

November 30, 2005

Mayor-Elect Sam Sullivan
Vancouver City Hall
453 West 12th Avenue
Vancouver, British Columbia V5Y 1V4

Dear Mr. Sullivan:

Insite, Vancouver's safe injection facility, is an essential harm reduction element of Vancouver's "four-pillar" drug strategy. I am writing to you to seek your support for maintaining Insite as a harm reduction service and not allowing the Vancouver Police Department to turn it into a law enforcement tool.

It was with alarm that we learned of the VPD's new practice of arresting anyone injecting in public places, including outside of Insite, to force all injectors to limit their injection to the safe site. As with all health measures, the use of Insite should be a matter of choice, and police and other public servants should do what they can to refer people to voluntary use of the site. At a hearing on November 22, your predecessor, Senator Larry Campbell, told the Toronto City Council that the Vancouver police were part of Insite's effectiveness, as they regularly referred people to the facility. Effectively forcing people into the facility is very different from referral, and it does not show respect for the facility's public health mission.

As Vancouver's experience has shown time and again, cracking down on those who find themselves having to inject in a public location will only heighten an environment of criminalization and fear, and cause some people who use drugs to inject in remote and unsafe locations. The step forward that the city has achieved in providing a safe injection facility should not be an excuse for police crackdowns.

Along with many others across Canada, we advocated over a long period for Vancouver and other cities to offer safe drug consumption facilities to people who use illicit drugs. We applaud your city for moving forward and are gratified that evaluations of Insite have been so positive. People who use drugs have a human right to the highest attainable standard of health services and goods, and Insite is an example of moving toward the realization of this right. But we very much fear that this new police practice will undermine the effectiveness of Insite, and of the four-pillar strategy more broadly, by once again allowing law enforcement considerations to overshadow effective public health measures.

This new police practice also amounts to discrimination against women who use drugs and those drug users who require assistance in injecting. As you are undoubtedly aware, because of unnecessarily restrictive federal regulations, Insite does not allow people who use drugs to be assisted in the act of injection, either by Insite staff or by a friend or partner. Women are much more likely than men to need assistance in injecting, and they are thus less likely to seek to inject at Insite, where they cannot get the help they need. They are thus deprived not only of safer injecting, but also of the other services Insite offers. Recent research indicates that up to 40 percent of people who inject drugs in Vancouver report that they require assistance with injections at certain times. Other research from Vancouver suggests that people who need assistance in injecting are much more vulnerable to HIV than others.

Rather than turning a blind eye to overzealous and effectively discriminatory policing, we call on you to support more pragmatic and human rights-friendly measures. We call on you to join us in urging Vancouver Coastal Health to rethink the policy of banning assisted injection at Insite. Allowing assistance to be provided by users of the facility to other users may be the first step and may present fewer legal liability issues than injection assistance provided by staff members.

If there is a concern about people having to wait outside the doors of Insite because the facility has a high volume of users, it is clear that effectively coercing larger numbers into seeking refuge in the facility is not a sustainable solution. We hope that the City of Vancouver will do everything possible to find the resources to establish other such facilities.

As Toronto and other cities across Canada establish harm reduction policies and drug strategies, the Vancouver experience is being scrutinized as a model. We appeal to you in your future capacity as chairman of the Vancouver Police Board to order a revisiting of the policy of arresting all people injecting in a public place. We urge you to ensure that the staff and management of Insite, representatives of people who use drugs, health professionals and other stakeholders, in addition to the police, are part of discussions of this policy and of the law enforcement pillar of the city's drug strategy.

We hope that your leadership as mayor will be felt in all four areas of Vancouver's drug strategy.

Sincerely yours,



Joanne Csete
Executive Director