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New York VOCAL Peer NSP

My name is Robert Suarez. I come from the United States of America, New York to be exact and I work for an organisation called VOCAL New York.

My involvement in peer needle exchange has sort of evolved over the years. I started out in peer needle exchange, I still work with a bunch of peers who are up and coming peers who are doing needle exchange, but for the most part I do a lot more advocacy work, and that advocacy work involves advocating for peers as well as advocating for drug users.

So, I still do a lot to maintain my needle stick certification so that whenever I see a user who is in need of syringes I can always, always just go right to the exchange and get them syringes if they need them. I also do a lot of haz waste when it comes to picking up syringes.

Drug users should be involved in needle exchange because it goes directly to the heart of what needle exchanges are actually for. So as more and more users become involved with needle exchanges, it's sort of... I look at it as sort of a reintegration into the community. For instance myself, coming from places where I came from, in the back of parks getting high, and then coming into a needle exchange, and then finding out just how much harm I was actually doing. To not just myself but to others who where in the park who don't inject, you know what I'm saying, who just want to use the park for what they want to use the park for. Then picking up the syringes that many of my friends left behind.

I believe that drug users should get involved with needle exchanges, to find out more about safe usage, and finding a way and means in which to possibly get some safe management out of it. But more importantly find out more how they as individuals now longer need to be stigmatised, demonised and/or criminalised.

The advice I would give to someone setting up a peer needle exchange would be: first of all great, make that happen. I would then lead them to the people that I know have the best experience in how to do it. I would love to have that experience I just don't, but I would lead someone right to the person they would need to talk to.

<voice off camera> who would that person be?

People like Taeko Frost and Jamie Favaro who started the Washington Heights Corner Project right from a knapsack walking up and down one of the most busy neighbourhoods in the Washington Heights, just giving out syringes right out of a back pack and applying for funding to start a small needle exchange that has now grown into quite possibly one of the most busy in the Washington Heights if not in Manhattan. So people like that Jamie Favaro and Taeko Frost are individuals that I would guide others to when it comes to starting up a needle exchange.