

The Healdsburg Tribune

Taking Action for Harm Reduction

Bobby Choate, drug and alcohol counselor at Alliance, has a life-saving calling

BY CHRISTIAN KALLEN - September 25, 2024



TASK FORCE Members of the Harm Reduction Coalition include Kristen Holmes (Healdsburg Hospital), Bobby Choate (Alliance Medical Center), Jeff McGee, (Healdsburg Police), Blake Manning (Alexander Valley Healthcare), and Dr. Walter Maack (retired).

A new metal drop box, gray and orange, has appeared in the parking lot next to the Alliance Medical Center next to Healdsburg Hospital. It's not a mailbox or a book drop or a bank deposit box, but it looks like one – aside from the bold phrase, “Secure Sharps.”

Medical personnel understand what that means: It's a place to dispose of used needles, known in the trade as “sharps.”

But needles aren't just used in hospitals, and drug addicts are not the only other people who use them. A large number of people use injected medication in all walks of life, as legal intravenous drugs become more widespread: for self-administered insulin, Ozempic and other medications. So finding a way to dispose of the needles is an increasingly important consideration for the medical community, and an obligation for the community at large.

Bobby Choate is the drug and alcohol counselor at Alliance Medical Center, and runs the Medication Assisted Treatment Program. He also informally chairs the North Sonoma County Harm Reduction Coalition, a task force made up of representatives from most local health care organizations.

A Certified Drug and Alcohol Counselor, he has worked at Alliance well over two years, helping people navigate appropriate health care and treatment. In the course of his work he's found not only ways to help at-risk individuals, but shortcomings in the county treatment system itself. We spoke with him recently about the Harm Reduction Coalition and some of its programs in the Healdsburg area.



DO NO HARM Gabrielle Jackson (Healdsburg Hospital) and David Anderson, MD, apply the motto of the medical profession with the introduction of a needle drop box to "secure sharps" at Alliance Medical Center, Healdsburg.

Healdsburg Tribune: *What is the Harm Reduction Coalition?*

Bobby Choate: It's basically just the community agencies in the community that want to promote harm reduction. Most of them are health care agencies: Healdsburg Hospital, Alexander Valley Health Care and the Northern Sonoma County Healthcare District. It falls under the Alliance umbrella. We're sort of in the early stages, but we meet once a month. And we do projects like Narcan distribution in the community, and we worked to get the needle disposal kiosk here at the clinic.

Why do you have a "Secure Sharps" drop box at Alliance?

If we go to CVS or Rite Aid, the pharmacy here [at Alliance], they're giving out a lot of medications that use sharps. Like diabetes medication, Ozempic, insulin; there's a lot of medications that have to be injected.

The problem is they're expensive to dispose of. That's why the pharmacy won't accept 'em. Places don't accept them because one, they don't want to. Also they're hazardous, and also they're expensive. Once you have a container full, it has to be disposed of by the HAZMAT crew. You just don't throw it in the trash.

Whose responsibility is it to make sure that syringes are properly disposed of? Is it the user's?

I think it's the community's responsibility to make sure there's a place to put them. And then it's the user's responsibility to use it. I mean, it's a two-part effort, but our part is to have a place to put them.

One of the arguments against syringe disposal is that you're encouraging the use of illegal drugs.

We're not giving any syringes out. We're just trying to get the ones that are already out there disposed of carefully. Because if there's nowhere to put them ...

Look, people use syringes for medications all the time, and they just put them in the trash can, which is incredibly dangerous for everybody down the line. The sanitation workers, the people at the garbage

company, the people who work at the landfill. Sometimes there's people who go through the trash cans to get aluminum cans out.

That's the thing with needle disposal, people say, "Well, we don't need it." But listen, as a community, we can't complain. If there's trash all over the ground, but there's no trash cans, I've got to put out trash cans – then we can get on people about using the trash cans.

But if we don't have anywhere for people to put them, inevitably they're going to go in the trash or on the ground or in places we don't want them to go.

So where do people go to dispose of their "sharps"?

We have one here in Alliance Medical in the parking lot. You just drive to it and put your sharp into the round hole. You don't even have to get out of your car. It's a locked box; someone from Face to Face checks it once a week.

We wanted to put one in town, but it's hard for us to get the approval from the property owners. Even though there's a grant that'll pay for it; it's completely free.

The City worked with us to get it here; they were very helpful. But the fire department didn't want one. The police department doesn't have one, but they do have the medication disposal. But no one wants it down by the town square.

We wanted to put one over by Rotten Robbie's. Goodwill's there, and businesses have asked for sharp containers because they find needles in the area.

A lot of the properties are owned by companies like Rite Aid. They're not owned by a person, they're owned by a corporation – I don't know what it's called, whoever owns commercial property. So they just automatically say, "No." There's no benefit to them.

Is this something we should be concerned about in Healdsburg?

I wouldn't say it's a rampant problem in Healdsburg. But it's not a zero problem.

The Alliance Medical Center is located at 1381 University Ave., open 7am-7pm Monday-Friday.

CHRISTIAN KALLEN

Christian Kallen has called Healdsburg home for over 30 years. A former travel writer and web producer, he has worked with Microsoft, Yahoo, MSNBC and other media companies, usually in an editorial capacity. He started reporting locally in 2008, moving from Patch to the Sonoma Index-Tribune to the Kenwood Press before joining the Healdsburg Tribune in 2022.