

Election 2008

Vote for action on AIDS



At issue: Supervised injection facilities (SIFs)

A supervised injection facility (SIF) — such as Vancouver's famed Insite — is a health centre that provides a safe, supervised place for people with addictions to obtain clean needles and inject their drugs. Health professionals on-site ensure there is no sharing of needles and intervene in the case of an overdose. SIFs also provide other health care and referrals to other services.

Controversy surrounding Insite, in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, has stimulated important public debate. More cities dealing with health risks associated with injecting drugs are considering SIFs based on the positive experience of Insite and similar programs in many other countries.

The need

Sharing contaminated injection equipment is a major cause of infection with HIV and hepatitis C virus (HCV) among people who use drugs. Needle exchange programs have been running in communities across Canada and around the world for more than two decades, helping reduce the HIV epidemic.

Poverty, homelessness and intense addiction are additional factors that can lead people to share needles or inject in harmful ways. SIFs support some of the most marginalized of people with addictions in critical, often life-saving ways.

The situation

Insite was the first SIF to operate with a legal exemption from Canada's drug laws. There are 49 SIFs across Europe, Australia and Canada. Other Canadian cities interested in pursuing SIFs have not yet received legal exemptions to do so.

In May 2008, the B.C. Supreme Court ruled that Insite is a critical health service for people with addictions. It ruled that access to a health service like Insite is a *Charter* right. It said that it would be unconstitutional to let people be charged with possessing drugs at Insite, because this would keep them from a service that helps prevent death and disease.

So it gave Insite the legal exemption it needs to operate without risk, and told the federal government it has to change the law. But the federal government is appealing this ruling.

The debate

Opponents of SIFs believe they encourage drug use, even though the evidence shows otherwise.

Opponents of SIFs criticize harm reduction as an either/or "alternative" to treatment, when in fact both are necessary components of an overall approach. Saying harm reduction is an "alternative" to addiction treatment is like saying first aid is

an "alternative" to physiotherapy for someone with a broken leg.

Years of research demonstrates that SIFs reduce the risks of disease transmission, prevent overdose deaths and support people in making healthier choices over time. Such research has been published in esteemed, peer-reviewed medical journals such as *The Lancet*, the *New England Journal of Medicine* and the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*.

Two years ago, Canada and all other countries at the United Nations committed to adopting effective measures to prevent the spread of HIV, including harm reduction measures like ensuring access to sterile needles. SIFs do this, and more.

The decision you need to make

Cast your vote for a federal government that will:

- ensure access to health services that are proven to work;
- make public policy based on evidence;
- support cities and provinces wishing to create SIFs where they identify a need for them to help prevent death and disease;
- not stand in the way of health services for some of those most at risk and most in need; and
- not allow Canada's drug laws to undermine public health programs that are proven effective.

SIFs supporters

Canadian Medical Association
International AIDS Society
World Health Organization
Joint UN Programme on AIDS (UNAIDS)
B.C. Supreme Court
Vancouver's Mayor and City Councillors
Vancouver Coastal Health Authority and community service agencies
Vancouver Police Department
Business associations of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside
B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS
B.C. Premier and Health Minister
Registered nurses' associations across the country
Unions such as the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the National Union of Public and General Employees

For more

www.aidslaw.ca/election2008
www.aidslaw.ca/drugpolicy