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Supervised Injection Services

We, the Board of Directors at Regional HIV/AIDS Connection, support the recommendation made by the Ontario Integrated Supervised Injection Services (OISIS) Feasibility study.

BACKGROUND

Regional HIV/AIDS Connection (RHAC) has provided harm reduction leadership and direct services in our community for over 25 years. This includes delivering a range of harm reduction interventions for people who inject drugs and participating in community based research related to injection practices, substance use, barriers to services and other considerations for this vulnerable population. RHAC’s Counterpoint fixed site Needle Syringe Program and associated mobile outreach annually provides harm reduction materials, education, and referrals to approximately 4,000 people who inject drugs. However, recognizing an increase in diminished health outcomes of service users, growing community concern about public injecting and discarded needles, trending associated with a growing crystal methamphetamine use, and related gaps in service, RHAC advocated to have London included in a multi-community feasibility study to determine potential uptake and impact of an introduction of supervised injection services (SIS) within London.

OISIS FEASIBILITY STUDY FINDINGS

The OISIS Feasibility Study presented their report on London in February, 2017.ⁱ Among 199 survey participants, 65% reported injecting drugs daily. In total, 86% of participants reported a willingness to use an SIS if one were available. Reasons for using an SIS included: access to sterile injection equipment, overdose prevention, injecting responsibly, safety from crime, and safety from being seen by police. The study concludes: “given the data presented in this report, it is recommended that SIS be implemented in London.”

URGENCY OF LOCAL NEED

Although HIV infection rates have been decreasing nationally and provincially, annually HIV rates in London have increased by nearly 50% since 2013. 68.8% of new HIV cases in London from 2015-2016 were found among people who inject drugs.ⁱⁱ The Middlesex London Health Unit has declared this to be a public health emergency.ⁱⁱⁱ

Similarly, local Hepatitis C (HCV) rates have increased significantly over the last ten years. Among the 204 people who inject drugs in London and were sampled for the local arm of the Public Health Agency of Canada I-Track Questionnaire, the prevalence of HCV rates in 2013 was 79.1%.^{iv}

Thus, HIV and HCV rates are rising and remain disproportionately high among people who inject drugs in London. Health concerns are only further aggravated by observing the significant number of overdoses people who inject drugs have been experiencing in Canada due to fentanyl being laced into other drugs (this began in Vancouver, moved east to Calgary and, recently, fentanyl-laced drugs have appeared in Waterloo, ON).^v

OUR POSITION: SUPPORTING THE OISIS RECOMMENDATION

Given all of these variables, we, the Board of Directors at Regional HIV/AIDS Connection, would like to state our strong support for the recommendation made by the OISIS feasibility study. We fully support the implementation of an SIS within London.

ⁱ Ontario Integrated Supervised Injection Services (OISIS) Feasibility Study. Study Report: London, ON. London: OISIS; 2017 [cited 2017 May 5]. Available from: <http://www.ohtn.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/OISIS-London-Report-Online.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Middlesex-London Health Unit (MLHU). HIV outbreak among PWID; Opioid Prescribing. London: MLHU; 2016 [cited 2017 May 5]. Available from: <https://www.healthunit.com/blog/hiv-outbreak-among-pwid-opioid-prescribing>; <https://www.healthunit.com/uploads/2014-05-15-report-032-14-appendix-a.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Middlesex-London Health Unit (MLHU). Health Unit to Address Local Public Health Emergency. London: MLHU; 2016 [cited 2017 May 5]. Available from: <https://www.healthunit.com/news/mlhu-to-address-local-public-health-emergency>.

^{iv} Middlesex-London Health Unit (MLHU). Middlesex-London I-Track Survey of People who Inject Drugs. MLHU Report No. 119-13. London: MLHU; 2013 [cited 2015 May 5]. Available from: <https://www.healthunit.com/uploads/2013-11-21-report-119-13.pdf>. London's HIV rates were low compared to the national average, and two thirds of those found to have HIV in the I-Track Survey did not know that they had it. Although some may then question if the rise in HIV infections in London is simply a result of people becoming better informed, the disproportionately high rates of HIV infections among people who inject drugs is cause for serious concern. HCV rates in London are also disproportionately high when compared to injection drug users elsewhere in Canada.

^v Much of this is tracked by the British Columbia Coroners Service. For example, British Columbia Coroners Service. Fentanyl-Detected Illicit Drug Overdose Deaths January 1, 2012 to February 18, 2017. Vancouver: Coroners Service; 2017 [cited 2017 May 5]. Available from: <http://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/public-safety-and-emergency-services/death-investigation/statistical/fentanyl-detected-overdose.pdf>; British Columbia Coroners Service. Illicit Drug Overdose Deaths in BC January 1, 2007 – March 31, 2017. Vancouver: Coroners Service; 2017 [cited 2017 May 5]. Available from: <http://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/public-safety-and-emergency-services/death-investigation/statistical/illicit-drug.pdf>.