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OTTAWA ADOPTING FAILED U.S.-STYLE “WAR ON DRUGS”

New National Anti-Drug Strategy plays politics with people’s lives

TORONTO, October 1, 2007 — The new National Anti-Drug Strategy to be officially unveiled this week by federal Health Minister Tony Clement is a huge step backward for Canada’s response to HIV/AIDS, said the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network today.

The new strategy funds law enforcement, prevention and treatment programs — three of the four so-called “pillars” common in many drug strategies. But the fourth pillar, harm reduction — which includes needle exchanges, methadone clinics and safe-injection facilities — has been eliminated.

“The federal government is ignoring widely published scientific evidence on the value of investing in harm reduction programs,” said Richard Elliott, Executive Director. “It seems clear that the new drug strategy is based on ideology instead of evidence, and from every angle — human rights, public health, or use of taxpayers’ dollars — that’s irresponsible and unacceptable.”

Even worse, Minister Clement is sowing confusion by claiming that other measures, such as law enforcement, constitute harm reduction in their own right.

“This is just smoke and mirrors,” said Elliott. “The reality is that some people can’t or won’t stop using drugs. Harm reduction pragmatically and realistically acknowledges this fact by providing evidence-based programs and services to lessen the harms associated with drug use. Arresting and imprisoning people can’t be considered harm reduction.”

The new drug strategy apes the failed U.S. approach of treating drug addiction primarily as a criminal matter, rather than a matter of public health. But despite spending billions of dollars on its “war on drugs,” not a dent has been made in reducing either drug supply or drug consumption in the United States. Rather, the establishment of “get-tough” criminal approaches to drug addiction has filled U.S. prisons with non-violent, often small-scale offenders.

Relying on criminal law inevitably also leads to increased fear, stigma and discrimination. As a result, many people hide their drug use, which usually means avoiding the public health and harm reduction programs that could help treat them. Insite, Vancouver's safe injection facility, is one such program.

“The facts speak for themselves: Insite has lowered the rates of syringe-sharing and deaths from overdoses, reduced the risk of HIV and hepatitis C transmission, and increased the chances of directing drug users to addiction treatment services,” said Elliott. “Instead of mounting a public misinformation campaign, Minister Clement and his government should be sharing these facts with Canadians to explain why funding harm reduction programs like Insite is a responsible investment in public health.”

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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