

COUNTY OF EL DORADO

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June 20, 2023

Alessandra Ross, MPH
Chief, Harm Reduction Unit
CA Department of Public Health, Office of AIDS
alessandra.ross@cdph.ca.gov

Dear Ms. Ross,

We appreciated you meeting with Sheriff Leikauf, Undersheriff Golmitz, Supervisor Parlin, CAO Tiffany Schmid and myself on May 18, 2023, to discuss our request for the California Department of Public Health to deny the reauthorization of Sierra Harm Reduction in El Dorado County. We have a shared goal of ensuring the safety and well-being of all residents in El Dorado County, and we were grateful for the opportunity to further clarify the steps El Dorado County is taking to promote public health and safety.

As background, it is helpful to note that on Tuesday, October 11, 2022, the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors received a presentation from the Executive Director of the Sierra Harm Reduction Coalition to satisfy their reporting requirement by the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) which authorizes their harm reduction services under Health and Safety Code (HSC) Section 121349. As you know, per HSC guidelines, syringe exchange services are authorized when it is determined that conditions exist for the rapid spread of HIV, viral hepatitis, or other blood-borne diseases. The purpose of the presentation at a noticed public meeting of the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors was to give agencies and the public "ample opportunity to comment" as well as to receive relevant statistics on local conditions. Following the presentation, board discussion and public comment, the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors as well as the community expressed unanimous opposition to Sierra Harm Reduction's services and activities on the West Slope of El Dorado County. Furthermore, after reviewing local data, the Board of Supervisors did not find that local conditions exist that show the rapid spread of HIV, viral hepatitis or other blood-borne diseases.

When we met with you on May 18, 2023, we gained additional clarity that from the California Department of Public Health's perspective, every county in California is at risk for the rapid spread of HIV. Furthermore, we understand that your Department is charged with mitigating the *potential* for spread, and that you operate in the arena of "*what if*", not necessarily "*what is*". We appreciated the opportunity to share with you the reality of what conditions we are dealing with in El Dorado County, as our direct charge as the Board of Supervisors and local law enforcement is to tackle the "*what is*". Locally, it is our unhoused population that primarily is the recipient of harm reduction services. It is critical for you to understand that El Dorado County has had an extremely difficult time combatting homelessness, and it has taken us

over ten years to finally come together to develop and implement a response to homelessness. In February 2023, we finally opened a low barrier, Navigation Center/Emergency Shelter with wrap around services and are working on a next phase for additional transition housing units. I cannot stress how difficult it has been to bring leadership, law enforcement and the community together on a shared path and plan, and still El Dorado County's response to homelessness is fragile. We must do everything we can to support a successful course forward.

What we are finding at the local level is that harm reduction services and needle exchange programs in El Dorado County are working to sabotage and undermine our efforts. Local statistics show an increase in crime and drug related offenses directly related to syringe exchange programs and services, and several cases from the El Dorado County Sheriff's Office are documented below:

1. *Methamphetamine and Heroin Sales Case* – During a search warrant the subject was selling pre-loaded syringes with heroin. The syringes were being obtained from Sierra Harm reduction for free and sold pre-filled in the City of Placerville mostly to transients.
2. *Heroin Possession* – Two subjects arrested for possession of heroin, pre-loaded syringes, and injection kits from Sierra Harm Reduction. Both advised they purchased the syringes pre-loaded.
3. *Methamphetamine and Heroin Case* – During a probation search subject was found to be in possession of a large quantity of products with Sierra Harm Reduction labelling. Pre-loaded heroin and injection kits were prepared for sale using those products. Additionally, methamphetamine oil burner style pipes from Sierra Harm Reduction were located during the search.
4. *Overdose Death Investigation* – Subject died from a fentanyl overdose. Syringes, and smoking paraphernalia from Sierra Harm Reduction was found at the scene.
5. *Overdose Death Investigation* – Sierra Harm Reduction Supplies found at the overdose scene. "Tooter" pipe and foil from a Sierra Harm Reduction package were in the decedent's vicinity. It appears the decedent used fentanyl with those supplies prior to or during the incident that resulted in the overdose death.
6. *DEA Arrest / Search Warrant* - In South Lake Tahoe, Tahoe Harm Reduction-a clean needle exchange and overdose prevention company, identifies as a non-profit that has received grant funds for its operation. During a search warrant the CEO & Director of Tahoe Harm Reduction, was arrested for possession for sale of a controlled substance and was indicted by the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). During the search warrant service, the house yielded large quantities of fentanyl, cocaine and an illegal firearm. As of February 2023, Tahoe Harm Reduction, Inc. has reportedly received grant funds for its operations and the status of this non-profit is unknown as the CEO is in Federal Pre-Trial Custody.

We understand that the contract with Sierra Harm Reduction Coalition which authorizes them to operate in El Dorado County is up for renewal September 1, 2023, and the intent and purpose of this letter is to formally request that this contract not be renewed. We also request that no other Harm Reduction Services be authorized to operate in El Dorado County.

The El Dorado County Board of Supervisors, local law enforcement and community partners are working diligently to address the health and safety of all members of our county. As mentioned, our new Navigation Center/Emergency Shelter with wrap-around services was authorized to address the growing problem with homeless encampments and the associated health and safety and fire danger challenges. It is a low barrier shelter, allowing us to meet and serve people where they are while giving them every opportunity to productively move out of homelessness. Furthermore, we have an extremely effective Homeless Outreach Team through the El Dorado County Sheriff's office where specially trained deputies are embedded with social and medical workers to build relationships with our unhoused population and help link them to resources and referrals. The Placerville Police Department also operates with this approach using specially trained officers.

We understand that harm reduction service operators are sometimes the only connection with the unhoused population in rural areas, and that they build relationships and are there to offer additional resources when people are receptive. In El Dorado County, we have already built an effective network of trusted relationships with the unhoused population. While we understand the intent of the syringe exchange program, our community is vehemently opposed to activities which enable illicit drug use, as evidenced by data from the El Dorado County Sheriff's office. This goes against everything we are trying to address at a local level.

We thank you in advance for supporting local decisions based on local data. The El Dorado County Board of Supervisors in concert with the El Dorado County Sheriff's Department respectfully, but emphatically, asks that you do not reauthorize syringe exchange programs in El Dorado County as we work diligently to ensure and promote public health and safety in our county.

Respectfully,

Wendy Thomas, Chair
El Dorado County Board of Supervisors

Jeff Leikauf, Sheriff
El Dorado County

