*Dear California Department of Public Health:

I am writing regarding the application from the Harm Reduction Coalition (Road Show) in Santa Cruz County. I am a Santa Cruz County Supervisor, representing the 2nd District, which includes parts of the cities of Watsonville and Capitola as well as much of the unincorporated area in the mid and south county areas.

I write in opposition of the application and also wanted to provide some additional context to my opposition. As you can imagine, this application has received a lot of attention and has, unfortunately, brought a negative reflection not just upon the proposed program but undeservedly upon the greater County run program as well. Long term supporters of needle exchange programs have come out strongly against this application and, based on the phone calls, emails and comments I receive while out in the community, many traditional supporters of public health programs are also questioning why this is being considered.

This is unfortunate because the one thing that seems to be universally agreed upon is the need to have a program that is managed with access to other wraparound services. Such a program would traditionally be run by the County with connections to other health services, transparency and responsibilities for proper disposal and removal of any needle waste.
However, in this climate the County is unable to engage in any sort of dialogue regarding ways in which the current program can be improved while this application is being considered for approval. Additionally, should the program be approved, it’s clear that the current County program will be difficult to separate from this independent program by the greater community. Any resultant lack of transparency, increase in needle waste, public health impacts or other impacts will reflect back upon the County program. I have concerns that any attempts to improve upon the current County program will be nearly impossible to implement in that context - and understandably so.

These programs should be run and managed by County Health where the community can have confidence that all public needs, from reduction of communicable diseases to reducing needle waste to reducing the number of those addicted are met. If this application were to be approved, I believe that the overall confidence in the value of the current County needle exchange program will be undermined. Given the difficulty that these programs operate in already, having one run by an independent group, without the same elected official oversight, public reporting and opportunities for community input will mean a greater erosion of support for this type of public health program moving forward.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my thoughts. I respect the difficulty of your position and appreciate the work you do for public health for our state.

Sincerely,

Zach Friend
Santa Cruz County Supervisor
2nd District*