

Sticking Points:

The Emergence of American Needle Exchange in the Urban Northeast, 1986-1995

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A Note to the Reader:

Throughout this essay, I use the phrase “people/person who use(s) injection drugs,” abbreviated to “PWUID,” to describe the population targeted by needle exchange programs. Nearly all of my sources, however, employ terms like “junkie,” “addict,” or “drug user,” which appear in some quotes and footnotes in my essay. I employ person-first language because it reinforces a person-centered outlook, placing the focus on the individual, not their use of substances.¹ Recent literature also suggests this is the preferred term among people who use or have formerly used drugs.² Furthermore, I use “clean” only when describing sterile injection equipment, and refrain from using the word to characterize a person or their sobriety, which carries a moralistic connotation. Lastly, for the purposes of this essay, “needle” and “syringe” are interchangeable since the vast majority of hypodermic syringes used were non-detachable units.³

¹ For a more thorough discussion of person-centered language as it relates to drug use, see: Annie Madden and Charles Henderson, “Words Matter! Language Statement & Reference Guide” (The International Network of People Who Use Drugs, 2020), https://www.inpud.net/sites/default/files/000596_INP_Terminology%20booklet_v11.pdf.

² Ekaterina Pivovarova and Michael D. Stein, “In Their Own Words: Language Preferences of Individuals Who Use Heroin,” *Addiction* 114, no. 10 (2019): 1785-1790, <https://doi.org/10.1111/add.14699>.

³ Kaveh Khoshnood, “Client-Based Evaluation of New Haven’s Needle Exchange Program” (PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 1995), 3, <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/client-based-evaluation-new-havens-needle/docview/304266249/se-2?accountid=15172>.

Introduction

Born in 1954, the second of seven to a single mother, Jon Stuen-Parker spent much of his childhood maneuvering the harsh underbelly of South Boston's D Street housing projects.⁴ By thirteen years old, Stuen-Parker had founded two gangs, was a versed thief and avid fighter, and began injecting heroin.⁵ Between stints in reform institutions, he robbed pharmacies, establishing himself as "The Rexall King" complete with an "Rx" stick-and-poke on his left wrist.⁶ At seventeen years old, Stuen-Parker was caught with a weapon and stolen pills following a New Hampshire drugstore stick-up and was sentenced to two years in Boston's Deer Island Prison.⁷ After an eventful term of incarceration, including an aquatic Mission-Impossible-style prison escape, poisoning an enemy with hallucinogenic seeds, and the completion of a GRE program, Stuen-Parker was released in 1974.⁸ Within three weeks, Stuen-Parker was back in handcuffs after robbing another pharmacy for opioids and was offered the choice between prison and

⁴ Wes Smith, "AIDS Guerrilla: An Ex-Addict Turned Yale Man Fuels a Campaign to Inject Hope into the Streets," *Chicago Tribune*, May 7, 1989, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/aids-guerrilla-ex-addict-turned-yale-man-fuels/docview/282691144/se-2?accountid=15172>.

⁵ Jon Stuen-Parker, *Letter to Norman Mailer: From Jail to Yale* (Self-published, 1999), 9, 20, 92, 111.

⁶ Jodi Wilgoren, "From Jail to Yale: Jon Parker's Story," *Yale Daily News*, January 18, 1990, [https://ydnhistorical.library.yale.edu/?a=d&d=YDN19900118-01.2.2&srpos=1&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-From+Jail+to+Yale+Jon+Parker-----](https://ydnhistorical.library.yale.edu/?a=d&d=YDN19900118-01.2.2&srpos=1&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-From+Jail+to+Yale+Jon+Parker-----; Stuen-Parker, From Jail to Yale, 5-6, 21); Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 5-6, 21.

⁷ Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 5-6, 26.

⁸ Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 34-53, 71-73, 85; "Activist Risks Jail to Fight AIDS: Man Illegally Gives Addicts Clean Needles," *Hartford Courant*, January 3, 1989, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/activist-risks-jail-fight-aids/docview/1633210233/se-2?accountid=15172>.

rehabilitation.⁹ He chose to enter the Boston State Hospital's democratic therapeutic community, and upon leaving, dramatically reoriented his life course.¹⁰ Despite his unlikely beginnings, Jon Stuen-Parker went on to study at the Yale School of Medicine, where, in response to the growing AIDS crisis of the 1980s, he would found the National AIDS Brigade, likely the nation's first needle exchange program (NEP).¹¹

When Stuen-Parker introduced needle exchange to the United States in 1986, it arrived as a European import. In the summer of 1984, after a major pharmacy in inner Amsterdam refused to continue selling hypodermic syringes to people who use injection drugs (PWUID), "Junky Union," a grassroots organization of PWUID, successfully lobbied the Ministry of Health to initiate the world's first NEP to prevent the spread of hepatitis B via shared needles.¹² The NEP gave PWUID the opportunity to swap used needles for sterile ones at no cost, curbing needle sharing without increasing the number of syringes in circulation.¹³ Dutch advocates advertised the program as a realization of the philosophy of "harm reduction," a non-judgmental approach

⁹ Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 96; Wilgoren, "From Jail to Yale."

¹⁰ Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 96; Wilgoren, "From Jail to Yale."

¹¹ Wilgoren, "From Jail to Yale."

¹² Don C. Des Jarlais, "Mathilde Krim, AmfAR, and the Prevention of HIV Infection Among Injecting Drug Users: A Brief History," *AIDS Patient Care and STDs* 20, no. 7 (2006): 467, <https://doi.org/10.1089/apc.2006.20.467>; *Needle Exchange Programs: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Health and the Environment of the Committee on Energy and Commerce*, 101st Congress 387 (April 24, 1989) (statement of Eddy Engelsman, Director of the Alcohol, Drug, and Tobacco Branch of the Ministry of Welfare of the Netherlands).

¹³ Ernst C. Buning, Giel H. Van Brussel, and Gerrit Van Santen, "Amsterdam's Drug Policy and Its Implications for Controlling Needle Sharing.," *National Institute on Drug Abuse Research Monograph Series* 80, (1988): 67, <https://doi.org/10.1037/e475372004-001>.

aiming to minimize the harm associated with substance use while accepting that not all people are willing or able to diminish their use of drugs.¹⁴

In the American Northeast, such interventions were less readily accepted. Even as the threat of what came to be known as HIV became clear in 1981, the criminalization and moralization of drug use made the timely mobilization of such strategies by state or federal government a political impossibility.¹⁵ The War on Drugs, initiated a decade earlier by President Nixon and taken to new heights under the Reagan administration, framed substance use as a criminal offense and ethical violation, exacerbating existing prohibitionist attitudes in the US incompatible with ideas of harm reduction.¹⁶ The AIDS epidemic also became a battleground for the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, as members of the “orthodox” camp, including the New Right and the Catholic Church, fought to counter demands of PWUID and gay activists, solidly in the “progressive” faction, for recognition and care.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ruth Harlow and Rod Sorge, *Needle Exchange, Harm Reduction and HIV Prevention in the Second Decade: A Briefing Book* (New York, NY: ACLU AIDS Project, 1994), 68; S. Einstein, “Harm and Risk Reduction: History, Theories, Issues, and Implications,” *Substance Use & Misuse* 42, no. 2-3 (2007): 258, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10826080601141990>.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Fee and Theodore M. Brown, “Michael S. Gottlieb and the Identification of AIDS,” *American Journal of Public Health* 96, no. 6 (2006): 982-983, <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2006.088435>.

¹⁶ Jelani Kerr and Trinidad Jackson, “Stigma, Sexual Risks, and the War on Drugs: Examining Drug Policy and HIV/AIDS Inequities among African Americans Using the Drug War HIV/AIDS Inequities Model,” *International Journal of Drug Policy* 37 (2016): 31-41, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2016.07.007>; Edward H. Kaplan and Elaine O’Keefe, “Let the Needles Do the Talking! Evaluating the New Haven Needle Exchange,” *Interfaces* 23, no. 1 (1993): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1287/inte.23.1.7>.

¹⁷ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: the Struggle to Define America* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1991), 194; David Buchanan et al., “Empirical Science Meets Moral Panic: An Analysis of the Politics of Needle Exchange,” *Journal of Public Health Policy* 24, no. 3/4 (2003): 434-435, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3343386>.

Worried that needle exchanges were harbingers of defeat in the War on Drugs and that endorsement would signify a certain softness on the “evils” of substance use, most elected officials’ attitudes toward proposed NEPs ranged from wary to outraged.¹⁸ Given the unfriendly cultural and political climate, combined with nationwide drug paraphernalia laws barring the distribution of syringes for substance use, the Northeast’s first licit exchanges were forced to fight headwinds for several years before gaining legal authorization. In spite of existing laws and prevailing norms, activist organizations, such as the National AIDS Brigade and AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) chapters, operated illicit exchanges in Northeastern cities years before the advent of legal programs.

Though some attention has been paid to the history of the earliest legal needle exchanges, appearing on the East Coast primarily in the early 1990s, existing literature has largely ignored illicit needle exchanges.¹⁹ Three prior theses dedicated to AIDS work in New Haven have focused exclusively on the development of the Yale-sponsored NEP, making no mention of an underground precursor.²⁰ While the National AIDS Brigade has received a few passing

¹⁸ Kaplan and O’Keefe, “Let the Needles do the Talking,” 9.

¹⁹ Samuel A. Macmaster and Bethany G. Womack, “HIV Prevention for Active Injection Drug Users: A Brief History of Syringe Exchange Programs,” *Journal of HIV/AIDS & Social Services* 1, no. 1 (2002): 99, https://doi.org/10.1300/j187v01n01_08; Warwick Anderson, “The New York Needle Trial: the Politics of Public Health in the Age of AIDS,” *American Journal of Public Health* 81, no. 11 (1991): 1506-1517, <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.81.11.1506>; Ricardo E. Barreras and Rafael A. Torruella, “New York City’s Struggle over Syringe Exchange: A Case Study of the Intersection of Science, Activism, and Political Change,” *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 4 (2013): 694-712, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12037>.

²⁰ Jennifer Chi, “Early Response: The Oral History of AIDS Activism in New Haven, Connecticut” (Senior Essay, Yale University, 2004); Michele Nichols, “Angels, Actual Reality & AIDS in New Haven: A Case Study” (Honors thesis, Wesleyan University, 2009), <https://digitalcollections.wesleyan.edu/object/ir-1052>; Gladys Mendez, “Needle Exchange Programs and HIV Transmission: New Haven’s Experience” (Master’s thesis, Yale University, 1996).

references in published articles about legal exchanges in New York and New Haven, authors have only acknowledged its existence without any recognition of the organization's accomplishments and influence.²¹

ACT UP has fared considerably better, with multiple book-length treatments of the organization and even two documentaries.²² I lean on Deborah Gould's work, in particular, to historically situate ACT UP's advocacy and unravel the organization's racial dynamics.²³ Still, their needle exchange efforts have been mostly overlooked. To my knowledge, Christina Hanhardt's "'Dead Addicts Don't Recover: ACT UP's Needle Exchange and the Subjects of Queer Activist History'" is the only published work exploring ACT UP/NY's illicit needle exchanges, but does not address the activists' role in the city's transition to legal NEPs.²⁴ Needle

²¹ Katherine McLean, "Reducing Risk, Producing Order: The Surprisingly Disciplinary World of Needle Exchange," *Contemporary Drug Problems* 40, no. 3 (September 2013): 415-445, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009145091304000306>; Katherine McLean, "The Biopolitics of Needle Exchange in the United States," *Critical Public Health* 21, no. 1 (March 2011): 71-79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09581591003653124>; John Curtis, "What the Needles Said," *Yale Medicine Magazine*, 2001, <https://medicine.yale.edu/news/yale-medicine-magazine/what-the-needles-said/>.

²² Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Benita Roth, *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA Anti-AIDS Activism in Los Angeles from the 1980s to the 2000s* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Marion Banzhaf et al., *Women, AIDS, and Activism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990); Jim Hubbard, *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*, Documentary (ACT UP Oral History Project, 2012), <https://www.amazon.com/United-Anger-History-ACT-UP/dp/B00KEOI2HA>; David France, *How to Survive a Plague*, Documentary (Public Square Films, 2012), <https://www.amazon.com/How-Survive-Plague-Bill-Bahlman/dp/B00AGEHFK8>.

²³ Gould, *Moving Politics*; Deborah B. Gould, "ACT UP, Racism, and the Question of How to Use History," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 1 (2012): 54-62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2011.638661>.

²⁴ Christina B. Hanhardt, "'Dead Addicts Don't Recover': ACT UP's Needle Exchange and the Subjects of Queer Activist History," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24, no. 4 (2018): 421-444, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-6957758>.

exchange undertaken by the IV League, a working group of ACT UP/Boston, has been most neglected of all, with, as far as I know, not a single mention in published work.

Beyond literature specific to needle exchange, books such as Tamar Carroll's *Mobilizing New York: AIDS, Antipoverty, and Feminist Activism* and Jennifer Brier's *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis*, are helpful in comprehending the landscape of American AIDS activism.²⁵ Other academics, such as S. Einstein, John Kleinig, and Virginia Berridge, provide insightful perspectives on the roots, meaning, and diverse applications of harm reduction.²⁶ Histories of health activism, such as Cathy Cohen's *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* and *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination* by Alondra Nelson have also proved useful in contextualizing the racialized debate surrounding needle exchange.²⁷

Given the paucity of secondary literature, I believe this essay, drawing primarily from media articles, oral histories, the archives of ACT UP/NY and the IV League, legal records, and

²⁵ Tamar W. Carroll, *Mobilizing New York: AIDS, Antipoverty, and Feminist Activism* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Jennifer Brier, *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Gould, *Moving Politics*; Steven Epstein, *Impure Science: AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1996).

²⁶ S. Einstein, "Harm and Risk Reduction"; John Kleinig, "Thinking Ethically About Needle and Syringe Programs," *Substance Use & Misuse* 41, no. 6-7 (2006): 815-825, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10826080600668670>; Virginia Berridge, "Histories of Harm Reduction: Illicit Drugs, Tobacco, and Nicotine," *Substance Use & Misuse* 34, no. 1 (1999): 35-47, <https://doi.org/10.3109/10826089909035634>; Mike Ashton, "The Rolleston Legacy," *Drug and Alcohol Findings*, no. 15 (2006): 4-21, https://findings.org.uk/docs/Ashton_M_28.pdf?s=eb&r=&c=&sf=sfnos.

²⁷ Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

Jon Stuen-Parker's autobiography, constitutes the first thorough exploration of underground needle exchanges in the Northeast.²⁸ It argues that illicit exchanges and the activists behind them were important precursors to legal NEPs, strongly influencing their operations and serving as advocates for their creation while servicing thousands of PWUID before state-run programs were present and effective. In sum, I contend that a nuanced understanding of the history of American needle exchange, and particularly the rise of state-sponsored exchanges, requires a close look at their unlawful ancestors and the people behind them.

In making the novel case for underground exchanges, this essay takes a two-pronged approach, illustrating the impact of illegal NEPs before the birth of adequate legal exchanges and demonstrating the role activists had in the creation of government-sponsored programs. The first chapter surveys the operations of the National AIDS Brigade and ACT UP/NY from the mid-1980s to 1991, contrasting their early efforts across the East Coast with the slow start of New Haven's legal exchange and the failed municipal exchange in New York City. The second chapter examines the differential relationships underground exchanges had with licit NEPs through the early 1990s in New York City, New Haven, and Boston, analyzing how bad leadership practices diminished the Brigade's direct influence relative to both ACT UP chapters in the formation of legal NEPs.

²⁸ I use the term "autobiography" in only the loosest sense to describe *From Jail to Yale*, Jon Stuen-Parker's self-published book. Although the material is non-fiction and chronicles the life of the author, it is primarily a discontinuous selection of diary entries lacking a central narrative and chronological structure.

Chapter 1: Illegal Origins

This section aims to demonstrate the impact of illegal NEPs initiated and maintained by community organizations like the National AIDS Brigade and ACT UP. While better-remembered needle exchange proponents, like the members of the New Haven Mayor's Task Force on AIDS (MTFA) or New York City Health Commissioner Dr. Stephen Joseph, spent years lobbying for legislative approval to operate limited pilot programs, some private citizens refused to wait. Beginning in the late 1980s, activists built illicit exchange networks throughout the Northeast, marshaling limited resources to challenge state prescription laws and change public perception of NEPs. Focusing on the efforts of two major underground exchanges operated by the Brigade and ACT UP in New Haven, New York City, and Boston, this chapter argues that, despite a resounding historical silence, these illegal programs made significant contributions to the fight against HIV/AIDS, working to curb the spread of HIV among PWUID while legal programs were either entirely absent or working under suffocating constraints.

The Inception of the National AIDS Brigade

As is briefly noted by some secondary literature, the story of American needle exchange likely begins with Jon Stuen-Parker and the National AIDS Brigade. These mentions, of course, fail to capture the scale and significance of the Brigade's operations. Drawing chiefly from newspaper articles and Stuen-Parker's self-published autobiography, I aim to show that from 1986 to 1990, while the celebrated legal New Haven NEP was in development, the National AIDS Brigade was mobilizing a growing network of volunteers to exchange syringes across the urban Northeast while building visibility for the cause of needle exchange.

After leaving treatment in 1975, Jon Stuen-Parker enrolled at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts.²⁹ To pay for tuition, he drove a cab, worked as a commercial fisherman, and boxed in Golden Gloves tournaments.³⁰ Graduating with a degree in biology in 1979, Stuen-Parker took a gap year to work as a drug counselor before successfully applying for admission to the Yale School of Medicine, where he hoped to earn a Medical Doctorate and Master of Public Health.³¹ To make ends meet, he continued to work as a taxi driver, even making the *Boston Globe* in 1981 after avoiding a robbery by taking his assailants on a wild ninety-mile-an-hour ride through downtown Boston.³²

In 1983, Stuen-Parker's academic career took a sharp turn when he discovered injection drug use could transmit the virus causing AIDS, now known as HIV.³³ Frustrated by professors

²⁹ Jodi Wilgoren, "From Jail to Yale: Jon Parker's Story," *Yale Daily News*, January 18, 1990, <https://ydnhistorical.library.yale.edu/?a=d&d=YDN19900118-01.2.2&srpos=1&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-From+Jail+to+Yale+Jon+Parker----->.

³⁰ Smith, "AIDS Guerrilla"; Ken Franckling, "From Jail to Yale: Medical Student Works Toward a World With Dignity for All," *Hartford Courant*, June 2, 1985, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/new-england-scene/docview/755876230/se-2?accountid=15172>.

³¹ Wilgoren, "From Jail to Yale"; Jodi Wilgoren, "Parker, AIDS Brigade Pioneer, Seen as 'Difficult,'" *Yale Daily News*, January 19, 1990, <https://ydnhistorical.library.yale.edu/?a=d&d=YDN19900119-01.2.4&srpos=1&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-Parker%2c+AIDS+Brigade+Difficult----->; Anson Smith, "Cabbie Turns Table on Thief: Victims of Crime," *Boston Globe*, March 9, 1981, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/cabbie-turns-table-on-thief/docview/1012036857/se-2?accountid=15172>.

³² Anson, "Cabbie Turns Table."

³³ Wilgoren, "Parker, AIDS Brigade Pioneer." HIV was originally known as HTLV-III/LAV (human T-cell lymphotropic virus-type III/lymphadenopathy-associated virus), and later, gay-related immune deficiency (GRID). (F Barre-Sinoussi et al., "Isolation of a T-Lymphotropic Retrovirus from a Patient at Risk for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)," *Science* 220, no. 4599 (1983): 868-871, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.6189183>; James Sorensen, "GRID," in *HIV Pioneers: Lives Lost, Careers Changed, and Survival*, ed. Wendee M. Wechsberg (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 148).

and politicians characterizing PWUID as too deviant or careless to change, Stuen-Parker founded the National AIDS Brigade, a student organization dedicated to preventing the spread of HIV among PWUID.³⁴

Beginning in 1985, Stuen-Parker hit the streets of New Haven and Boston with a handful of student volunteers to educate PWUID about the risks of sharing injection equipment.³⁵ A year earlier, likely spurred by the opening of Amsterdam's NEP, he contemplated passing out clean needles, but could not bear abandoning his hard-earned law-abiding lifestyle.³⁶ Instead, he envisioned leading the Brigade in creating a series of AIDS prevention storefronts, facilities "where mind, body, and spirit are not to be considered separately but as complimentary parts of a whole," to tend to the comprehensive health-related needs of the surrounding community.³⁷

In January 1986, Jon Stuen-Parker and eight other Yale graduate students opened what they imagined would be the first of such centers at 166 York Street, christened the "New Haven

³⁴ Wilgoren, "Parker, AIDS Brigade Pioneer." Some secondary sources have assumed this is the year that the AIDS Brigade began exchanging needles, but this is inaccurate. Jon Stuen-Parker himself clarifies on page 143 of his autobiography, citing an incorrect year published in the *Yale Alumni Magazine* followed by the correct date: "clandestine needle exchange programs had already been operating on and off in New Haven for years. One was run in 1983 by a group of Yale students calling themselves the AIDS Brigade." [From 1992 *Yale Alumni Magazine* article "Fighting AIDS with needles"] This was also wrong. In 1983, AIDS Brigade undertook IV drug user education. Three years later we began undertaking needle exchange." (Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 143).

³⁵ Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 109; "National AIDS Brigade: History and Philosophy" manuscript, n.d., Box 1, ACT UP/Boston (David Stitt) collection, Northeastern University Archives, Boston.

³⁶ Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 109.

³⁷ "National AIDS Brigade: History."

Health Promotion Project.”³⁸ The Brigade hoped the storefront would act as an access point for health education, drug and alcohol counseling, physical examinations, blood pressure screenings, and referrals for legal and medical services.³⁹ Among the laundry list of services they aimed to provide, there was no mention of sterile needles—in Stuen-Parker’s original plans, AIDS work was limited to education.⁴⁰

Later that year, however, at an outreach meeting in Boston, Stuen-Parker witnessed a generous attendee give away seven clean needles he had amassed for himself.⁴¹ Each was worth at least five dollars on the black market, but the man felt morally compelled to help protect his peers from HIV/AIDS.⁴² Inspired by the good deed, Stuen-Parker established what was likely the first American NEP in September of 1986.⁴³ Using earnings from his side jobs to purchase bulk needles in Vermont, where they could be obtained without a prescription, Stuen-Parker and his volunteers rounded the shooting galleries of Boston and New Haven, offering sterile syringes to the PWUID inside.⁴⁴

³⁸ Jill Savitt, “Grad Students Organize Community Health Group,” *Yale Daily News*, October 17, 1986, <https://ydnhistorical.library.yale.edu/?a=d&d=YDN19861017-01.2.17&srpos=1&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-grad+students+community+health----->.

³⁹ Savitt, “Grad Students Organize”; Franckling, “From Jail to Yale.”

⁴⁰ Franckling, “From Jail to Yale.”

⁴¹ Curtis, “What the Needles Said.”

⁴² Curtis, “What the Needles Said.”

⁴³ “National AIDS Brigade: History.” Existing literature rarely recognizes the National AIDS Brigade as the first American NEP, often citing the Tacoma exchange, founded by Dave Purchase in Washington state nearly two years later, as the first. See, for example, the previously cited: Harlow and Sorge, *Needle Exchange, Harm Reduction and HIV Prevention in the Second Decade: A Briefing Book*, 102.

⁴⁴ Curtis, “What the Needles Said.”

Unfortunately for Stuen-Parker, the beginning of his exchange marked the end of his run as a medical student. The same year he began his needle exchange, the Yale School of Medicine's Executive Progress Committee requested his withdrawal after he failed his boards for the third time and, based on their records, concluded he was too "socially immature."⁴⁵ Dr. Howard Levitin, Dean of the medical school and a man Stuen-Parker called a "father figure," told the Yale Daily News his "priorities were wrong" and the idea he could remain enrolled while running the Brigade was "unrealistic."⁴⁶ Refusing to abandon the National AIDS Brigade, Stuen-Parker decided to only pursue a degree from the Yale School of Public Health while devoting most of his time to exchange work.⁴⁷

The Rise of the National AIDS Brigade

In the late 1980s, the National AIDS Brigade extended its operations along the East Coast and, thanks to encounters with law enforcement, began attracting media attention. In August of 1988, after several months of sterile needle distribution without issue, Stuen-Parker was arrested in the housing projects of Boston and charged with distributing needles without a prescription.⁴⁸ The arrest garnered modest press coverage, and though he vowed to fight his

⁴⁵ Wilgoren, "Parker, AIDS Brigade Pioneer."

⁴⁶ Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 99; Wilgoren, "Parker, AIDS Brigade Pioneer."

⁴⁷ William Falk, "His Mission: Street War on AIDS," *Newsday* (Nassau edition), January 27, 1991, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/his-mission-street-war-on-aids/docview/2316239022/se-2?accountid=15172>.

⁴⁸ Peggy Hernandez, "Distributor of Needles in Anti-AIDS Effort Is Arrested," *Boston Globe*, August 19, 1988, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/distributor-needles-anti-aids-effort-is-arrested/docview/2228395474/se-2?accountid=15172>; Commonwealth of Massachusetts v. Jon C. Parker, No. 89-0123, 1 (Boston Municipal Court January 23, 1991).

charges, Stuen-Parker agreed to cease exchanging needles in the state.⁴⁹ Within four months, Stuen-Parker reneged on his word.⁵⁰ In January 1989, he happily reported to the *Hartford Courant* that, with the help of fifty volunteers, Brigade operations had not only resumed in Boston but spread to New York City and New Jersey.⁵¹

By the summer of 1989, the Brigade solidified its position as the leading American needle exchange network. The New Haven storefront, once home to Stuen-Parker's needle-free Health Promotion Project, now acted as the base of operations for the Brigade.⁵² In a white van outfitted with a hand-painted "National AIDS Brigade" sign, Stuen-Parker spent up to six days per week on the road, often swapping needles across three states in a single day.⁵³ With his crew of volunteers, most of whom were current or former PWUID, the Brigade distributed upwards of thirty thousand needles across five states in fewer than three years.⁵⁴ In August, Stuen-Parker even flew to Illinois to hand out injection equipment with a local supporter on the West Side of

⁴⁹ Hernandez, "Distributor of Needles."

⁵⁰ *The Hartford Courant*, "Activist Risks Jail."

⁵¹ *The Hartford Courant*.

⁵² Paul Festa, "Group Fights AIDS With Clean Needles on Streets," *Yale Daily News*, February 9, 1989, <https://ydnhistorical.library.yale.edu/?a=d&d=YDN19890209-01.2.5&srpos=1&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-group+fighters+aids+with+clean+needles----->.

⁵³ Smith, "AIDS Guerrilla."

⁵⁴ Ray Richard, "Man Asks Judge to Dismiss Needle Charge," *Boston Globe*, May 2, 1989, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/man-asks-judge-dismiss-needle-charge/docview/2445080068/se-2?accountid=15172>; Jorge Casuso, "AIDS Fighter Defies Law on Needles," *Chicago Tribune*, August 23, 1989, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/aids-fighter-defies-law-on-needles/docview/1030244072/se-2?accountid=15172>.

Chicago.⁵⁵ Off of street corners and under restaurant tables, the AIDS Brigade was hard at work getting bleach, condoms, AIDS pamphlets, and needles into the hands of PWUID.⁵⁶

With the meteoric rise of the National AIDS Brigade, Stuen-Parker became a small celebrity in the world of AIDS activism. By 1991, he had been profiled by the *Yale Daily News*, *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *New Haven Advocate*, *Washington Post*, *Hartford Courant*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Newsday*, and *Nightline*, and received at least a mention in tens more articles. Dubbed the “Johnny Appleseed” of needles, Stuen-Parker’s bold approach to activism and remarkable past granted him a cult-like following.⁵⁷ At his pre-trial hearing in Boston for the charges he incurred the previous year, a dozen of his supporters arrived, giving glowing testimonials to his work to the press in attendance.⁵⁸ In multiple articles, Yale professor Alvin Novick, the chairman of the New Haven MTFAs, characterized Stuen-Parker as “Christlike [*sic*],” “a saint with a mystical calling,” and even described himself as “one his disciples.”⁵⁹ Sher Horosko, coordinator of the MTFAs, also publicly praised his commitment to direct action.⁶⁰ Leaders of other community-based AIDS organizations, like Brianne Comella of Boston’s

⁵⁵ Casuso, “AIDS Fighter Defies Law.”

⁵⁶ *Hartford Courant*, “Activist Risks Jail.”

⁵⁷ Wilgoren, “From Jail to Yale.”

⁵⁸ Richard, “Man Asks Judge.”

⁵⁹ Smith, “AIDS Guerrilla”; Wilgoren, “From Jail to Yale.”

⁶⁰ Smith, “AIDS Guerrilla”; Bruce Lambert, “AIDS Battler Gives Needles Illicitly to Addicts: AIDS Crusader Giving Needles Illicitly to Addicts,” *New York Times*, November 20, 1989, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/aids-battler-gives-needles-illicitly-addicts/docview/110361640/se-2?accountid=15172>.

Project Trust, stressed the importance of the National AIDS Brigade in “push[ing] the system.”⁶¹ Stuen-Parker used his newfound platform to spread the gospel of clean needles, stressing their life-saving potential in interviews and even debating skeptical policymakers on the evening news.⁶²

Stuen-Parker’s trial in January of 1990 propelled him further into the national spotlight.⁶³ The first of its kind, he faced up to a year in prison for his Boston needle distribution arrest a year and a half prior.⁶⁴ With the support of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and AIDS academics, Stuen-Parker’s attorney employed the medical necessity defense, arguing that his actions were not only justified but necessary in the face of the unchecked AIDS crisis.⁶⁵ His defense forced the one-day trial to weigh the benefits of needle exchange against the potential harm, instead of assessing the specific facts of the case—essentially, Stuen-Parker put needle exchange itself on trial.⁶⁶ After hours of testimony, Judge Sally Kelly acquitted Stuen-Parker, writing, “it is difficult to put aside the potential benefits of his actions to society and individuals.”⁶⁷ Though her decision warned any subsequent exchange cases may be decided

⁶¹ *Hartford Courant*, “Activist Risks Jail.”

⁶² *Nightline* (ABC, January 5, 1990), Vanderbilt Television News Archive.

⁶³ Susan Levine, “AIDS Crusader Not Guilty in Needle Giveaway Case,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 10, 1990.

⁶⁴ Levine, “AIDS Crusader Not Guilty”; “Ex-Drug Addict Is Acquitted In Giving Out Clean Needles,” *New York Times*, January 11, 1990, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/ex-drug-addict-is-acquitted-giving-out-clean/docview/108611760/se-2?accountid=15172>.

⁶⁵ *Parker*, No. 89–0123 at 7-11.

⁶⁶ *Parker*, No. 89–0123 at 7-11.

⁶⁷ Levine, “AIDS Crusader Not Guilty.”

differently, Stuen-Parker took his acquittal as a potentially replicable precedent.⁶⁸ Encouraged by his first legal victory, he resolved to exchange syringes in the remaining ten states, plus the District of Columbia, with laws requiring a prescription to buy hypodermic needles.⁶⁹ Either police would turn a blind eye, encouraging more individuals to take up needle exchange in the state, or he would instigate an arrest, generating an opportunity to challenge state restrictions and garner more press coverage.

By the fall of that year, Stuen-Parker had been arrested in ten cities along the Eastern Seaboard.⁷⁰ By the time the first legal program in New Haven finally launched in late 1990, the Brigade was in its prime: in their first four years, the Brigade had distributed over two hundred thousand needles in nine states plus DC and forced needle exchange to be publicly debated.⁷¹ Though the Brigade and its founder suffered from considerable shortcomings, as explored in the following chapter, the organization undoubtedly made crucial strides in the advancement of needle exchange.

⁶⁸ Levine.

⁶⁹ Bruce Lambert, "AIDS Protesters Test State Needle Laws," *New York Times*, April 14, 1991, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/aids-protesters-test-state-needle-laws/docview/108805003/se-2?accountid=15172>.

⁷⁰ Ernest Drucker, "Through the Eye of the Needle III: In a Dark Season, One Million Points of Light," *International Journal on Drug Policy* 2, no. 3 (1990): 8; Bruce Lambert, "10 Seized in Demonstration As They Offer New Needles," *New York Times*, March 7, 1990, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/10-seized-demonstration-as-they-offer-new-needles/docview/108594690/se-2?accountid=15172>.

⁷¹ Drucker, "Through the Eye," 10; Ruben Castaneda, "Distributors of Needles Fail in Bid to Be Arrested," *Washington Post*, March 31, 1990, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/distributors-needles-fail-bid-be-arrested/docview/307260403/se-2?accountid=15172>.

Movement for Legal Exchange: New Haven 1986-1990

In sharp contrast to the National AIDS Brigade, the New Haven Mayor's Task Force on AIDS, the eventual founders of Connecticut's first legal NEP, got off to a more measured start. As the Brigade began briskly exchanging needles across the Northeast, prioritizing a short response time over careful planning and legal protection, the MTFAs more conservative constituency invested years in prudent research and coalition-building before opening their exchange.

Established in May 1986 by Mayor Biagio DiLieto at the behest of Dr. Alvin Novick, a Yale professor, with Elaine O'Keefe, a public health nurse, and Sher Horosko, a former nun, the MTFAs spend their first four months assembling a diverse membership.⁷² Recognizing the importance of including communities most affected by AIDS, the MTFAs recruited gay, Black, and Latinx members, along with PWUID, treatment providers, public health professionals, and the Director of the Health Department.⁷³ In September 1986, the same month the National AIDS Brigade began handing out sterile syringes, the MTFAs commenced a three-month needs assessment to investigate how to best combat the spread of HIV/AIDS.⁷⁴ Based on their findings, the MTFAs recommended in January of 1987 that Mayor DiLieto fund an outreach team to educate PWUID, who represented 80 percent of New Haven's AIDS cases, about the risks of

⁷² Chi, "Early Response," 15-17; Kaplan and O'Keefe, "Let the Needles do the Talking," 8.

⁷³ Mendez, "Needle Exchange Programs," 16.

⁷⁴ "National AIDS Brigade: History"; Elaine O'Keefe, Edward Kaplan, and Kaveh Khoshnood, *Preliminary Report: City of New Haven Needle Exchange Program* (New Haven, CT: Office of Mayor John C. Daniels, July 31, 1991), 2-3.

sharing injection equipment.⁷⁵ In October, the newly hired team of four outreach employees began working throughout New Haven, delivering condoms, AIDS information, and bleach kits to PWUID—services the National AIDS Brigade began offering two years prior.⁷⁶ Soon afterward, O’Keefe, Horosko, and Dominick Maldonado, an outreach worker and President of Latinos Contra el SIDA, decided to gauge interest in an NEP by surveying one hundred PWUID in New Haven.⁷⁷ Encouraged by their affirmative findings, the group launched a three-and-a-half-year campaign to generate broad support for a legislative request for a trial NEP.⁷⁸ As remembered by Maldonado, “[w]e had meetings after meetings after meetings with politicians, the religious community, with the people in the school system ... anybody that would invite us to talk about needle exchange we would go.”⁷⁹ Realizing that a politically viable NEP would also have to show empirical evidence that it reduced transmission of HIV, Dr. Novick asked Dr. Edward Kaplan, a good friend and professor at the Yale School of Management, to begin planning a rigorous and non-invasive evaluation.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Dominick Maldonado, interview by Tiffany Lu, March 14, 2005, Transcript, Oral Histories Documenting New Haven, Connecticut, Yale Manuscripts and Archives, New Haven; Kaplan and O’Keefe, “Let the Needles do the Talking,” 8.

⁷⁶ O’Keefe, Kaplan, and Khoshnood, *Preliminary Report*, 3; Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 109.

⁷⁷ Maldonado interview, 5; O’Keefe, Kaplan, and Khoshnood, *Preliminary Report*, 3.

⁷⁸ Maldonado interview, 5.

⁷⁹ Maldonado, 5.

⁸⁰ Mendez, “Needle Exchange Programs,” 20; Edward Kaplan, interview by Jim Cochran, Transcript, 20, November 5, 2018, INFORMS, <https://www.informs.org/Explore/History-of-O.R.-Excellence/Biographical-Profiles/Kaplan-Edward>.

In 1989, the MFTA took the issue of needle exchange to the Connecticut legislature.⁸¹ Testifying for the Public Health Committee, MFTA members and their allies advocated for a legal exemption from state-level drug paraphernalia and needle prescription laws.⁸² Four members of the National AIDS Brigade, including Stuen-Parker, also testified, admitting to illegal exchange and explaining how NEPs could reduce HIV transmission.⁸³ Unmoved, the committee's chairman flatly denied their request and asked the advocates to "please not come back."⁸⁴ Undeterred, the MFTA shifted gears and began reaching out to all the New Haven mayoral candidates running in the upcoming election.⁸⁵ Through a series of educational meetings and debates, the MFTA persuaded each candidate to support either over-the-counter hypodermic needles or a legal needle exchange.⁸⁶ When John Daniels became the first Black mayor in 1990, he kept his word, even appointing pro-exchange Nicholas Pastore as Chief of Police.⁸⁷ After securing half a dozen additional endorsements, the MFTA made its successful return to Hartford

⁸¹ Maldonado interview, 5.

⁸² Kaplan and O'Keefe, "Let the Needles do the Talking," 10.

⁸³ Frank Spencer, "AIDS Group Testifies for Legalizing Needles," *Hartford Courant*, March 10, 1989, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/aids-group-testifies-legalizing-needles/docview/1637821469/se-2?accountid=15172>.

⁸⁴ Kaplan and O'Keefe, "Let the Needles do the Talking," 10; Chi, "Early Response," 20.

⁸⁵ Maldonado interview, 5.

⁸⁶ Maldonado interview, 5; Kaplan and O'Keefe, "Let the Needles do the Talking," 10.

⁸⁷ Kaplan and O'Keefe, "Let the Needles do the Talking," 10; Matthew Lopes, interview by Tiffany Lu, February 28, 2005, Transcript, Oral Histories Documenting New Haven, Connecticut, Yale Manuscripts and Archives, New Haven.

in the summer of 1990.⁸⁸ After passing the House and Senate, Governor William O’Neill signed Public Act No. 90-214 on July 1, exempting the MTFA’s program from state laws and clearing the way for Connecticut’s first legal NEP.⁸⁹

As illustrated, the National AIDS Brigade and the MTFA had markedly different approaches. In contrast to the Brigade’s speedy start, the MTFA delayed action for four years in service of long-term goals.⁹⁰ Once underway, however, the MTFA enjoyed smoother operations and ultimately, a longer lifespan than the maverick Brigade. Still in existence today, the exchange drew wide acclaim in 1991 when Yale researchers announced their data demonstrated a 33 percent reduction in HIV transmission among PWUID using the NEP.⁹¹ The study firmly established the epidemiological benefit of NEPs and became one of the most frequently cited pieces of evidence in the domestic and international exchange debate.⁹²

Movement for Legal Exchange: Boston 1986-1990

In Boston, where the National AIDS Brigade had its second-largest presence, progress on the legal needle exchange front was virtually nonexistent through the 1980s. In March 1988,

⁸⁸ Kaplan and O’Keefe, “Let the Needles do the Talking,” 10-11; Maldonado interview, 5.

⁸⁹ Kaplan and O’Keefe, “Let the Needles do the Talking,” 11.

⁹⁰ Maldonado interview, 5.

⁹¹ Abram Katz, “Tracing Needles: By Tracking Addicts’ Syringes, Yale Prof Shows Swap Program Helps Fight AIDS,” *New Haven Register*, August 15, 1991; Mireya Navarro, “Yale Study Reports Clean Needle Project Helps Check AIDS,” *New York Times*, August 1, 1991.

⁹² Kaplan and O’Keefe, “Let the Needles do the Talking”; Frank Spencer, “Needle Exchange Gets Lots of Attention,” *Hartford Courant*, June 24, 1992

Mayor Raymond Flynn professed his support for needle exchange, announcing he would seek a home-rule exemption from state prescription and paraphernalia laws so that the city could open a pilot NEP.⁹³ Facing tremendous opposition from the Catholic Church, Governor Michael Dukakis, and Black religious leaders, including a group of ministers led by Rev. Charles Stith, married to Public Health Commissioner and vocal NEP adversary Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith, the attempt was doomed to fail.⁹⁴ Though rather miraculously, the petition passed City Council in April 1988, it was immediately shot down by the Massachusetts legislature in June.⁹⁵ With such entrenched opposition, Boston would have to wait until 1994 for their first legal program.⁹⁶

Despite the lack of licit NEPs, PWUID in Boston had access to exchange services starting in late 1986 due to the work of the National AIDS Brigade and, to a lesser extent, ACT UP/Boston, beginning in 1991.⁹⁷ Though the underground exchanges were imperfect, for nearly a decade, illicit NEPs offered a life-saving resource to the PWUID they were able to reach while authorized programs remained a political impossibility.

⁹³ Peggy Hernandez, “Flynn, Johnston Vow to End Waiting Lists for Addict Treatment,” *Boston Globe*, March 4, 1988, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/flynn-johnston-vow-end-waiting-lists-addict/docview/2227914804/se-2?accountid=15172>.

⁹⁴ Jim Luger, “Background on ACT UP/Boston IV Drug Use + AIDS Work, 1988-1991” manuscript, 1991, Box 1, ACT UP/Boston (David Stitt) collection, Northeastern University Archives, Boston; Maureen Dezell, “Talking Politics: The Ayes of the Needle,” *Boston Phoenix*, April 22, 1988; Adam Gaffin, “Methadone versus AIDS: Doctors Differ on Needle Handout,” *Middlesex News*, March 31, 1988.

⁹⁵ Hernandez, “Distributor of Needles.”

⁹⁶ Mike Schement and Jarvis Chen, “ACT UP/Boston Needle Exchange Comes in From the Cold,” ACT UP media advisory, March 7, 1994, Box 1, ACT UP/Boston (David Stitt) collection, Northeastern University Archives, Boston.

⁹⁷ Luger, “Background on ACT UP/Boston”; “National AIDS Brigade: History.”

Movements for Legal Exchange: New York City 1986-1990

In 1988, New York City became the first American city to fund a legal NEP.⁹⁸ The legal exchange was supposed to ensure that the city's PWUID had access to sterile syringes, but its poor location and demanding intake procedures meant illicit exchanges remained critical sources of clean injection equipment.

Initially suggested in 1985 by Health Commissioner Dr. David Sencer, the proposition drew immediate and vehement criticism.⁹⁹ Leaders in law enforcement and Rudy Giuliani, who, at the time, was US Attorney for the Southern District of New York, averred that needle exchange would increase drug use, while Sterling Johnson Jr., Manhattan's Special Narcotics Prosecutor, believed such efforts were based upon the flawed assumption that PWUID preferred to use sterile injection equipment.¹⁰⁰ "Drug addicts," he wrote in an open letter to Mayor Ed Koch in the *New York Times*, "in the frenzied and desperate minutes before injecting a needle into their veins, could not care less about contamination."¹⁰¹ Convinced any formal proposal was bound to fail, Mayor Koch abandoned the idea.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Jeffrey Schmalz, "Addicts to Get Needles in Plan To Curb AIDS: Albany to Allow Giving Out Needles," *New York Times*, January 31, 1988, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/addicts-get-needles-plan-curb-aids/docview/110606972/se-2?accountid=15172>.

⁹⁹ Joyce Purnick, "Koch Bars Easing of Syringe Sales in AIDS Fight," *New York Times*, October 4, 1985, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/koch-bars-easing-syringe-sales-aids-fight/docview/111304817/se-2?accountid=15172>; Barreras and Torruella, "New York City's Struggle," 696.

¹⁰⁰ Purnick, "Koch Bars Easing."

¹⁰¹ Purnick.

¹⁰² Purnick.

In 1987, Dr. Sencer's successor, Dr. Stephen Joseph, picked up the needle exchange torch in the face of the mounting HIV/AIDS crisis.¹⁰³ By then, more than an estimated *half* of the city's two hundred thousand PWUID were infected.¹⁰⁴ Given the dire situation, Dr. Joseph convinced Mayor Koch to give needle exchange another chance.¹⁰⁵ After nearly a year of political maneuvering, state Health Commissioner Dr. David Axelrod and Governor Mario Cuomo agreed to allow a small-scale, experimental Manhattan exchange strictly to evaluate the efficacy of NEPs.¹⁰⁶ The initial plan called for the enrollment of four hundred PWUID on waiting lists for treatment with random assignment to sites offering either counseling and needle exchange, or, for the control group, counseling only.¹⁰⁷

Even prospective contributions to science could not save the proposed NEP from overwhelming criticism. Again, law enforcement and members of the criminal justice system voiced their opposition, while Cardinal John O'Connor suggested such a program would degrade the city's character.¹⁰⁸ Less likely denouncements came from a handful of leaders in drug treatment, who expressed concerns that needle exchange would replace existing treatment options as a more economical alternative.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ Schmalz, "Addicts to Get Needles."

¹⁰⁴ Schmalz.

¹⁰⁵ Peter Kerr, "Needles-for-Addicts Plan: A Choice Between 2 Evils," *New York Times*, February 1, 1988.

¹⁰⁶ Kerr, "Needles-for-Addicts Plan"; Schmalz, "Addicts to Get Needles."

¹⁰⁷ Anderson, "New York Needle Trial," 1509.

¹⁰⁸ Kerr, "Needles-for-Addicts Plan"; Anderson, "New York Needle Trial," 1509.

¹⁰⁹ Anderson, "New York Needle Trial," 1509.

The fiercest opposition, however, came from Black leaders at the city level. The City Council's Black and Hispanic Caucus expressed their displeasure with the program, arguing it sent an implicit message that the government condoned drug use.¹¹⁰ Since the majority of PWUID in New York were Black or Latinx, Councilman Hilton Clark likened the prospective NEP to "genocide" and declared Dr. Joseph should be prosecuted.¹¹¹ Police Commissioner Benjamin Ward, a Black man, was also leery of the intervention as, throughout history, public health experiments have been "too frequently conducted against blacks."¹¹² Particularly in the wake of the horrific Tuskegee syphilis study, terminated and revealed to the public only fifteen years prior, and the federally-funded forced sterilization of young Black women like the Relf sisters in the early 1970s, these reservations were well-founded and recurred across the country.¹¹³ The medical establishment's string of dubious theories in the 1980s attempting to pin Africa as the source of HIV/AIDS, including blaming a non-existent "remote pygmy tribe" allegedly located on the continent, combined with myths tying Haitians to the disease further deteriorated Black trust in American public health.¹¹⁴ Despite the United States' track record, not

¹¹⁰ "Council Calls for End to Free Needles Plan," *New York Times*, December 7, 1988. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/council-calls-end-free-needles-plan/docview/110426084/se-2?accountid=15172>.

¹¹¹ Anderson, "New York Needle Trial," 1512.

¹¹² Bruce Lambert, "The Free Needle Program Is Under Way and Under Fire," *New York Times*, November 13, 1988, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/free-needle-program-is-under-way-fire/docview/110422376/se-2?accountid=15172>.

¹¹³ Jean Heller, "Syphilis Victims in U.S. Study Went Untreated for 40 Years: Syphilis Victims Got No Therapy," *New York Times*, July 26, 1972, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/syphilis-victims-u-s-study-went-untreated-40/docview/119530241/se-2?accountid=15172>; Nelson, *Body and Soul*, xv.

¹¹⁴ Ali Versi, "Africa and the AIDS Myth," *New African* 217 (April 1990): 9-12; Debra Fraser-Howze, "African American Legends: Debra Fraser-Howze, CEO, National Black

all leaders of color were opposed to the NEP. For instance, the Association for Drug Abuse Prevention and Treatment (ADAPT), a primarily Black and Latinx nonprofit headed by Yolanda Serrano, enthusiastically supported New York City's first NEP, even showing up with signs on opening day to cheer on the program.¹¹⁵

By the time New York City's needle exchange opened on November 7, 1988, a series of "not-in-my-backyard" objections whittled away all proposed sites, leaving the basement of a Health Department building in downtown Manhattan as the only option.¹¹⁶ Not only was the exchange site far from most of its target population, but it was also located directly next to police headquarters.¹¹⁷ To make matters worse, research protocols demanded that participants sit through mandatory counseling sessions and be fingerprinted and photographed for an ID card.¹¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, only two people signed up on the first day and enrollment remained abysmal through the ensuing months. Originally conceived as a service to reach thousands, only 270 PWUID participated in the first year, erasing any hope of useful data.¹¹⁹ As a campaign promise directed largely at Black religious leaders, newly-elected Mayor David Dinkins shuttered the

Leadership Commission on AIDS," interview by Roscoe Brown, Video, 7:08, October 30, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xdggfKYrsk8&t=328s>; Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 50.

¹¹⁵ Lambert, "The Free Needle Program."

¹¹⁶ Anderson, "New York Needle Trial," 1511.

¹¹⁷ Susan G. Sherman and Dave Purchase, "Point Defiance: A Case Study of the United States' First Public Needle Exchange in Tacoma, Washington," *International Journal of Drug Policy* 12, no. 1 (2001): 49, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0955-3959\(00\)00074-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0955-3959(00)00074-8).

¹¹⁸ Schmalz, "Addicts to Get Needles."

¹¹⁹ Lambert, "AIDS Battler Gives Needles."

floundering program in 1990, after only thirteen months of operation.¹²⁰ Though the Big Apple would not see another lawful exchange for nearly four years, activists, unimpeded by the red tape and research requirements that sank the first legal American NEP, stepped in to fill the gap.¹²¹

Illicit Exchange in New York City: 1987-1992

Starting in 1987 and continuing throughout the lifespan of the legal NEP, the National AIDS Brigade conducted needle exchange in New York City.¹²² Following the closure of the municipal program, ACT UP/NY began their own program after receiving training from the Brigade. This section seeks to illustrate the impact of the ACT UP/NY exchange from 1990 to 1992, the period in which legal NEPs were absent from New York City.¹²³

In 1987, six years after the start of the AIDS epidemic and forty thousand deaths in, ACT UP was founded out of anger towards the federal government and existing AIDS organizations, who refused to engage in disruptive modes of activism.¹²⁴ Incensed by the lack of response to the AIDS crisis, writer and Yale alumnus Larry Kramer gave a rousing speech on March 10, 1987,

¹²⁰ Anderson, “New York Needle Trial,” 1514.

¹²¹ Richard Elovich and Rod Sorge, “Toward a Community-Based Needle Exchange for New York City,” *AIDS & Public Policy Journal* 6, no. 4 (1991): 165.

¹²² Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 143.

¹²³ Lambert, “10 Seized in Demonstration”; *Needle Exchange Programs: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Health and the Environment of the Committee on Energy and Commerce*, 101st Congress 519 (July 19, 1989) (statement of Dr. Stephen Joseph, Commissioner of Health, New York City).

¹²⁴ Michael Bronski, “The Truth About Reagan and AIDS,” ACT UP Historical Archive, November 2003, <https://actupny.org/reports/reagan.html>; Hubbard, *United in Anger*, 2:30-3:00.

to a group assembled at the New York Gay Community Center.¹²⁵ Asking half the audience to stand, Kramer declared, “You’re all going to be dead in six months. Now what are we going to do about it?”¹²⁶ Two days later, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, more commonly known as ACT UP, was founded to bring attention to AIDS through public demonstrations and disseminate medical information to affected groups.¹²⁷ Within a year, chapters began to spring up across the country, enlisting thousands of volunteers in the battle for survival.¹²⁸ Though ACT UP was largely an association of white gay men, it also included people of color, lesbians, and straight women.¹²⁹ Led by a handful of seasoned activists and ex-journalists, ACT UP organized effective “zaps,” attention-grabbing direct actions, to strong-arm authorities into taking action.¹³⁰

A common critique of ACT UP, as addressed by queer theorist Nishant Shahani and ex-member and sociologist Deborah Gould, was its pervasive focus on issues facing middle-class,

¹²⁵ Hubbard, *United in Anger*, 2:30-3:00.

¹²⁶ Hubbard, 2:30-3:00.

¹²⁷ Hubbard, *United in Anger*, 2:30-3:00; Jon Greenberg, “ACT UP Explained,” ACT UP Historical Archive, 1992, <https://actupny.org/documents/greenbergAU.html>. ACT UP was not originally intended to be an acronym, and the words came months after the founding of the group. Living ACT UP activists, like Maxine Wolfe, also dispute the fact that Larry Kramer founded the organization, seeing this as an oversimplification of a more organic coalescence of concerned individuals. (Maxine Wolfe, “Make it Work for You: Academia and Political Organizing in Lesbian and Gay Communities,” ACT UP Historical Archive, 1997, <https://actupny.org/documents/academia.html>).

¹²⁸ “ACT UP History Capsule, 1989,” ACT UP Historical Archive, accessed January 3, 2021, <https://actupny.org/documents/cron-89.html>.

¹²⁹ Gould, *Moving Politics*, 50.

¹³⁰ Hubbard, *United in Anger*, 11:30-17:00.

white, gay men.¹³¹ The “drugs-into-bodies” agenda dominated the early years of the organization, and leaders typically saw issues facing primarily poor and minority people with AIDS, like lack of housing and basic healthcare, and demands rooted in feminist and racist critiques of ACT UP as distracting to their core mission.¹³² Shahani also flags Kramer’s view of drug use as a “Black issue,” which likely contributed to ACT UP’s delayed concern for PWUID.¹³³ Only after members Rod Elovich, who had a history of substance use, and Dan Williams, a member of the Majority Action Committee, named because racial minorities constituted the majority of AIDS cases, made contact with the Brigade did ACT UP/NY consider providing services to PWUID.¹³⁴

In 1990, just before Mayor Dinkins terminated the legal exchange, Williams and Elovich began shadowing Stuen-Parker.¹³⁵ “When I saw what Jon was doing,” Elovich recounted in an interview, “I completely got it. And I think within a week ... we went to the floor of ACT UP,

¹³¹ Nishant Shahani, “How to Survive the Whitewashing of AIDS: Global Pasts, Transnational Futures,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 3, no. 1 (2016): 1-33, <https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.3.1.0001>; Gould, “ACT UP, Racism.” Some recent scholars and surviving members of ACT UP see this as a partially historiographical issue, where early external narratives focused on heroic stories of white gay men leaving comfortable lifestyles to lead the charge for affordable and timely AIDS medications, ignoring the broader efforts of ACT UP and the contributions of women and minorities. See the aforementioned Gould and Shahani sources, as well as the previously cited article by Maxine Wolfe, “Make it Work for You: Academia and Political Organizing in Lesbian and Gay Communities,” for a more complete discussion.

¹³² Shahani, “How to Survive,” 10; Gould, “ACT UP, Racism,” 57.

¹³³ Shahani, “How to Survive,” 10.

¹³⁴ Richard Elovich, interview by Sarah Schulman, Transcript, 37, May 14, 2007, ACT UP Oral History Project, <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/elovich.pdf>; Dan Williams, interview by Jim Hubbard, Transcript, 20, March 26, 2004, ACT UP Oral History Project, <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/williams.pdf>.

¹³⁵ Elovich interview, 39; Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 143.

and described this, and said we had to do it.”¹³⁶ Initially, Elovich encountered resistance, but with the support of other members with past experiences of addiction, convinced chapter leadership that needle exchange represented a chance for ACT UP to broaden its agenda beyond issues of the white middle class.¹³⁷ In February 1990, after a dozen volunteers learned the “fundamentals of needle exchange” from the Brigade, ACT UP/NY began an NEP to supplement the Brigade’s program.¹³⁸

The next month, ACT UP/NY decided to pursue a multipronged approach, deploying a cadre of dedicated activists accompanied by Stuen-Parker to seek arrest, while a larger group would maintain a covert exchange.¹³⁹ On March 6, 1990, after alerting the press and police of their intentions, Stuen-Parker and nine members of ACT UP/NY openly set up an exchange table at the intersection of Essex and Delancey Streets on the Lower East Side.¹⁴⁰ Amidst frenetic media and throngs of counter-protesters, no syringes were distributed, but all ten exchangers

¹³⁶ Elovich interview, 39.

¹³⁷ Zoe Leonard, interview by Sarah Schulman, Transcript, 27, January 13, 2010, ACT UP Oral History Project, <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/leonard.pdf>; Hanhardt, “Dead Addicts Don’t Recover,” 427.

¹³⁸ Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 143; Elovich and Sorge, “Community-Based Needle Exchange,” 168.

¹³⁹ Leonard interview, 27.

¹⁴⁰ Elovich interview, 45; Kimberleigh Smith, “City’s Needle-Exchange Policy Put to the Test,” *The City Sun* (New York City), April 10, 1991.

were arrested.¹⁴¹ After booking, eight of the demonstrators, including Stuen-Parker, were charged with criminal possession of a hypodermic needle.¹⁴²

On April 8, 1991, Judge Laura Drager gavelled in the trial of the “Needle Eight.”¹⁴³ During their thirteen months in limbo, the activists assembled an all-star defense team, with support from Dr. Joseph of the legal New York City exchange, Dr. Mathilde Krim, founding chair of the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR), and Dr. Don Des Jarlais, a leading academic.¹⁴⁴ Through six days of passionate testimony, the Needle Eight and their allies, inspired by Stuen-Parker’s successful Boston defense, argued that their actions should be considered a medical necessity.¹⁴⁵ After over a month of deliberation, Judge Drager concurred, finding all defendants not guilty.¹⁴⁶ The highly-publicized trial legitimized their operations and signaled to policymakers and the public that needle exchange had merit.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴¹ “AIDS Activists on Trial for Offering Needles,” *New York Post*, April 9, 1991; John Marzulli, “10 Nabbed in Needle Giveaway,” *Daily News*, July 3, 1990.

¹⁴² *New York Post*, “AIDS Activists on Trial.”

¹⁴³ Lambert, “AIDS Protesters Test.”

¹⁴⁴ Elovich interview, 56; Ronald Sullivan, “Needle-Exchangers Had Right to Break Law, Judge Rules,” *New York Times*, June 26, 1991, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/needle-exchangers-had-right-break-law-judge-rules/docview/108740553/se-2?accountid=15172>. Dr. Stephen Joseph, arguably the defense’s most influential witness, was a former target of ACT UP demonstrators. After he and Richard Elovich were stuck in an airport together for three hours, the two made amends and Dr. Joseph agreed to support him and the rest of the Needle Eight in their upcoming trial.

¹⁴⁵ *State of New York v. Gregg Bordowitz et al.*, No. 90N028424, 15 (Criminal Court of the City of New York June 25, 1991).

¹⁴⁶ Sullivan, “Needle-Exchangers Had Right.”

¹⁴⁷ Sullivan.

Starting in early 1990, ACT UP/NY's novice NEP grew rapidly. Beginning with only one weekly site on the Lower East Side, ACT UP extended its operations over the next two years to six sites across three boroughs, exchanging up to 1,300 needles per site, per week.¹⁴⁸ Volunteers, most of whom had experience with addiction or as a substance abuse counselor, distributed syringes, pamphlets, condoms, and bleach.¹⁴⁹ Instead of distributing assembled packs like the Brigade, ACT UP lined up plastic pails of supplies, allowing patrons to customize their kits.¹⁵⁰ This system also lent itself to more conversation, which, in turn, strengthened rapport and provided opportunities to inquire about other needs.¹⁵¹ Zoe Leonard, an ACT UP exchanger, conceptualized her stand not simply as a site for swapping needles, but as a “gateway for social work.”¹⁵² Her perception of the NEP's broad mandate was hardly unique—other activists also made frequent referrals to housing, mental health, and medical organizations.¹⁵³ Unencumbered by mandated maximums, ACT UP's exchange also franchised their efforts, allowing individuals to exchange dozens of needles on behalf of many neighbors.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁸ Catherine Woodard, “Needle Providers Wrestle Law,” *Demand Newsday* (New York City), October 10, 1990; *Public Hearing on Non-Prescription Possession and Sale of Hypodermic Needles: Hearings before the New York Assembly Committee on Health*. 73 (1992) (testimony of Rod Sorge, representative of ACT UP).

¹⁴⁹ *Bordowitz*, No. 90N028424 at 12; Leonard interview, 28.

¹⁵⁰ Elovich interview, 46-47.

¹⁵¹ Elovich, 46-47.

¹⁵² Leonard interview, 28.

¹⁵³ Elovich interview, 46-47.

¹⁵⁴ Sorge testimony, *Public Hearing*, 54-56.

Overall, ACT UP enjoyed positive relations with the surrounding communities, with only a single documented complaint from a methadone clinic asking them to move one block over.¹⁵⁵ Other than the planned arrests, police turned a blind eye to their operations, with one officer even moving his vehicle after volunteers explained it was scaring away their clients.¹⁵⁶ To ensure the collected needles were safely disposed of and would not pose a threat to the community, ACT UP leader Rod Sorge periodically snuck into the city's Department of Health and dropped trash bags full of contaminated syringes in the office of the Deputy Commissioner of Disease Intervention, who was friendly to the organization.¹⁵⁷

Described by Elovich as "ACT UP's longest civil disobedience," the needle exchange network provisioned thousands of New Yorkers with syringes from 1990 to 1992, while the city government was unable to do so.¹⁵⁸ Though ACT UP is relatively well-remembered in the annals of history, their exchange efforts, like those of the Brigade, have been largely ignored by previous scholars.

As evidenced, underground needle exchanges had significant accomplishments. From 1986 to 1990, while state-sponsored NEPs were developing in New Haven, struggling or absent in New York City, and decidedly out of the question in Boston, the National AIDS Brigade and ACT UP filled the void. Distributing hundreds of thousands of needles and connecting PWUID to essential social services, these activist-led organizations worked to stem the tide of the AIDS epidemic while showcasing the benefits of needle exchange in courtrooms and newspapers

¹⁵⁵ *Bordowitz*, No. 90N028424 at 13.

¹⁵⁶ Woodard, "Needle Providers Wrestle Law"; *Bordowitz*, No. 90N028424 at 13.

¹⁵⁷ Sorge testimony, *Public Hearing*, 68.

¹⁵⁸ Elovich interview, 40-41.

across the country. ACT UP and the Brigade were not, however, simply placeholders for legal NEPs. As the following chapter examines, the stories of illicit and licit exchanges are inextricably intertwined.

Chapter 2: The Rise of Legal Needle Exchange Programs

From the outset, needle exchange activists in ACT UP and the National AIDS Brigade saw their work as temporary. Leaders believed their role was to push for satisfactory government-sponsored programs and provide clean syringes in the meantime, not exchange needles for eternity.¹⁵⁹ Underground programs had clear drawbacks: obtaining private funding was a constant struggle and fear of arrest hampered participation. This chapter argues that exchange activists contributed to the creation of legal NEPs through media campaigns, court cases, and presence in legislative debates, and shaped the operations of early licit programs by way of participation and surveillance. Though the National AIDS Brigade and both ACT UP chapters played essential roles in the establishment of legal programs, the Brigade's involvement in the actual implementation of licit NEPs was less substantial than ACT UP/NY and Boston. While the National AIDS Brigade dominated the East Coast needle exchange scene prior to 1991, Stuen-Parker's arrogance, disregard of marginalized voices, and deleterious leadership prevented the Brigade from working directly with legal exchangers, while the more conscientious ACT UP chapters exerted considerable influence over the operations of state-run programs as they began to open in the early 1990s.

The Fall of the National AIDS Brigade

As the probable originators of American needle exchange, Stuen-Parker and the National AIDS Brigade made key contributions to the advancement of legal programs by encouraging the

¹⁵⁹ Skip Blumberg, *The 90's Raw: John Parker*, Hi 8 mm, Documentary, 15:50-16:15, 1990, <https://mediaburn.org/video/the-90s-raw-john-parker/>; "Raw Footage for Three Interviews on Needle Exchange Programs," Northeastern University Library Digital Repository Service Video, 25:00-25:25, 1994, <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/D20199858>.

formation of NEPs in the Northeast and forcing the issue of exchange into legislative and lay debate. However, unlike the ACT UP chapters, their role in the operation of legal programs was minimal, owing to Stuen-Parker's egotism and neglect of the concerns of the communities he sought to work within. These issues came to a climax upon the disastrous opening of a needle exchange storefront in Mission Hill, Boston, which sullied the Brigade's image and prevented future partnerships with other activist groups and governmental agencies.

Throughout Jon Stuen-Parker's life, extreme pride, a penchant for prepotency, and a craving for public recognition were constant. His first forays into organized crime as a preteen were not motivated by material gain, but social power.¹⁶⁰ In prison, he cultivated a reputation for brutality as a preemptive defense measure, but also because "it felt good to dominate."¹⁶¹ Even his first public stunt was not to promote NEPs but to ensure he would be credited for their introduction to Boston.¹⁶² In March 1988, Stuen-Parker caught wind that Mayor Flynn would declare his support for a government-run NEP at an upcoming drug forum.¹⁶³ In response, he showed up outside the venue and attempted to chain himself to a pillar while screaming "Mayor Flynn is stealing our plan!" before being arrested.¹⁶⁴ Stuen-Parker's concern was not that there may be a licit NEP—that was his goal all along—but that the Mayor was co-opting "his" idea without acknowledgment.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁰ Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 20.

¹⁶¹ Stuen-Parker, 73, 103-104.

¹⁶² Hernandez, "Distributor of Needles."

¹⁶³ Hernandez, "Distributor of Needles."

¹⁶⁴ Hernandez, "Flynn, Johnston Vow."

¹⁶⁵ Blumberg, *The 90's Raw*, 15:50-16:15.

As the National AIDS Brigade rose to prominence in 1989, Stuen-Parker became increasingly possessive of needle exchange and lashed out at those who disagreed with his methods or sought independence.¹⁶⁶ In January of 1990, the *Yale Daily News* published a two-page article entitled “Parker, AIDS Activist, Seen as ‘Difficult’,” where other New Haven AIDS leaders came forward with their grievances. Describing him as “impossible to work with,” “too concerned with media attention,” “stridently independent,” “a renegade,” and “damaging the AIDS movement from the inside,” the article began chipping away at Stuen-Parker’s noble image.¹⁶⁷ Even Alvin Novick, who less than six months earlier sang his praises in the *New York Times*, admitted Jon Stuen-Parker was “self-centered, unforgiving, demanding” and “is often self-defeating when he insists that people see things his way.”¹⁶⁸ An hour of raw footage following Stuen-Parker taken just two weeks before the article’s publishing corroborates these complaints.¹⁶⁹

On January 5, 1990, cameramen from *The 90’s*, a television series, and a three-person crew from ABC’s *Nightline* shadowed Stuen-Parker for a day to document his exchange activities.¹⁷⁰ As the reporters begin filming Stuen-Parker swapping needles in a public square, it is immediately clear that the participants are wary of the cameras.¹⁷¹ Ignoring their apprehension, Stuen-Parker waves the journalists closer and begins cajoling his clients for positive testimonials,

¹⁶⁶ Wilgoren, “Parker, AIDS Brigade Pioneer.”

¹⁶⁷ Wilgoren.

¹⁶⁸ Wilgoren.

¹⁶⁹ Blumberg, *The 90's Raw*.

¹⁷⁰ Blumberg.

¹⁷¹ Blumberg, 20:10.

even physically holding one man in front of the cameras.¹⁷² After giving his short statement, another man asks Stuen-Parker to ensure his face is not shown, as he currently has warrants out for his arrest.¹⁷³ Though Stuen-Parker agrees, the man's face is visible for the entire length of his appearance.¹⁷⁴

Night falls and Stuen-Parker leads the five men, as well as several additional newspaper reporters he picks up on the way, to an active shooting gallery.¹⁷⁵ Despite the protests of the people inside, he ushers in all seven journalists, packing the tiny room to the brim (fig. 1).¹⁷⁶



Figure 1. Jon Stuen-Parker, in the teal jacket, exchanges needles with a man in a New Haven shooting gallery with seven journalists and cameramen in tow. (Image from Skip Blumberg, *The 90's Raw: John Parker*, Hi 8 mm, Documentary, 43:20, 1990, <https://mediaburn.org/video/the-90s-raw-john-parker/>).

¹⁷² Blumberg, 27:40-28:00.

¹⁷³ Blumberg, 31:50.

¹⁷⁴ Blumberg, 31:04-31:50.

¹⁷⁵ Blumberg, 38:50-40:00.

¹⁷⁶ Blumberg, 40:00-43:20.

After several Brigade members enter the gallery, Stuen-Parker begins leading a group meeting concerning the Health Department's imminent termination of support.¹⁷⁷ He suggests organizing a protest or petition pressuring the department to continue supplying the Brigade with bleach without much excitement from his team.¹⁷⁸ When a man points out that bleach does not perfectly sterilize needles anyway, Stuen-Parker shouts him down and chastises him for not taking his side in front of the media.¹⁷⁹ After another member laments the lack of cooperation between AIDS organizations, Stuen-Parker reminds the group that a "gay-IV drug user battle" is raging, prompted by the "gays'" alleged desire to control all AIDS funding.¹⁸⁰ From Stuen-Parker's perspective, other AIDS organizations were rivals to be subjugated, not allies to work in concert with. To outshine his competitors, he aggressively sought out favorable media coverage, even if detrimental to the individuals he was working to help.

In 1991, Stuen-Parker's headstrong attitude came to a head when he opened a needle exchange storefront in Mission Hill, Boston.¹⁸¹ For the past three years, the Brigade exchanged needles with Mission Hill residents from a van, but in early January, announced they would open a permanent outpost without any discussion with the predominantly Black and low-income

¹⁷⁷ Blumberg, 51:10.

¹⁷⁸ Blumberg, 55:20-56:00, 1:03:30-1:04:20.

¹⁷⁹ Blumberg, 59:20-1:00:30.

¹⁸⁰ Blumberg, 1:01:00-1:01:45.

¹⁸¹ Amy Goldstein, "Clean Needle Programs for Addicts Proliferate," *Washington Post*, April 23, 1991, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/clean-needle-programs-addicts-proliferate/docview/408093625/se-2?accountid=15172>.

community.¹⁸² Though Stuen-Parker's autobiography demonstrates that he was at least peripherally aware of race, he seemed to understand racism as discriminatory interpersonal interactions practiced exclusively by others.¹⁸³ In his recollections, he never reflected upon the racial dynamics of the Brigade's exchange work and appeared to ignore his own racial positionality before entering communities of color. Thus, he failed to recognize that, given the history of American public health, his brute-force entry into Mission Hill might arouse suspicion and alarm. Instead, he believed the time-sensitive nature of the AIDS crisis justified the bypass of any community input.¹⁸⁴

The inhabitants of Mission Hill, however, did not share in this belief. Outraged that they had not been consulted, residents immediately banded together to speak out against the impending storefront and demand that the Brigade include them in its decision-making processes.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² Elizabeth Yukins, "Needle Exchange Heatedly Debated in Boston; Residents and Community Activists Protest the Opening of a Needle Exchange Storefront in a Boston Neighborhood," *Gay Community News* (Boston), February 10, 1991, <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/needle-exchange-heatedly-debated-boston-residents/docview/199421551/se-2?accountid=15172>; Goldstein, "Clean Needle Programs."

¹⁸³ Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 128, 136. Stuen-Parker was aware that he, as a white man, was less likely to be stopped by police while driving, and believed his race made it more difficult for him to attract exchange clients. He also describes nearly every single individual mentioned in his book by their race and noted in his journal entries when he saw Black individuals in mostly white spaces. For more complete discussions of the role of race in American public health, see: Nelson, *Body and Soul*; Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*.

¹⁸⁴ "Eagerness in AIDS Fight Ruffles a Neighborhood," *New York Times*, January 31, 1991, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/eagerness-aids-fight-ruffles-neighborhood/docview/108842314/se-2?accountid=15172>; Yukins, "Needle Exchange Heatedly Debated."

¹⁸⁵ *New York Times*, "Eagerness in AIDS Fight."

To appease the community, three members of the Brigade's board agreed to meet with the Mission Hill Neighborhood Association and the Treatment on Demand Coalition, an opposing organization advocating for greater treatment accessibility in place of harm reduction initiatives.¹⁸⁶ After a prolonged negotiation, the delegates agreed to allow the Brigade to open the storefront as intended if exchange services were put on hold.¹⁸⁷ Stuen-Parker, who was not present for the meeting, was enraged by his board's compromise and pledged to exchange needles on opening day.¹⁸⁸ Citing the urgency of the AIDS epidemic, George McGrath, Stuen-Parker's loyal spokesman and friend from Deer Island, told the *New York Times*, "I really don't care if the community leaders were consulted. We really don't have time to make sure everyone has their feathers smoothed."¹⁸⁹ Refusing to give any ground, Stuen-Parker resolved to staff the exchange himself and opened as planned on January 24.¹⁹⁰

Unified by their hatred for Stuen-Parker, hundreds of residents and Treatment on Demand members arrived to picket the entrance of the storefront on opening day.¹⁹¹ Never one to back down from a fight, Stuen-Parker walked out to face the crowd.¹⁹² The situation rapidly escalated, leading to an ugly confrontation between Stuen-Parker and Rev. Grayland Ellis-

¹⁸⁶ Yukins, "Needle Exchange Heatedly Debated."

¹⁸⁷ Yukins.

¹⁸⁸ Yukins.

¹⁸⁹ *New York Times*, "Eagerness in AIDS Fight."

¹⁹⁰ *New York Times*.

¹⁹¹ Yukins, "Needle Exchange Heatedly Debated."

¹⁹² *New York Times*, "Eagerness in AIDS Fight."

Hagler, a local minister and vocal Treatment on Demand organizer.¹⁹³ Opposing sources leave differing accounts of the incident. According to Stuen-Parker's autobiography, Rev. Ellis-Hagler punched him in the head so forcefully that Stuen-Parker was hospitalized.¹⁹⁴ He was then "wrongly charged" with assault and battery, but after chaining himself to the doors of the Roxbury courthouse twice, had his case thrown out.¹⁹⁵ The *New York Times*, however, reported that Stuen-Parker bit Rev. Ellis-Hagler on the face, leading the minister to shove him to the ground.¹⁹⁶ Stuen-Parker filed charges against Rev. Ellis-Hagler for knocking him down, but they were quickly dismissed.¹⁹⁷

Irrespective of the fight's exact mechanics, the consequences for Stuen-Parker and the Brigade were swift and severe. The Brigade's nine-member board, initially frustrated by Stuen-Parker's refusal to abide by the original deal and now infuriated by his public tussle, voted to remove him and McGrath from the governing body on January 31.¹⁹⁸ Board member Will Murphy justified the dramatic move, telling the *Gay Community News*, "Jon has taken an 'all or nothing approach,' and he wants to go down in a blaze of glory ... the issue has become an ego thing: a conflict of Jon Parker versus the rest of the world."¹⁹⁹ Despite the board's best attempts to shake themselves of Stuen-Parker's soured name, the Brigade remained widely disliked in

¹⁹³ *New York Times*.

¹⁹⁴ Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 140.

¹⁹⁵ Stuen-Parker, 140.

¹⁹⁶ *New York Times*, "Eagerness in AIDS Fight."

¹⁹⁷ *New York Times*.

¹⁹⁸ *New York Times*.

¹⁹⁹ Yukins, "Needle Exchange Heatedly Debated."

Mission Hill.²⁰⁰ Neil Sullivan, the chief advisor to Mayor Flynn, observed that the controversy had “so far alienated the community that people not only oppose Parker, but now oppose the issue of needle exchange itself.”²⁰¹

Even with opposition at an all-time high, Stuen-Parker set out to regain control of the Brigade.²⁰² To flush out his opponents, Stuen-Parker dissolved the entire board, leaving only himself and McGrath.²⁰³ In an attempt to wrest back power, a group of Brigade volunteers headed by ex-board member Jim Luger made a deal with Mayor Flynn, agreeing to halt needle exchange in Mission Hill if they were given control of the Brigade.²⁰⁴ The Mayor agreed, and restraining orders barring Stuen-Parker and his allies from entering the storefront were swiftly issued.²⁰⁵ Several weeks later, however, the Luger-led faction of the Brigade inexplicably abandoned the storefront, prompting Stuen-Parker’s followers to break in and reclaim the space.²⁰⁶ The previous occupants, dubbed the “AIDS whores” by Stuen-Parker for their purported exploitation of the AIDS crisis for personal gain, had taken \$5,000 in cash and left

²⁰⁰ Yukins.

²⁰¹ Yukins.

²⁰² Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 127.

²⁰³ Yukins, “Needle Exchange Heatedly Debated.”

²⁰⁴ Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 127; Goldstein, “Clean Needle Programs.”

²⁰⁵ Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 127.

²⁰⁶ Stuen-Parker, 127.

\$6,000 in unpaid utility bills.²⁰⁷ Though he triumphed in the battle for ownership, the organization Stuen-Parker won back was in financial ruin.²⁰⁸

Witnessing the chaos caused by Stuen-Parker, external support for the Brigade plummeted. Larry Kessler, Director of Boston's AIDS Action Committee, expelled the Brigade from the committee's "IV drug user" task force and denounced their biannual AIDS Prevention Walk.²⁰⁹ Similarly, Sher Horosko of the New Haven MTFA withdrew support for the walks and terminated all material contributions.²¹⁰ Likely due to the influence of Luger, a prominent member of both groups, ACT UP/Boston also cut ties with the Brigade and resolved to establish their own NEP.²¹¹ Based on ACT UP/Boston's existing network of "rubber fairies," volunteers who distributed condoms in gay cruising areas, the newly-formed "IV League" working group began an exchange targeting "gay men, drag queens, and sex workers" in late February of

²⁰⁷ Stuen-Parker, 127.

²⁰⁸ Stuen-Parker, 127. There is some ambiguity over the exact timeline of the fight for control of the National AIDS Brigade between Jon Stuen-Parker and Jim Luger. While Stuen-Parker's autobiography describes the entirety of the struggle lasting only a few weeks, two newspaper articles published in April and May of 1991 describe Jim Luger as the Director of the National AIDS Brigade. Both articles were about court proceedings regarding charges leveled against Luger in 1990 for needle exchange, when he was Director of the Brigade. I believe that the journalists mistakenly assumed Luger was still in the same role in the spring of 1991, when he had to answer for the charges incurred the previous year. However, it is possible that Stuen-Parker is misremembering the length of time Luger held the Brigade's reins, and that he did not regain control until the early summer of 1991. (Goldstein, "Clean Needle Programs"; Scott Wenger, "Drug Needle Distributors -- Lifesavers or Lawbreakers?," *Hartford Courant*, May 29, 1991, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/drug-needle-distributors-lifesavers-lawbreakers/docview/1851303584/se-2?accountid=15172>.)

²⁰⁹ "National AIDS Brigade: History."

²¹⁰ "National AIDS Brigade: History."

²¹¹ Luger, "Background on ACT UP/Boston."

1991.²¹² All funding previously funneled into Stuen-Parker’s NEP was redirected toward their in-house exchange, worsening the Brigade’s financial struggles.²¹³

Nearly a year before, ACT UP/NY also parted ways with the Brigade over Stuen-Parker’s refusal to acknowledge the role of race in exchange activism. While coordinating who would be present at the open exchange leading to the *Needle Eight* case, Stuen-Parker insisted that there be at least one person of color.²¹⁴ Given the rampant belief that minorities were universally opposed to needle exchange, Stuen-Parker believed that diverse representation would improve public perception of their efforts.²¹⁵ Richard Elovich of the ACT UP/NY exchange agreed with Stuen-Parker’s premise but felt his coercive recruitment tactics were unethical.²¹⁶ As Elovich recollected, Stuen-Parker “was like a Pied Piper with a lot of guys on the street. And he said to them; this is what you got to do. You got to do this with us; you got to do it openly with us; and you got to get arrested.”²¹⁷ Concerned that Black demonstrators would be treated particularly badly by the criminal justice system, Elovich confronted Stuen-Parker about the lack of “informed consent” in his enlistment procedures.²¹⁸ The two “practically came to blows on the street” and never reconciled.²¹⁹ The fight, combined with Stuen-Parker’s insistence that ACT

²¹² Luger.

²¹³ Luger.

²¹⁴ Elovich interview, 44-45.

²¹⁵ Elovich, 44-45.

²¹⁶ Elovich, 45.

²¹⁷ Elovich, 44-45.

²¹⁸ Elovich, 45.

²¹⁹ Elovich, 45.

UP/NY only distribute needles under his purview, prompted the dissociation of the two organizations.²²⁰

As demonstrated, the National AIDS Brigade experienced a dramatic fall from grace in 1991. Rooted in Stuen-Parker's unwillingness to cooperate with other AIDS activists and the residents of the communities he served, the Mission Hill calamity ensured the Brigade would not be offered a seat at the table when planning for licit NEPs began in the coming years. Stuen-Parker's aggression and stubbornness were not simply personality quirks incidental to the broader story of American needle exchange—his disposition was a key factor in explaining the differential trajectories of the Brigade and the ACT UP chapters, as explored in the following sections.

The National AIDS Brigade Post-1991

Despite their weakened position after the events of 1991, the National AIDS Brigade remained engaged in the fight for legal NEPs outside the general AIDS activism community through the mid-1990s. Though restrained by persisting hostilities with ACT UP and other groups, the Brigade continued to advance the issue of licit exchange by challenging state prescription laws and surveilling New Haven's budding legal NEP to ensure it reached those who needed it most.

From 1991 to 1995, the National AIDS Brigade limped along with Stuen-Parker at its helm. Though the Brigade continued to exchange needles through the early 1990s, their impact was limited by their abysmal relationships with other AIDS organizations.²²¹ Spoiled relations

²²⁰ Elovich, 45.

²²¹ Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 132.

with the Boston AIDS Action Committee, which offered grants to groups like ACT UP, meant the National AIDS Brigade had few outlets for income.²²² As a result, the Brigade struggled to fund legal bills and exchange supplies, and Stuen-Parker himself defaulted on \$120,000 of student loans.²²³ Other groups took a more interventionist approach in repressing the Brigade's efforts. ACT UP/Boston and New York engaged in active conflict with the Brigade, inciting shouting matches on the street and calling the police on Brigade volunteers in an attempt to terminate their exchanges.²²⁴ The Treatment on Demand Coalition also remained faithful opponents, meeting Brigade members at their exchange in front of the Boston City Hospital each week to harass exchangers.²²⁵ On May 28, 1991, tensions boiled over and Treatment on Demand demonstrators beat a Brigade volunteer, resulting in a weekly police presence thereafter.²²⁶

Despite significant setbacks, by 1995, the Brigade succeeded in having members arrested in all states requiring a prescription to purchase needles.²²⁷ Out of the fourteen needle exchange trials in the US between 1988 and 1994, Brigade volunteers were the defendants in twelve and

²²² David Stitt to David Aronstein, March 28, 1994, Box 1, ACT UP/Boston (David Stitt) collection, Northeastern University Archives, Boston; Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 127. To generate any income, the Brigade relied on members canning for money, though thefts were common, and Stuen-Parker's illegal nighttime clam digging. In a single night, Stuen-Parker could dig upwards of 200 pounds of clams, which he would sell to local restaurants (Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 120, 124, 145-146).

²²³ Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 130.

²²⁴ Stuen-Parker, 119, 142, 144.

²²⁵ Stuen-Parker, 147.

²²⁶ Stuen-Parker, 147.

²²⁷ Paul de la Garza, "AIDS Activists Cleared after Giving Needles to Addicts," *Chicago Tribune*, December 9, 1994, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/aids-activists-cleared-after-giving-needles/docview/1969055369/se-2?accountid=15172>.

had charges dismissed or received acquittals in all but two.²²⁸ Some trials with Brigade involvement, like the *Needle Eight* and *Leno* cases discussed in the following sections, directly influenced policymakers. More commonly, these legal battles generated media attention for the issue of needle exchange and, in some instances, inspired citizens to begin their own programs. In Redwood City, California, for example, the jury foreman in a Brigade trial once “repulsed” by AIDS was so moved by defendants’ case that he began illegally exchanging afterward, telling the *New York Times*, “I could not hide from what I learned.”²²⁹

Though the legal New Haven NEP never worked with the Brigade due to its poor image, Brigade members testified in support of the MTFAs’ proposed exchange in 1988, and after the legal exchange was on its feet, monitored its activities.²³⁰ In 1992, upon hearing complaints that outreach workers were seldom seen, Brigade members contacted a reporter from the *New Haven Advocate* and gave her a tour of local shooting galleries and soup kitchens where residents confirmed they had never seen the outreach team.²³¹ The ensuing exposé ran on the front page, forcing Sher Horosko to resign.²³²

²²⁸ Harlow and Sorge, *Needle Exchange*, 747-748.

²²⁹ Jane Gross, “Doing His Duty, Juror Finds a Cause: Once Repulsed by AIDS, He Swaps Needles to Fight It,” *New York Times*, May 6, 1991, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/doing-his-duty-juror-finds-cause/docview/108800845/se-2?accountid=15172>.

²³⁰ Curtis, “What the Needles Said.”

²³¹ Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 143.

²³² Stuen-Parker, 143.

In 1995, with legal exchanges in New York City, New Haven, and Boston, the need for the Brigade's political instigation waned.²³³ In the late 1990s, Stuen-Parker and a few remaining Brigade members retreated to Asia, organizing trips to establish exchanges in Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and China.²³⁴ Though Stuen-Parker maintained some presence in American AIDS work through at least the spring of 1999, his focus shifted to high school condom programs and raising awareness of the dangers of "p-dope," a supposedly new, more addictive heroin variant spreading across the East Coast.²³⁵ In a last-ditch effort to reenter the limelight, Stuen-Parker loudly rang the p-dope alarm bells, warning the press it contained a mystery ingredient capable of "cutting through" methadone.²³⁶ Stuen-Parker's campaign never gained much traction and disintegrated completely in 1999, when chemical analyses found p-dope was just high-purity heroin.²³⁷

Although the Brigade never directly participated in the operations of legal programs due to Stuen-Parker's hubris and mishandling of community relations, it played a considerable role in their creation in the Northeast. By establishing crucial legal precedents, supporting exchange

²³³ Amanda Bennett, "Needle-Swap Programs Spark Life-and-Death Debates," *Wall Street Journal*, July 10, 1996, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/health/docview/1441137162/se-2?accountid=15172>.

²³⁴ Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 161, 233.

²³⁵ Christopher Wren, "For Heroin's New Users, a Long, Hard Fall: Couple's Addiction Reflects Lure of a Purer, More Potent Drug," *New York Times*, May 9, 1999, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/heroins-new-users-long-hard-fall/docview/110111499/se-2?accountid=15172>; Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 124, 153, 168.

²³⁶ Jason Gay, "P-Doped Up: Meet the Heroin from Hell," *Boston Phoenix*, May 13, 1998; Christopher Wren, "Getting Hooked Faster, but Why?," *New York Times*, May 9, 1999, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/getting-hooked-faster-why/docview/110111569/se-2?accountid=15172>; Stuen-Parker, *From Jail to Yale*, 153.

²³⁷ Wren, "For Heroin's New Users"; Wren, "Getting Hooked Faster."

advocates in the Connecticut legislature, monitoring licit NEPs, and initiating the involvement of other groups, like ACT UP, in needle exchange, the Brigade made undeniable contributions to the cause of needle exchange through the mid-1990s.

The Return of Legal Needle Exchanges in New York City

Like the Brigade, ACT UP/NY sought to promote the creation of legal exchanges through advocacy and litigation. A comparatively cooperative organization, ACT UP/NY proved instrumental in the struggle to change Mayor Dinkins' position on NEPs and directed the two largest licit programs in New York City post-legalization.

In 1991, less than two years after Mayor Dinkins closed the first legal program, the question of legal NEPs came back on the agenda as public support for needle exchange grew due to activism and new research. In May, Judge Drager released her twenty-nine-page *Needle Eight* decision, acquitting Stuen-Parker and the ACT UP volunteers on the basis of the medical necessity defense.²³⁸ The opinion rested largely on the merits of needle exchange as a public health strategy, and, given the judge's careful and systematic weighing of all available evidence, proved influential in changing local stakeholders' opinions.²³⁹ The summer of 1991 also saw the release of two critical new studies. The Johns Hopkins AIDS Link to Intravenous Experience (ALIVE) paper compared two cohorts of PWUID in Baltimore, one with diabetes or an immediate family member with diabetes, and, therefore, a lawful route to clean needles, and a

²³⁸ *Bordowitz*, No. 90N028424.

²³⁹ Mireya Navarro, "Needle Swap Programs Gain Wider Acceptance," *New York Times*, October 30, 1991, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/needle-swap-programs-gain-wider-acceptance/docview/108697387/se-2?accountid=15172>.

cohort without.²⁴⁰ The ALIVE study found a significantly lower HIV prevalence among the group with sterile syringe access.²⁴¹ The linchpin came on July 31, 1991, when Yale researchers evaluating the New Haven needle exchange unveiled their famous 33 percent reduction in new HIV infections among NEP participants.²⁴² Within a week, the National Commission on AIDS endorsed needle exchange, citing the New Haven research.²⁴³ The announcement also prompted Mayor Dinkins to assemble a working group of city commissioners to make recommendations based on the study.²⁴⁴

By 1992, it was clear the tide was turning in New York City. Behind closed doors, Ruth Messinger, Borough President of Manhattan, told Mayor Dinkins that her public support of needle exchange was imminent.²⁴⁵ Advisors to Mayor Dinkins encouraged him to “get out in front of” her endorsement, particularly since he had not made any progress on issues of substance use after the 1,100 additional treatment slots he promised failed to materialize.²⁴⁶ With pressure mounting, the Mayor agreed to rescind his objection to demonstration NEPs if the city did not have to pay for them and the Black Leadership Commission on AIDS (BLCA), a

²⁴⁰ David Vlahov et al., “The ALIVE Study, A Longitudinal Study Of HIV-1 Infection in Intravenous Drug Users: Description of Methods and Characteristics of Participants,” *NIDA Research Monograph* 109 (1991): 75-100, <https://doi.org/10.1037/e496262006-006>.

²⁴¹ Vlahov et al., “The ALIVE Study.”

²⁴² Navarro, “Yale Study Reports.”

²⁴³ Philip Hilts, “AIDS Panel Backs Efforts to Exchange Drug Users’ Needles,” *New York Times*, July 8, 1991, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/aids-panel-backs-efforts-exchange-drug-users/docview/428175448/se-2?accountid=15172>.

²⁴⁴ Navarro, “Needle Swap Programs.”

²⁴⁵ Elovich interview, 56.

²⁴⁶ Elovich, 56-57.

nationally-renowned, New York-based assembly of Black clergy, entrepreneurs, healthcare experts, and treatment providers, supported his change of mind.²⁴⁷ In a tense meeting, BLCA founder Debra Fraser-Howze and ACT UP needle exchangers Rod Sorge and Tim Sweeney presented the argument for NEPs to the commission.²⁴⁸ Though some members still had their reservations, the BLCA agreed they would not stand in the way of legal exchange.²⁴⁹

On May 13, 1992, the Dinkins administration announced their policy reversal and the opening of three pilot NEPs funded entirely by the New York State Department of Health and amfAR.²⁵⁰ The trial NEPs and their clientele would be granted a temporary exemption from state prescription and paraphernalia laws during a three-year evaluation headed by Dr. Don Des Jarlais.²⁵¹ Learning from the failure of the city's first legal NEP, the new exchanges would be operated by community-based organizations.²⁵²

²⁴⁷ Fraser-Howze, "African American Legends," 5:45; Elovich interview, 56-57.

²⁴⁸ Elovich interview, 57.

²⁴⁹ Elovich, 57.

²⁵⁰ Mireya Navarro, "Needle Swaps to Be Revived to Curb AIDS," *New York Times*, May 14, 1992, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/needle-swaps-be-revived-curb-aids/docview/428513699/se-2?accountid=15172>.

²⁵¹ Navarro, "Needle Swaps"; Felicia Lee, "Needle Exchange Programs Shown to Slow H.I.V. Rates," *New York Times*, November 26, 1994, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/needle-exchange-programs-shown-slow-h-i-v-rates/docview/429941997/se-2?accountid=15172>.

²⁵² Navarro, "Needle Swaps."

Between July and November 1922, four NEPs, all of which had a direct ACT UP connection, received authorization and funding.²⁵³ Before legalization, ACT UP partitioned its needle exchange efforts into three relatively autonomous geographic factions.²⁵⁴ The Lower East Side team became the Lower East Side Needle Exchange Program (LESNEP), whose director, Allan Clear, was an ACT UP leader.²⁵⁵ The Bronx and Upper Manhattan team underwent a similar transition, rebranding itself as the Bronx-Harlem Needle Exchange Program (BHNEP) and operating under ACT UP activist Rod Sorge in partnership with the Minority Task Force on AIDS.²⁵⁶ The final ACT UP team in Brooklyn handed off their operations to longtime ally Yolanda Serrano, who ran the NEP under her non-profit, ADAPT.²⁵⁷ The city granted the fourth approved program to Housing Works, an organization stemming from the ACT UP Housing Committee dedicated to serving people experiencing homelessness with AIDS.²⁵⁸

With legal status and consistent funding, the LESNEP and BHNEP, soon renamed the New York Harm Reduction Educators, dramatically scaled up their needle dispensation: within six months of attaining a legal waiver, each NEP quintupled its client base and distributed over

²⁵³ Mireya Navarro, “New York Needle Exchange Called Surprisingly Effective,” *New York Times*, February 18, 1993, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/new-york-needle-exchanges-called-surprisingly/docview/109219343/se-2?accountid=15172>.

²⁵⁴ Donald Grove, interview by Sarah Schulman, Transcript, 41, July 1, 2008, ACT UP Oral History Project, <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/grove.pdf>.

²⁵⁵ Grove interview, 41-43; Elovich and Sorge, “Community-Based Needle Exchange,” 165.

²⁵⁶ Grove interview, 41-43; Navarro, “Needle Swaps.”

²⁵⁷ Lee, “Programs Shown to Slow HIV”; Grove interview, 42.

²⁵⁸ Lee, “Programs Shown to Slow HIV”; Janet Allon, “New Tension for City and AIDS Group,” *New York Times*, March 1, 1988, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/new-tension-city-aids-group/docview/109823461/se-2?accountid=15172>.

13,000 needles weekly.²⁵⁹ The LESNEP, now open six days per week, added acupuncture, GED courses, massages, flu shots, and spiritual services to their offerings.²⁶⁰ When Dr. Des Jarlais and his collaborator, Dr. Denise Paone, published their initial findings, the data showed an HIV infection rate of 2 percent per year for PWUID using an NEP, while PWUID outside the programs had an infection rate of 4 to 7 percent.²⁶¹ While skeptics certainly remained, the hard evidence demonstrated that the legal exchange trial was a success and the NEPs were here to stay.²⁶²

Though both have undergone reorganization and name changes, the LESNEP and the New York Harm Reduction educators still exist today.²⁶³ While both nonprofits openly acknowledge their roots, secondary literature has largely overlooked the central role of ACT UP in initiating and leading the first wave of successful, licit needle exchanges in New York City.

Rise of Legal Needle Exchange in Boston

Like their sister chapter in New York, ACT UP/Boston helped establish the first long-term legal exchanges in Massachusetts through legislative lobbying and test case litigation. As members of the Clean Coalition, which included the ACLU, AIDS Action Committee, and the National AIDS Brigade prior to their Mission Hill fiasco, ACT UP fought to improve public

²⁵⁹ Navarro, “Exchange Called Surprisingly Effective.”

²⁶⁰ Lee, “Programs Shown to Slow HIV.”

²⁶¹ Lee.

²⁶² Navarro, “Exchange Called Surprisingly Effective”; Lee, “Programs Shown to Slow HIV.”

²⁶³ “Alliance LES Harm Reduction Center,” The Alliance for Positive Change, accessed January 21, 2021, <https://alliance.nyc/leshrc>; “What We Do,” New York Harm Reduction Educators, accessed January 21, 2021, <http://nyhre.org/about/what-we-do/>.

opinion and reverse policymakers' stances on needle exchange.²⁶⁴ Intensifying their efforts after the 1991 departure of staunch NEP opponent Gov. Dukakis and his public health appointees, the Clean Coalition agitated for a system of government-funded NEPs operating under an exemption from state laws.²⁶⁵ In service of this goal, ACT UP activists wrote pro-exchange op-eds, appeared on radio and television shows, and testified for the State's Joint Health Care Committee.²⁶⁶

Perhaps most importantly, ACT UP also funded the appeal case of Harry Leno, who, in 1991, was arrested for exchanging needles in Boston.²⁶⁷ An ex-Brigade volunteer and grandfather with a history of addiction, Leno employed the traditional medical necessity defense at the state's Supreme Judicial Court.²⁶⁸ Though the court decided against Leno in 1993, Chief Justice Paul J. Liacos explicitly encouraged the Massachusetts legislature to decriminalize needle distribution in his concurring decision, citing "the overwhelming and uncontroverted expert evidence presented at trial."²⁶⁹ The relative contributions of the *Leno* decision, Clean Coalition's lobbying in the state legislature, and ACT UP's public-facing advocacy are difficult to discern, but by September 1993, the new Public Health Commissioner, David Mulligan, and a critical

²⁶⁴ David Stitt and Mike Schement, "ACT UP IV League Report to the AIDS Action Committee," 1993, Box 1, ACT UP/Boston (David Stitt) collection, Northeastern University Archives, Boston.

²⁶⁵ Stitt and Schement, "ACT UP IV League Report."

²⁶⁶ Stitt and Schement.

²⁶⁷ Stitt and Schement.

²⁶⁸ Commonwealth of Massachusetts v. Harry W. Leno, Jr., & another, 415 Mass 835, 835-836 (Supreme Judicial Court 1993).

²⁶⁹ *Leno*, 415 Mass at 842.

mass of legislators were behind needle exchange.²⁷⁰ The next month, the legislature passed a bill allowing needle exchanges in consenting communities, and after receiving a \$100,000 grant, the Boston's Department of Health and Hospitals (DHH) began making plans for a pilot needle exchange program (PNEP).²⁷¹

As the eminent Boston exchange, the city asked the IV League to join the DHH advisory group on NEPs.²⁷² This inclusion led to the approval of ACT UP's program "as an integral part of DHH's PNEP proposal," where IV League routes would be converted into van-based PNEP sites.²⁷³ In March 1994, several IV League programs officially traded in autonomy for legal protection and began working as sanctioned PNEP routes under the watch of an evaluator from the Health Department.²⁷⁴ IV Leaguers still running illicit sites also encouraged their participants to join the PNEP instead, which offered referrals to healthcare and treatment, as well as ID cards that, in theory, conferred immunity from arrest for needle possession.²⁷⁵ As the official program subsumed much of the IV League's exchange operations, activists discovered that with municipal support came "a great deal of bureaucratization and institutionalization" they found

²⁷⁰ Edward McHugh, "Main South Group Fights Needle Bill," *Telegram & Gazette* (Worcester), March 24, 1993, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/main-south-group-fights-needle-bill/docview/268503978/se-2?accountid=15172>.

²⁷¹ "Boston, Cambridge to Begin Needle Exchange Program," *Telegram & Gazette* (Worcester), October 21, 1993, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/boston-cambridge-begin-needle-exchange-program/docview/268522128/se-2?accountid=15172>.

²⁷² Stitt and Schement, "ACT UP IV League Report."

²⁷³ Stitt and Schement.

²⁷⁴ David Stitt to David Aronstein, March 28, 1994, ACT UP/Boston Collection; Schement and Jarvis Chen, "ACT UP/Boston Needle Exchange."

²⁷⁵ Schement and Jarvis Chen, "ACT UP/Boston Needle Exchange."

encumbering but continued to outwardly support the PNEP to avoid damaging public opinion on needle exchange.²⁷⁶

In the fall of 1995, the PNEP declared victory after a municipal evaluation found a reduction in syringe sharing and an increase in participants accessing drug treatment.²⁷⁷ With the nod from Governor William Weld, Mulligan began pushing for ten additional programs across the state.²⁷⁸ Though NEPs remain controversial, thirty-four Massachusetts towns and cities now have programs, thanks in part to the vision and leadership of early activist-led underground exchanges.²⁷⁹

As illustrated, the story of illicit exchanges is not simply a disconnected prologue from that of ensuing legal exchanges. Though the trajectory of the National AIDS Brigade and the ACT UP programs sharply diverge after 1991, both underground NEPs directly contributed to the creation of successful licit programs before eventually yielding to them. Suffering from a bad reputation and brash leadership, the Brigade's influence on legal NEPs was less direct, while ACT UP, who enjoyed strong relationships with other AIDS organizations, a superior resource

²⁷⁶ "Interviews on Needle Exchange Programs," Northeastern University Library, 25:27.

²⁷⁷ "Commissioner Backs Local Choice on Needle Exchange," *Telegram & Gazette* (Worcester), September 24, 1995, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/commissioner-backs-local-choice-on-needle/docview/268581250/se-2?accountid=15172>.

²⁷⁸ Kathleen Shaw, "State Seeks City Needle Exchange," *Telegram & Gazette* (Worcester), September 1, 1995, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/state-seeks-city-needle-exchange/docview/268583645/se-2?accountid=15172>.

²⁷⁹ "Syringe Service Program Locator," Commonwealth of Massachusetts, last modified October 2020, <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/syringe-service-program-locator>. The state now calls needle exchange programs "syringe service programs," an increasingly popular term encompassing programs that do not require the deposit of used injection equipment to receive a new needle.

pool, and a better public image, had a heavy hand in the design and implementation of licit programs in New York City and Boston.

Conclusion

In 2018, Dr. Edward Kaplan, primary evaluator of the legal New Haven exchange, reminisced on the polarized reaction to his paper documenting the renowned 33 percent reduction in HIV transmission, for which he later received numerous honors, telling his interviewer:

what I learned from that entire experience was it's one thing to do the research, to build the model, to write the papers, *it's another thing to try and really make a difference in the world*. And if you want to really make a difference in the world, and if you really believe in what you've done, then you have to invest a lot of energy in communicating the work, in arguing with people.²⁸⁰

(Emphasis mine) I point out this subtle irony not to devalue the work of Dr. Kaplan, whose research was undoubtedly one of the primary drivers behind legal NEPs around the world, but to underscore the relative unrecognition of needle exchange activists, despite their shouldering of serious risk. While Dr. Kaplan and other pro-NEP researchers, public health experts, and politicians put themselves in academic and professional peril, operators of the first illicit exchanges braved arrest, incarceration, beatings, and bankruptcy in their quest to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS among PWUID.²⁸¹

In the face of such hazards, activists from the National AIDS Brigade and ACT UP made essential contributions, previously unacknowledged by historical literature, to the advancement of needle exchange in the Northeast. In the mid-1980s, as campaigns for legal exchanges slowly progressed, underground NEPs ensured PWUID had access to sterile syringes in spite of existing laws. Due in part to the advocacy, court battles, and testimony of illicit exchangers, efforts for legal exchanges found success in the early 1990s.

²⁸⁰ Kaplan interview, 22.

²⁸¹ Kaplan, 22-23.

Although the Brigade and ACT UP chapters both had appreciable impacts on New Haven, Boston, and New York City’s legal NEPs, there exist important differences in their trajectories and degrees of influence. Stuen-Parker’s reckless leadership, the root cause of the Mission Hill incident removing the Brigade from the AIDS activism community and their resources, dampened the group’s impact. While ACT UP was primarily concerned with issues of the white middle class, their needle exchange leadership was more thoughtful and collaborative, facilitating direct involvement in political negotiations and the operations of state-run NEPs.

Though the National AIDS Brigade is now defunct—its founder moved to Australia, where he is now, at sixty-six, a semiprofessional cage fighter—and ACT UP has no current involvement in exchange work, the need for activist-led NEPs has not disappeared. With the rise of twin opioid and hepatitis C virus (HCV) epidemics in the last decade, needle exchange advocacy has taken on new urgency.²⁸² Even though the science backing them has only strengthened, NEPs are still often decried as immoral and enabling interventions. Currently, eleven states do not have a single NEP, including Virginia, despite a 364 percent surge in HCV cases driven by injection drug use.²⁸³ West Virginia, one of the states hardest hit by the syndemic of opioids, HCV, and HIV, has been a particularly active battleground for NEPs.²⁸⁴ Needle

²⁸² Stephen M. Davis et al., “Barriers to Using New Needles Encountered by Rural Appalachian People Who Inject Drugs: Implications for Needle Exchange,” *Harm Reduction Journal* 16, no. 1 (February 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12954-019-0295-5>.

²⁸³ “Sterile Syringe Exchange Programs,” Kaiser Family Foundation, last modified 2018, <https://www.kff.org/hivaids/state-indicator/syringe-exchange-programs/?activeTab=map¤tTimeframe=0&selectedDistributions=has-syringe-exchange-program&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>; Davis et al., “Barriers to New Needles,” 1.

²⁸⁴ Davis et al., “Barriers to New Needles,” 1-2; Lauren Peace, “When a West Virginia County Eliminated its Needle Exchange, Experts Forewarned of an HIV crisis: Now it’s Here,” *Mountain State Spotlight*, December 15, 2020,

exchange was permitted by the state government in 2015, only to be effectively outlawed by a flurry of local-level bans.²⁸⁵ Perhaps these states would benefit from a similar breed of activism, forcing the issue of needle exchange while creating a prospective model for legal programs.

Today, debates about the limits of efficacious and legitimate activism rage on. From current underground needle exchanges to demonstrations for racial justice, certain activists resort to unlawful tactics to advance their cause. While some elements of society may lament their strategic choices, and condemn these groups for refusing to pursue a legal path, the history of illicit NEPs suggests that dismissing activist efforts *simply because* they run counter to the law is unmerited. Illegal actions may be justified in the face of a deadly threat and can act as efficient mechanisms to promote change and save lives.

Word Count: 11,003

<https://mountainstatespotlight.org/2020/12/15/when-a-west-virginia-county-eliminated-its-needle-exchange-experts-forewarned-of-an-hiv-crisis-now-its-here/>.

²⁸⁵ Peace, “West Virginia County Eliminated its Needle Exchange.”

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Bibliographical Essay

My research journey has been, at its core, a tale of serendipity. It began in August of 2020 when I approached Dr. Melissa Grafe seeking sources about histories of early harm reduction practices in the United States. Inspired by one of my favorite courses at Yale, The History of Drugs in 20th Century America, and opioid research I conducted with the Centers for Disease Control the summer before, I hoped to uncover a story recounting the inevitably tumultuous development of a harm reduction initiative. Miraculously, Dr. Grafe informed me she had just received a massive binder from Dr. Edward Kaplan of the New Haven Mayor's Task Force on AIDS, documenting the emergence and success of one of the first legal needle exchange programs (NEPs) in the United States. After I met with two graduate students working with Dr. Kaplan on a Yale School of Medicine exhibit involving the New Haven exchange, he generously granted me access to the binder.

A veritable treasure trove of primary source materials, I believed I had the makings of a senior essay in my hands. It seemed to have a tidy and triumphant storyline, one in which heroic professors and public health professionals vanquished conservative naysayers to establish a nationally-renowned and academically productive NEP. As I began delving into sources outside the binder, however, I quickly realized the story was not so simple. Chiefly, the pioneers were not as pioneering as I thought—tucked into a lengthy *Yale Alumni Magazine* article, I found a two-sentence mention of an illicit needle exchange founded four years before the legal NEP by a mysterious man named Jon Stuen-Parker. Though he and his organization, the National AIDS Brigade, were almost entirely absent from secondary literature and initial searches for primary sources were unsuccessful, further digging led to my next two lucky finds.

First, I discovered Stuen-Parker had a self-published autobiography which I was able to purchase from a used bookseller. The contents were jarring and told an entirely different story about the emergence of exchange efforts not only in New Haven but across the East Coast.¹ This account placed Stuen-Parker, a once-incarcerated ex-Yale medical student, at the forefront of American needle exchange. Second, I found an hour-long unedited video from *The 90's Raw* following Stuen-Parker's exchange activities for a day.² Though they left serious gaps, the two sources made it clear that an accurate and nuanced history of needle exchange in New Haven must include the Brigade.

Next, I expanded the boundaries of my research, looking beyond New Haven and the National AIDS Brigade for examples of contemporaneous NEPs. I soon discovered that to maintain an appropriate scope, I would have to focus on only the earliest programs beginning before 1991. This narrowed my search down to two clusters of illicit NEPs: one on the West Coast, encompassing the California and Washington exchanges, and another in the Northeast, including the National AIDS Brigade and the New York chapter of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP/NY), whose program Stuen-Parker mentioned in his book. Upon further investigation, I realized that, while the West Coast exchanges were technically illegal, they gained legal tolerance and municipal funding soon after opening and therefore had very different histories from the East Coast programs. Although an essay comparing and contrasting the development of the two clusters would be fascinating, the maximum word count for senior

¹ Jon Stuen-Parker, *Letter to Norman Mailer: From Jail to Yale* (Self-published, 1999).

² Skip Blumberg, *The 90's Raw: John Parker*, Hi 8 mm, Documentary, 1990, <https://mediaburn.org/video/the-90s-raw-john-parker/>.

essays would prohibit such an analysis. Settling on the underground NEPs of the Northeast, the outlines of my project began to take shape.

Given the centrality of the National AIDS Brigade to the story of East Coast needle exchange, I tried to contact Jon Stuen-Parker several times for an interview but was unable to elicit a response. Other members of the organization, whose full names are few and far between, were similarly elusive. Returning to primary source databases, it occurred to me that Jon Stuen-Parker may have used other names in his interactions with the media. He explained in his autobiography that, as a teenager, he switched between Jon Stuen-Parker, Jon Stuen, and Jon Parker to evade law enforcement, and upon searching for articles with the latter two names, I began finding results. In my fourth stroke of luck, I realized that there were far more variations of his name. Sources used the last name Stuen-Parker, Stuen, Parker, Struan-Parker, and even Stewart-Parker, each preceded by either Jon or, more frequently, John. Fortunately, these additional searches yielded more than fifty mentions in newspapers, magazines, newsletters, student publications, and television news. This new batch of primary sources also revealed that the Brigade and ACT UP/NY were not alone in their work: the IV League, as indicated by a single *Yale Daily News* article, was also a relevant player.

In pursuit of primary sources documenting the ACT UP/NY exchange, I contacted the New York Public Library, home of the ACT UP New York records, an archive containing over 230 boxes of material. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the library was unable to send me any of the sources. However, I discovered that the ACT UP/NY website had a collection of historical documents and interviews available for public use, including three interviews with leading ACT UP exchangers. Upon searching the Yale library, I also found an eight-hundred-page American Civil Liberties Union harm reduction briefing binder with articles, research

papers, court records, and testimony transcripts from needle exchange proponents around the world, including several from ACT UP/NY and the legal New Haven NEP.

Locating sources for the IV League proved to be a lengthier process. After extensive online searching, I came across the David Stitt papers of the ACT/UP Boston collection at the Northeastern University library. With only a vague description available on the website, I contacted the librarian in charge to request a scan of the collection since public health guidelines prohibited an in-person visit. She graciously agreed but warned it could take some time. After several months of waiting, I resigned myself to writing a tale of two cities: New Haven and New York City. Luckily, three weeks before the deadline for my first draft, I received a scan of over one hundred pages of IV League records, their contents so compelling I decided they must be included.

The search for secondary sources was similarly challenging, as literature on the history of American needle exchange is incredibly scant. Though my hunt for existing works discussing underground exchanges was unfruitful, I found several articles and theses exploring the development of legal exchanges in New Haven and New York City. “Early Response: The Oral History of AIDS Activism in New Haven, Connecticut,” a Yale senior essay written by Jennifer Chi in 2004, addresses the formation of four key AIDS organizations, including the New Haven Mayor’s Task Force on AIDS and their legal exchange, but has no mention of illegal precursors.³ Similarly, Michele Nichols’ 2009 thesis for Wesleyan University, “Angels, Actual Reality & AIDS in New Haven: A Case Study,” provided a brief overview of the legal New Haven NEP,

³ Jennifer Chi, “Early Response: The Oral History of AIDS Activism in New Haven, Connecticut” (Senior Essay, Yale University, 2004).

but is silent on all other exchange efforts.⁴ Gladys Mendez, a 1996 graduate of the Yale School of Public Health, wrote her Master’s thesis entitled “Needle Exchange Programs and HIV Transmission: New Haven’s Experience” on the political battle waged by the Mayor’s Task Force on AIDS between 1987 and 1990 to gain legislative approval for an NEP, but omits all unlawful needle swapping during the same period.⁵ As for New York City, Warwick Anderson’s “The New York Needle Trial: The Politics of Public Health in the Age of AIDS” provides a detailed overview of the rise and fall of the 1988 trial NEP, but does not consider the operators of underground exchanges during the lifespan of the pilot program.⁶

Looking beyond needle exchange, literature about health activism and the AIDS crisis more broadly also proved useful. Tamar Carroll’s *Mobilizing New York: AIDS, Antipoverty, and Feminist Activism* analyzes the impact of feminist and LGBTQ+ activist groups’ direct-action campaigns on social policy during New York City’s “culture wars” of the 1980s and 1990s, giving pertinent information on the landscape of East Coast AIDS activism.⁷ *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* by Deborah Gould, a former ACT UP member, looks at the history of ACT UP in a sociological context, providing valuable information about

⁴ Michele Nichols, “Angels, Actual Reality & AIDS in New Haven: A Case Study” (Honors thesis, Wesleyan University, 2009).

⁵ Gladys Mendez, “Needle Exchange Programs and HIV Transmission: New Haven’s Experience” (Master’s thesis, Yale University, 1996).

⁶ Warwick Anderson, “The New York Needle Trial: The Politics of Public Health in the Age of AIDS,” *American Journal of Public Health* 81, no. 11 (1991): pp. 1506-1517, <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.81.11.1506>.

⁷ Tamar W. Carroll, *Mobilizing New York: AIDS, Antipoverty, and Feminist Activism* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

the organization's founding, leadership, agenda, and political challenges.⁸ To better understand the racial dynamics of the AIDS crisis, I turned to Cathy Cohen's *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*, which gives profound insights into the reaction of Black leaders to needle exchange and the influence of the Black Leadership Commission on AIDS.⁹

Though I have assembled a rich collection of primary sources, there are limitations to my historical understanding of early underground needle exchanges. To a large extent, this history is missing the voices of the participants of needle exchange programs. While interest and participant acceptability can be, to a degree, inferred by enrollment numbers, the explicit beliefs, preferences, and opinions of the exchanges' clientele are mostly missing from the narratives and documents left by activists. Perhaps future research could locate former participants of the earliest exchanges to explore and conserve their experiences of illegal NEPs.

Beyond gaps in the histories of the exchanges of which I am aware, there may have been other minor exchanges in the 1980s that left no historical trace. Since NEPs were unlawful, operations were largely covert unless the activists were seeking media coverage or a test case. Small, isolated programs assembled and dismantled prior to legalization organized by people who avoided publicity and escaped contact with law enforcement may have existed. Still, given the accounts and records I have had the good fortune of encountering, I believe this essay captures the emergence and legacy of the Northeast's most consequential underground needle exchanges.

⁸ Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and Act Up's Fight against AIDS* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁹ Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).