

Shared needles

Addicts' death rate increases

By **MATTHEW DIETRICH**
The Hudson Dispatch

THE BIG SECRET HUDSON'S AIDS CRISIS

■FOURTH OF FIVE PARTS.



A heroin addict at Columbia Park in Jersey City displays his pockmarked arms.

DON MCCOY THE HUDSON DISPATCH

AIDS babies bring parents pain.
Story Page 12.

Each morning, Jack Cox arrives at a Jersey City methadone clinic he runs and checks the obituary pages of local newspapers, looking for the names of his clients. In 1984, he noted 11 AIDS deaths. This year, the number already is approaching 100.

He watches each morning as addicts line up to wait outside the connected trailers that house the clinic for a Dixie Cup of pale orange methadone — the drink that weans them away from heroin.

A handful of outreach workers at Spectrum Health Care Inc., a heroin rehabilitation clinic, try to teach abusers about the danger of sharing needles, a practice that has spread acquired immune deficiency syndrome throughout Jersey City's

drug addict population and given the county the third highest AIDS rate in the country. Half of the addicts afflicted with AIDS are already dead, according to the state Department of Health.

But the workers are only a few soldiers in a battle with thousands of enemies. Spectrum has become a kind of M*A*S*H unit, besieged by a medical catastrophe, overwhelmed by increasing numbers of casualties. The city and the county, meanwhile, have done little — some say nothing — to help fight this war.

Please see **ADDICTS** Page 12

AIDS workers a tiny army in their battle

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

AT AGE 40, Joe Bosworth is in his 25th year as a heroin and cocaine addict. He spends his days in search of, and under the influence of, the drugs that have been his most faithful companions for the better part of his life.

The pock marks and long, swollen black lines that decorate his left arm as he searches for scrap metal on Communipaw Avenue paint a vivid roadmap of the thousands of trips he has taken with hypodermic needles to escape reality.

In 1981, his friends started getting sick. They lost weight, lost strength and stopped coming to the abandoned buildings and secluded alleys where addiction had become a symbol of fellowship. Eventually his friends started dying, signaling the dawn of a new aspect of reality to be escaped: the specter of AIDS.

In June, his brother, also a heroin addict, died of the deadly virus after contracting it by sharing an infected needle. Still, the attraction of the drugs is stronger than the fear of AIDS.

"It's a chance you got to take," he says as he pushes a shopping cart filled with aluminum cans and scraps of metal he has collected since his day began at 7 a.m. He arches the tattered brows above his yellowed, blood-shot eyes and says casually, "You gotta leave sometime, some kind of way."

If health statistics are correct, Bosworth stands a high chance of leaving the way his brother did — poor, starving and wasted by a disease that was unknown when he first pushed a needle into his spindly arm.

ADDING TO the physical pain suffered by addicts dying of AIDS and their families is the loneliness of being abandoned by local government.

By the end of 1987, the disease had claimed 195 addicts in Hudson County. Nine months

later, the death toll soared to 511. Fifty-one drug abusers died from AIDS between July and September, and the numbers continue to show a deadly upward trend.

As the addicts continue to pass needles — and the AIDS virus — among themselves in burned-out buildings and debris-ridden lots throughout this city, local politicians pass the buck on who is responsible for caring for them once they have the disease.

So far, the city has doled out \$50,000 to fund an AIDS task force that distributes pamphlets, video tapes and educational materials to keep AIDS away from those who do not have it, but not a cent for housing or care of those already dying.

Other action to battle the problem has been paralyzed: Legislation to distribute condoms to residents and needles to drug addicts has died or been watered down beyond recognition this year due to pressure from religious groups.

MEANWHILE, COUNCILMEN such as Jaime Vasquez and William O'Dea adamantly maintain the city should not be held responsible for developing and implementing programs to care for AIDS victims. Without substantial planning and financial assistance from state and federal agencies, they say, the city cannot design a system for care of AIDS patients who cannot care for themselves. They say no one has come to them with that assistance.

There is no county agency devoted to AIDS and no county money has been set aside for education on its prevention or health care for its sufferers. County Executive Robert C. Janiszewski promised an AIDS information agency this year, but has not yet delivered.

The lack of action, AIDS experts say, has left a gaping hole that swallows up victims of the disease who are too sick to care for themselves but not sick



Pamela Lowe, a counselor for people who abuse drugs and alcohol, talks about programs at Spectrum Health Care Inc. in Jersey City which encourage addicts to quit drugs and avoid AIDS.

enough for hospitalization. With minuscule incomes and, in many cases, lacking transportation and adequate housing, addicts who contract the disease often accelerate its onset because they cannot meet even their most basic physical needs.

The malnutrition and unsanitary living conditions that have become the standard of living for many addicts have proven deadly in the era of AIDS, helping the virus move even faster in ravaging its victims' immune systems, according to health authorities.

FOR MANY addicts, the deadly habit is kept a dark secret between themselves and their needle-sharing partners. Because they keep their drug lives hidden, the addicts freely expose their sexual partners to the virus. Experts say this fatal chain reaction has brought AIDS

out of the shooting galleries and into family homes in Hudson County.

Ironically, hypodermic needles are harder to buy on the street than heroin, giving addicts double incentive to share and reuse old, infected works. A dealer with access to new needles can sell them for \$3 to \$5.

The lack of needles is widely cited as a catalyst for the spread of AIDS here, and has prompted calls for the distribution of free syringes. But state and city officials have yet to move on such a measure, saying they want to chart the progress of a needle distribution plan in New York City.

Health authorities predict that for every known AIDS case, there are 100 more that remain hidden. By 1990, there may be 6,000 cases countywide, and health care facilities could be ravaged by the onslaught.

caine freak" for the past eight years. "When it comes down to it, you gotta get high."

It is easy to talk about hygiene in a classroom or an air-conditioned clinic, but it is different when a lifelong friend offers a loaded needle.

"I care about my life, but when you're desperate, it just happens," he says.

The threat of AIDS may not be enough to force addicts to stop sharing unclean needles every time they shoot up, but an addict showing sudden thinness, baldness or other outward signs of the disease quickly becomes a virtual leper to his peers, ostracized from what was a close-knit group.

Bubba, a 43-year-old addict who lives in Curries Woods and says he has shot heroin since he was 15, says that in the projects absence is equated with AIDS.

"DON'T SHOW your face in that project for a week and, if you're a drug user, you got AIDS," he says through a toothless smile. When two of his friends died of AIDS, he was barred from the "gallery," a vacant apartment used as a drug den, for several weeks because of rumors that he had contracted the disease.

He says an AIDS test he took last year came up negative.

Bubba, who holds down a job at a paint factory despite his drug use, says he tries to clean his "works" before shooting and tries to avoid sharing needles. "I have been in a position where there ain't no time to f--- around with no alcohol. You just want to get that blast," he says, a baseball cap perched sideways on his head. "Then later on you think about it. You say, 'Man, I

Please see **AIDS** Page 28

Tomorrow's installment

■**PROSTITUTES.** They prowl the streets of Hudson, exposing their customers — and themselves — to a disease that kills. Some have changed their behavior, and some spread the disease mercifully.

AIDS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

just took a chance!"

He gulps from a bottle of Mogen David 20/20 and says the temptation to take chances comes from "a little man down here," as he points to the round pot belly that seems out of place when compared to his spindly arms and legs. "That little man down here says you don't feed me and I'll make your day bad."

Bubba feeds that little man seven or eight times a day, usually beginning before 7 a. m. Like Bosworth, the tale of his life is written in the track marks that run up and down his arms, making a detour on his right forearm around a rose tattooed there by a different set of needles.

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POLICE AND health officials have no way of gauging the number of intravenous drug users who gravitate to abandoned buildings and secluded empty lots to feed their habits daily.

Spectrum's Cox says that although many current intravenous drug users are not deterred by the threat of AIDS, the disease has reduced the number of needle-using clients in the clinic's methadone program. In 1982, 98 percent of the clinic's heroin patients injected the drug compared to 2 percent who snorted it. Now only 70 percent use needles. He says 60 to 70 percent of Spectrum clients who take AIDS tests are positive for the virus.

Most, however, would rather not know.

"Once they find out you have it, you really go off the social cliff," says Cox, 40, who grew up in Curries Woods. "These people have given up everything in their lives for drugs. They don't want to lose their peers."

Ronald Austin, a counselor at Spectrum, usually makes five trips a week to shooting galleries and sites frequented by addicts to try to bring them into the program and instruct them on how to clean their works. When he asks, the users say they are following his instructions and flushing their needles several times with bleach and clean water. Privately, he knows the reality of hygiene versus habit among drug addicts.

"They'll clean them, but when

it comes right down to it, you gotta go with what you've got," he says.

* * *

CARLOS RIVERA, 42, knows the realities of AIDS. A 12-year cocaine addict, he says he does not share needles; at least not very often, and only with people he knows. He tries to run bleach through his works when possible but, like Austin, he says he usually has to go with what he has.

Rivera and five others used to live in an abandoned tenement at Halladay and Johnston streets. Since the building was demolished in mid-August, he and his companions have lived on the street corner in a makeshift shanty of scrap metal and other rubbish.

And all he has now is a trickle of water flowing from a hydrant to rinse the precious needles. Nearby, one of his friends creates a steady din by hammering idly on a rusted slab of metal.

As thick black smoke rises from a garbage fire the group has kindled with a plastic bucket from a construction site nearby, Rivera is candid about his fear of AIDS.

"Everybody worries about it," he says, rubbing the grease-smudged bandage around his head, evidence of a mugging a few days earlier by two men who thought Rivera might be carrying his stash.

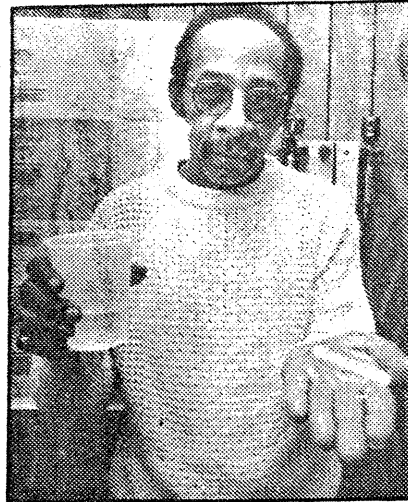
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HIS HANDS coated with grease and his T-shirt and jeans filthy from a day of rummaging for scrap metal to support his habit, Rivera says AIDS has made him more choosy about his needle-sharing partners.

"If I know the person real well, if his health is pretty decent, I might hook up with him," he says.

Rivera took an AIDS test in June and it came up negative. Weeks after the test, he was trading needles again, not knowing if the apparently healthy person handing him the works might be a carrier of the deadly and often hidden virus.

He has heard the warnings and he knows he breaks the rules. "I have no idea if I've gotten high with people who have the virus," he says.



Drug counselor Ronald Austin of Jersey City yesterday shows how to clean a needle — with a solution of water and bleach.

DON MCCOY THE HUDSON DISPATCH

AIDS AND ADDICTS

N.J. eyes needle plan

State officials to check versions of N.Y. program

By **MATTHEW DIETRICH**
Staff Writer

New York's plan to give clean needles to drug addicts to combat the spread of AIDS will be watched closely by state officials and could spark a similar program here, a state Department of Health spokesman said yesterday.

In Jersey City, where a city condom distribution plan pitted officials against each other almost immediately upon its introduc-

tion, the groundwork is already set for opposition to a needles proposal.

New Jersey has not considered handing out clean syringes to fight the spread of acquired immune deficiency syndrome in Jersey City, where sharing of contaminated needles is the leading cause of the spread of the fatal disease, but the New York program will provide an example this state may benefit from, said Marilyn Riley, a state health spokesman in Trenton.

"We're pleased New York is going to be

experimenting with it because we think we can learn from what they do," Riley said.

Riley added, however, that the department sees "serious problems" with the program and said state-sponsored needle distribution has not been considered in New Jersey "even on an experimental basis."

Locally, a member of the Jersey City AIDS task force — currently in the midst of a controversy over the condom distribution

Please see **NEEDLES** Page 6

AIDS BATTLE

Cucci OKs condom plan

NEEDLES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

program — said that while needle distribution in Jersey City had not been discussed at length by the task force, it would be in upcoming meetings.

"We don't want to jeopardize the major part of our program by polarizing council members by saying we might distribute needles," Robert Vogt, an assistant health officer and task force member, said yesterday.

At a press conference yesterday, Councilman Thomas Hart assailed a city program that

passes out free condoms as being morally and fiscally irresponsible. Referring to the New York needle distribution plan, Hart said he "could not be more opposed" to such programs.

As of Jan. 1, there were 3,257 cases of AIDS reported, resulting in 1,875 deaths in New Jersey. Fifty-seven percent of the reported cases involve heterosexual drug addicts who contracted the virus by sharing syringes with other addicts. Na-

tionally, only 17 percent of AIDS cases involve heterosexual drug users.

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Despite this figure, the director of a local drug rehabilitation center says providing clean needles to addicts is neither a solution nor a deterrent to the problem.

"The government starts out with the premise that they're going to be afraid of AIDS, but they're not," said Ned Cox, executive director of Spectrum Health Care, a Jersey City drug treatment facility. "These are

A counselor at the center, himself a former heroin addict, said he thought distributing needles might be an effective deterrent to the spread of AIDS among drug users, but doubted that such a program would be used by addicts, who would have to submit applications and identification to be included.

"Mostly the addict is thinking about where his next hit will come from," the counselor said, adding, "they'll take the syringe but not the responsibility."

Cox said Spectrum is not an AIDS treatment center per se. But the rapid spread of the fatal disease through city's extensive underworld of intravenous drug users has filled his program beyond capacity with users who fear or already have AIDS. He says additional state funding for rehabilitation of drug abusers, rather than for making their habit safer, is a more viable response to the crisis.

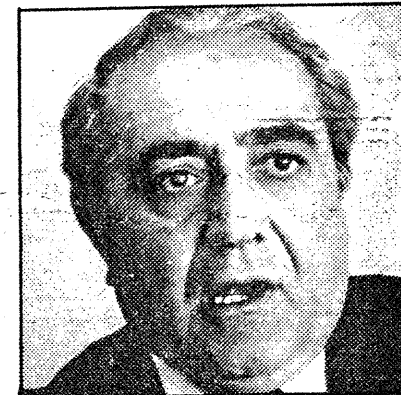
Mayor shifts stance on free distribution

By **MATT DIETRICH**
Staff Writer

JERSEY CITY—Mayor Anthony R. Cucci yesterday reversed himself and supported the city's plan to hand out free condoms to battle the spread of AIDS.

At a press conference at City Hall, Cucci said the distribution and further purchase of prophylactics by the city's AIDS task force could continue and called for state and Hudson County financial help in the purchase and distribution of additional condoms and educational literature.

After hearing on Wednesday of the plan by the task force to



ANTHONY R. CUCCI

Calls for purchase assistance

randomly hand out 7,000 condoms at city bars and hotels, Cucci said he would stop the pro-

Please see **CONDOMS** Page 6

gram and prohibit the 6,000 remaining condoms from being handed out.

On Thursday, he said he would allow the remaining condoms to be given out, but ordered a halt to further purchases by the 32-member task force. Cucci, a Catholic, said repeatedly on Thursday that he was not opposed to the giveaway on moral grounds, but said the state and county, not the city alone, should pay for such a program.

In endorsing the plan yesterday, Cucci said he would not wait for assistance from the county or the state, as he pledged to do last week, and said Jersey City should "take the lead" in fighting acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

"I'm asking the entire administration and the task force to work together to attract county and state officials to help standardize these procedures," Cucci said. "Other government agencies have to be involved, but we're not waiting for other governments."

Cucci's main objection with the plan was, and is, the random manner in which more than 1,000 of the prophylactics were distributed. The main targets for distribution were hotels and bars on the outskirts of the city, believed by task force members to be frequented by prostitutes.

While Cucci softened his approach to the condom issue, Councilman Thomas Hart used yesterday's press conference to stress his stance against the idea.

"You don't spend public money for immoral purposes," Hart said. "You are taking money from individuals and giving it to individuals to commit crimes against society."

The argument about further purchases of condoms is moot, however, according to Irene Jessie-Hunte, AIDS coordinator for the city Department of Human Resources.

After the conference yesterday, Jessie-Hunte said all but \$9,500 of the \$50,000 allotted for the task force by the city last year had been spent and that the remaining money was earmarked for specific future plans. She said the task force could not afford another \$480 for more condoms.