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HARPER NEEDS HARD DOSE OF REALITY

Prime Minister should make life-and-death decisions based on evidence, not ideology, says Legal Network

TORONTO, August 15, 2006 — The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network called today on Prime Minister Stephen Harper to make evidence-based and potentially life-saving decisions to keep Vancouver's safe injection site open and to implement needle exchange programs in Canadian prisons.

"The Canadian government's head is in the sand on the problem of HIV among people who use drugs and prisoners," said Joanne Csete, Executive Director, during a press conference at the XVI International AIDS Conference. "Proven harm reduction measures such as Insite, Vancouver's supervised injection facility, are under threat of cancellation by Ottawa. In Canadian prisons, such measures are nonexistent — and people are paying the price with their lives."

Prevalence of HIV and hepatitis C (HCV) is much higher in Canadian prisons than in the general population, thanks in no small part to the lack of prison needle exchange programs. As a result, prisoners who inject drugs fashion makeshift injection tools that are reused and shared with others, increasing the risk of HIV and HCV transmission.

Numerous countries, from Switzerland and Spain to Belarus and Iran, have implemented large-scale sterile syringe programs in prisons and have demonstrated that such measures reduce HIV and HCV transmission.

Ottawa has also tabled legislation that would establish mandatory minimum prison sentences for some categories of drug offences, similar to measures in the United States, which have dramatically increased the prison population, while failing to make a dent in the so-called "war on drugs."

"Failing to stop the spread of HIV in Canadian prisons is bad enough. Pushing mandatory-sentencing policies that will put even more people in prison and expose them to greater risk of HIV infection is simply irresponsible," Csete said. "If Iran and Belarus can cut their HIV transmission rates by providing sterile

syringes to prisoners, then why can't Canada? If the evidence shows that Insite is saving lives — and it does — then why is the government waffling on whether to keep it open, especially when the evidence is supported by solid legal and human rights arguments?"

The news conference also featured Dr. Julio Montaner, Director of the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS and president-elect of the International AIDS Society, Diane Tobin of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users, Gillian Maxwell, spokesperson for Insite for Community Safety, and Jim Motherall, a former prisoner and founding co-chair of the Stony Mountain Penitentiary Health Awareness Group.

Evidence on how prison systems with needle exchange programs can stem the spread of HIV and hepatitis C can be found in the recently released second edition of *Prison Needle Exchange: Lessons from a Comprehensive Review of International Evidence and Experience*, available at www.aidslaw.ca. A joint letter to federal Health Minister Tony Clement on the subject of Insite is also posted to this website.

About the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network

The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (www.aidslaw.ca) promotes the human rights of people living with and vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, in Canada and internationally, through research, legal and policy analysis, education, and community mobilization. The Legal Network is Canada's leading advocacy organization working on the legal and human rights issues raised by HIV/AIDS.

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