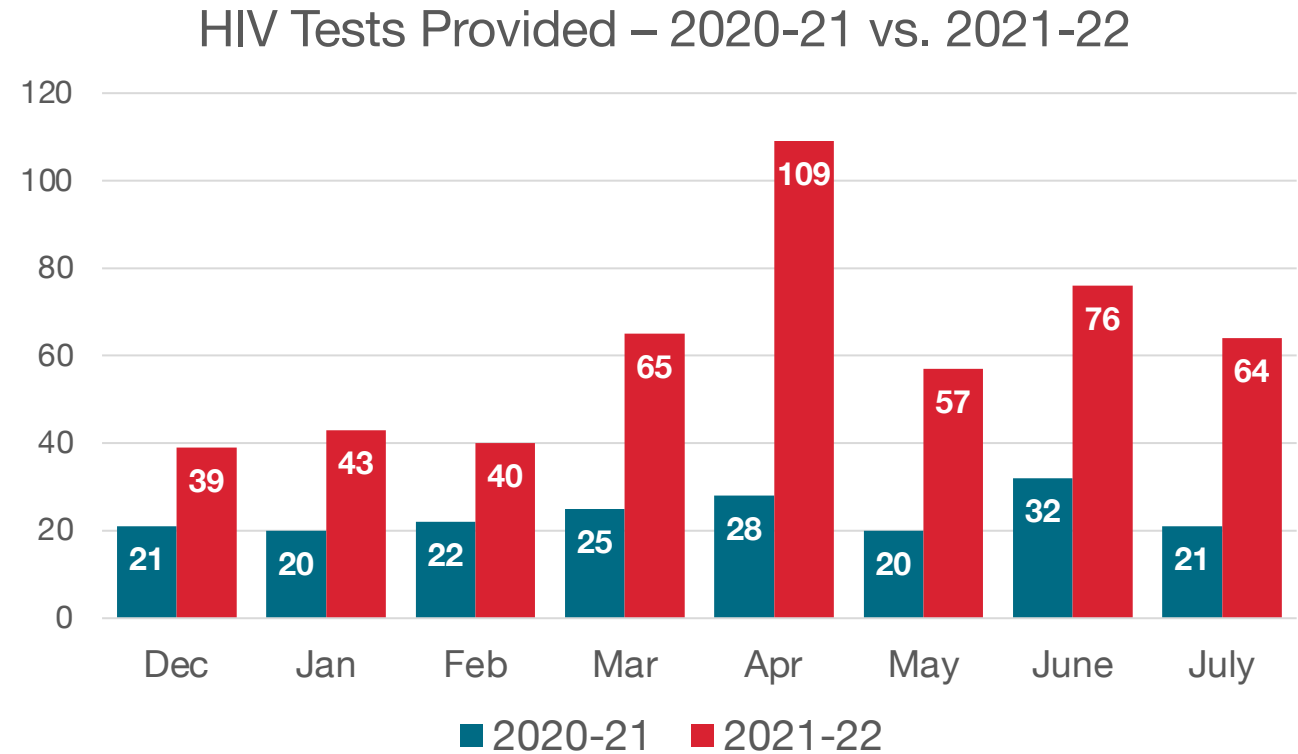
Full range of dentistry services to restore the health, smiles and confidence of people living with HIV.

## FOOD

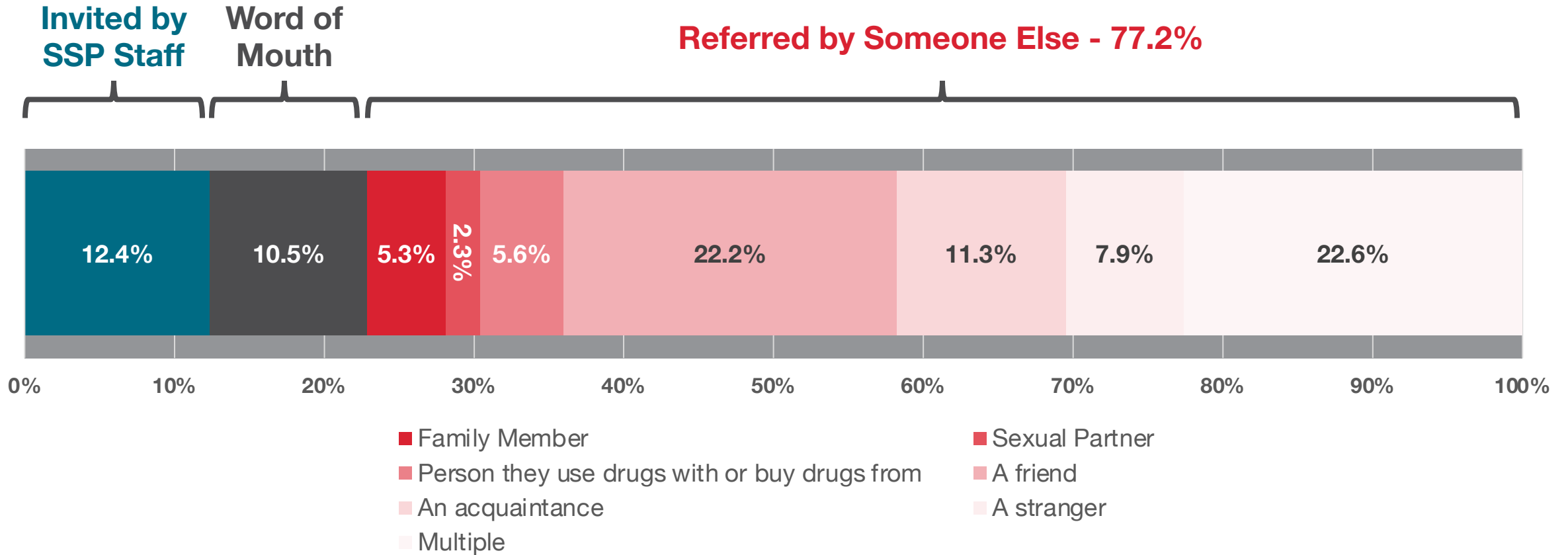
Access to healthy and delicious food to ensure good nutrition for people living with HIV so they can thrive.

# Implementation Challenges & Lessons Learned

- Volume of participants
- Communication between staff and other departments



# Point of Interest: Participant Recruitment



# Wins from Project NEXUS

- Project NEXUS was able to recruit a much more diverse group of community members when compared to the individuals we served in the same period in 2020-21.

Time Period	American Indian/Alaskan Native	Asian	Black/African American	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	White	N/A or More than one Race
<b>Lifepoint Syringe Services</b> Dec 2020 to July 2021	1%	0.4%	4%	1%	91%	2.6%
<b>NEXUS Enrollment</b> Dec 2021 to July 2022	3%	0.7%	40%	0%	43%	13.3%

# Wins from Project NEXUS

During Project NEXUS,  
the Madison office had

**69%**

more **new clients**  
**access our SSP**  
compared to the same  
period in 2020-21  
(66 vs. 39)

During Project NEXUS,  
the Madison office had a

**69%**

increase in **referrals to**  
**our PrEP program**  
compared to the same  
period in 2020-21  
(100 vs. 59)

During Project NEXUS,  
the Madison office had a

**160%**

increase in the number  
of clients **tested for HIV**  
compared to the same  
period in 2020-21  
(493 vs. 189)

# Open Aid Alliance

Missoula, MT

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# Implementation

Moved into a new office July of 2021 - planned our space specifically for NEXUS - challenge - “open concept” warehouse

Hired an ER nurse as Interview Monitor  
- addition of regular Wound Care to our SSP services (!!!)

Success - boosted our testing numbers HUGELY  
- more tests during NEXUS than 2019, 2020, and 2021 combined

Out of 168 HIV tests in 2019 we had zero reactives - two reactive tests during NEXUS (both previously unknown to participant)



# Demographics

Highest reported injection meth use (74%) and lowest injection rate of heroin (29%) of among Project NEXUS sites.

**57%** Men  
**42%** Women  
**1%** Trans men, trans women, non-binary, genderqueer

**35%** American Indian or Alaska Native  
**1%** Asian  
**3%** Black or African American  
**7%** Hispanic/Latino  
**3%** Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander  
**68%** White

41% had any BIPOC identity

**76%** Experienced homelessness in the past 6 months

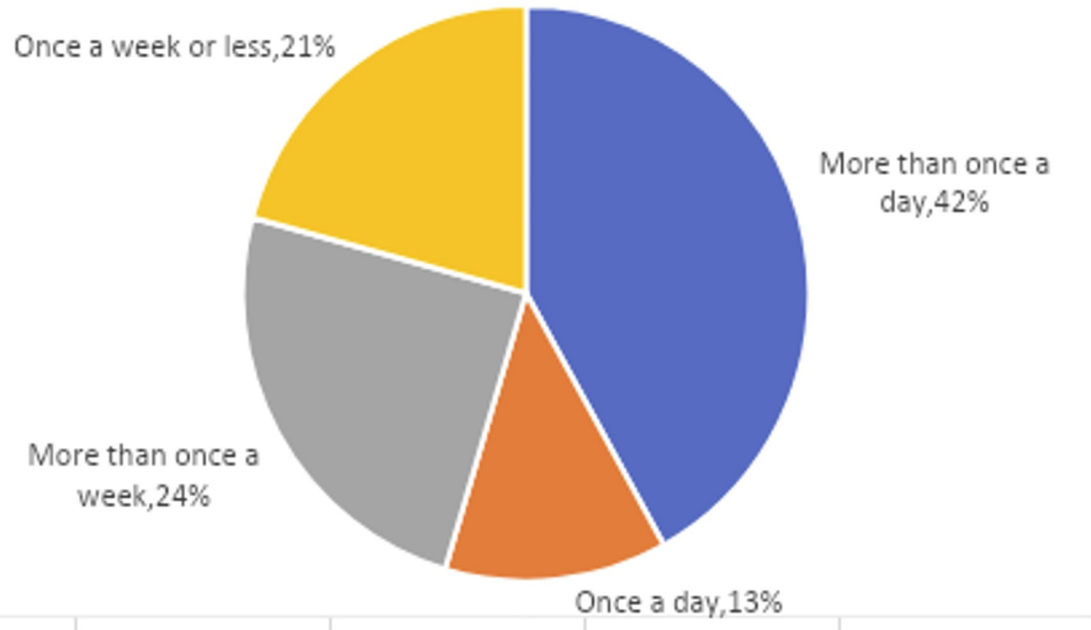


# Meth User Engagement

Which drug did you inject that very first time?

Methamphetamine, by itself 158 (59.4%) N=266

Frequency of non-injection meth use during the past 6 months



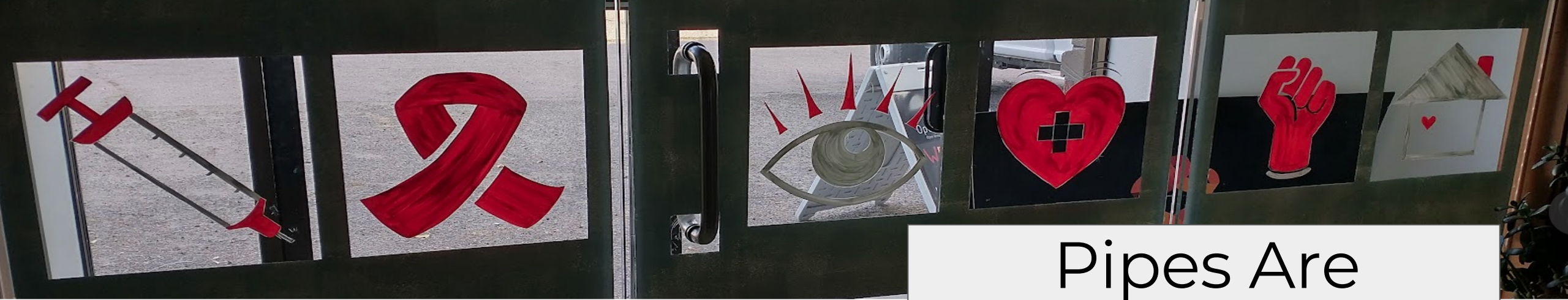
In the past 6 months, how often did you inject heroin, by itself?

More than once a day 28 (31.1%)

In the past 6 months, how often did you inject methamphetamine, by itself?

More than once a day 117 (50.4%)

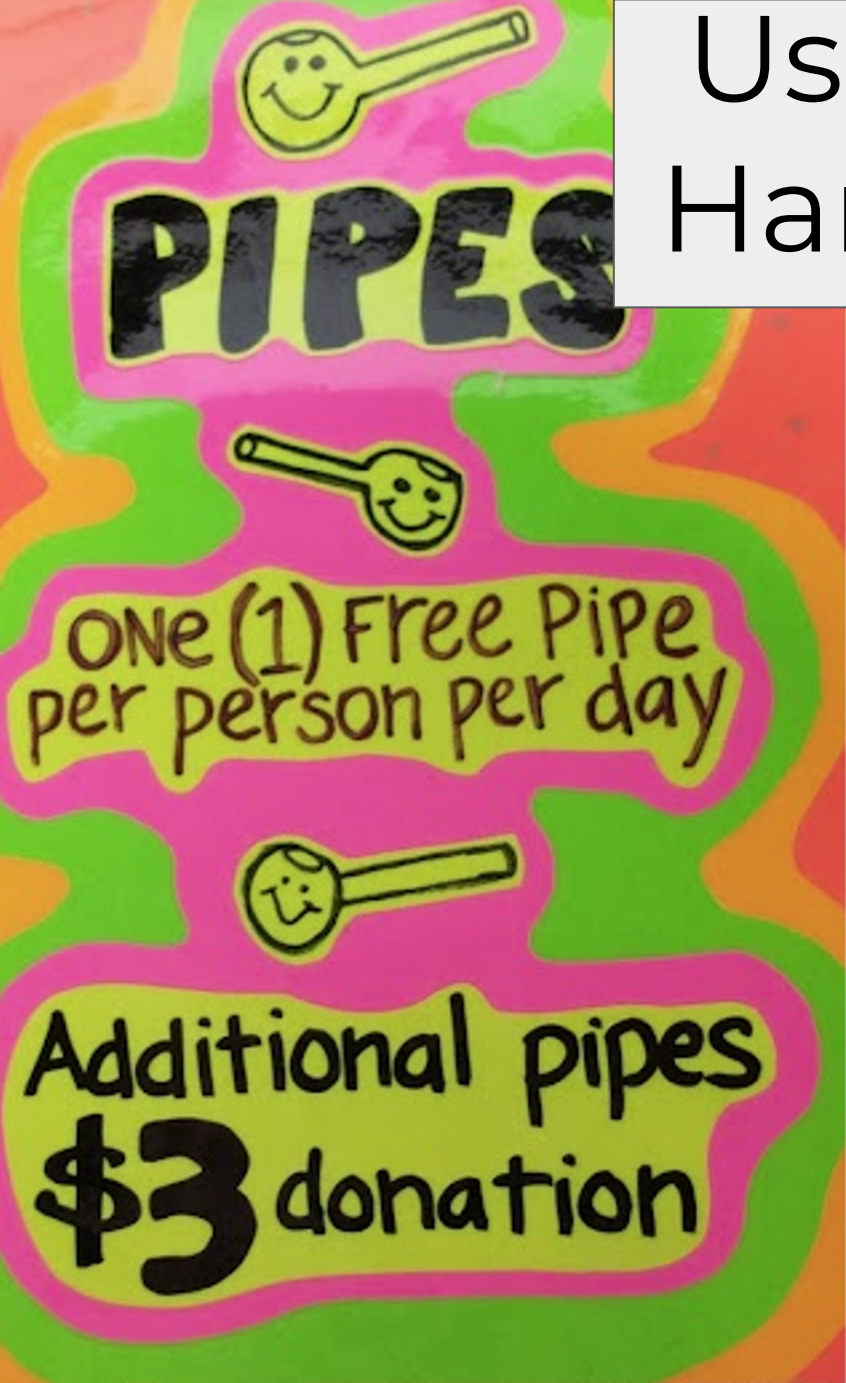




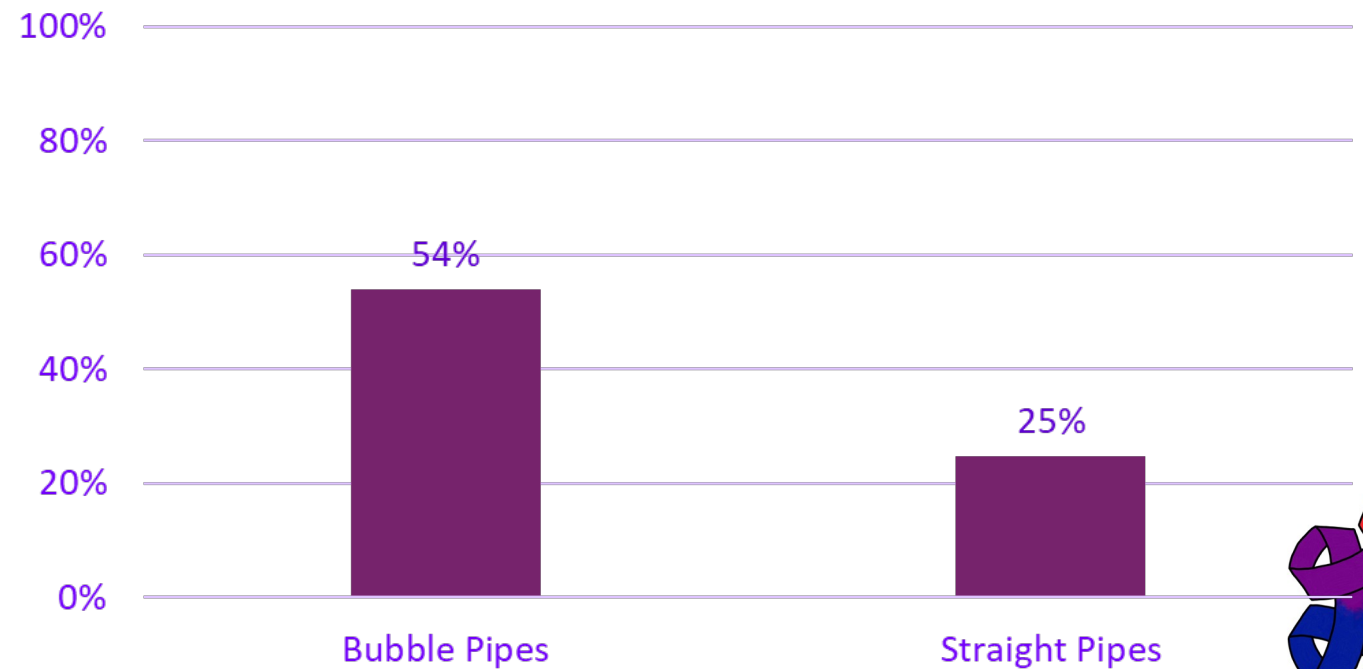
# Pipes Are Harm Reduction



# User Supported Harm Reduction



Items participants would be willing to receive more in exchange for a small donation



# Safer Alternatives through Networking and Education (SANE)

Sacramento, CA

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SAFER ALTERNATIVE THRU NETWORKING & EDUCATION

SANE

Project NEXUS







## Things we learned while working on project NEXUS

- Participants want to schedule appointments
- Five new cases of HIV
- Referrals work

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS LEGEND?



SANE founded in 1993

RACHEL ANDERSON  
FOUNDER OF SANE

# Cross NEXUS Enrollment Site Panel Discussion

# Project NEXUS Partners - Thank You!

## University of Washington

- Jeremy Beckford
- Bruce Bello
- Maria Corcorran
- Nicky Cotta
- Noah Frank
- Sara Glick
- Alexa Juarez
- Susan Kingston
- Tianna Kong
- Punita Kumar
- Anthony Morgan
- Brittany Price
- UW Interviewers
  - Keonna Moffett
  - David Perlmutter
  - Kayla Lovett
  - Joanne Quiray
  - Rachel Patrick
  - Cassidy Smalley
  - Paige Prather
  - Chase Myers
  - Breyah Atkinson
  - Lauren Berry-Kagan
  - Tarsila Machado
  - Trey Evans
  - Mira Reichman
  - Kayla DeHoniesto
  - Cassie Ko
  - Allison Nguyen
  - Lia Villaruz
  - Han Bender

## CDC

- Alice Asher
- Amy Baugher
- Dita Broz
- Janet Burnett
- Pollyanna Chavez
- Brian Emerson
- Maleeha Fareed
- Nathan Furukawa
- Senad Handanagic
- Shilpa Patel
- Marc Pitasi
- Talia Pindyck

## NASEN, NYU, and Other Partners

- Don Des Jarlais
- Paul LaKosky
- Stephanie Prohaska
- Molecular Testing Labs (MTL)

## NSEE

- Lauren Wickerath
- Chelsey Loeffers
- Nea Alfaro
- Pam Tuggle Miles
- Vanessa Velazquez
- Victor Minjire
- Katie Odiaga

## NCHRC

- Voni Simpson
- Jesse Bennett
- Talya Williams
- Zeph Long
- Reid Getty
- Mike Page
- Charita Perry
- Becca Lilly
- Shannon Bullock

## Yale

- Natalie Kil
- Kubilay Kaymaz
- Angel Ojeda
- Liz Znamierowski
- Lisandra Alvarez
- Migdalia Williams
- Regina Wright
- Rolo Lopez, SR
- Role Lopez ,JR

## Vivent Health

- Kristen Grimes
- Mikaela Becker
- York Chow
- Val Walowit
- Jess Morrow
- Chris Moore
- Peter Ngo
- Mary Alt

## OAA

- Christa Weathers
- Rebecca Ramos
- Hollis Hubbard
- David Carpenter
- Aisha Golie
- Lindsay Benes
- Phil Weiser
- Monica Denny

## SANE

- Rachel Anderson
- Shilo Jama
- Sonja Albin
- Kristen van Zyll de Jong
- Eli Nash

Thank you!

Thoughts/Questions