

# Needle exchange saving money and saving lives

As Hawaii's state and county governments struggle to make tight budgets balance, they keep coming up with cuts that save a little now but will cost taxpayers a lot in the long run.

It's the symptom that encourages expensive spending for treatment over less expensive spending for prevention.

So, it's a pleasure to recognize one program that's alive and well in Hawaii — even while it's lacking across most of the Mainland — that is saving us big bucks while saving lives.

An annual review of this program by a New York analyst reports that Hawaii's needle-exchange program has prevented HIV infection in nearly 30 percent of Hawaii's injection drug-users and saved the state "tens of millions" of dollars.

In 1990, Hawaii was the first state to start and fund a syringe-exchange program. In other areas, 30 to 40 percent of intravenous drug users

tend to be infected with HIV. Here it's under 1 percent.

Do the math: HIV treatment costs \$20,000 a year, while the state spends \$650,000 a year to sponsor the exchange program. That means it's cost-effective if it prevents 33 cases of HIV each year.

That seems likely; 143,715 needles were exchanged in Hawaii last year.

Opponents object that needle-exchange programs actually encourage use of injectable drugs. Perhaps it does take some of the worry out of it. But just look at places where needle exchange isn't available, where users share needles even though HIV infection is substantial.

An encouraging aspect of needle-exchange programs is that it brings users into contact with people who can counsel them and direct them to treatment programs.

Getting in touch with these lost souls may be society's best chance of making them whole again.