



The Future of Safe Injection Sites in Calgary

What is the Situation?

The Government of Alberta recently cut provincial funding towards ARCHES, a charity-run safe injection site located in Lethbridge. ARCHES has been dubbed the busiest consumption site in North America with an average of 663 visits a day since its opening in March 2018. This decision was largely influenced from an audit completed by the provincial government back in 2020, which found financial mismanagement and poor distribution strategies as one of the key reasons for ARCHES' exacerbated situation. The report found that a significant amount of funding was insufficiently used, and many clients received five times the resources that other safe injection sites offer.

While the audit reveals several managerial mishaps, the impact of this funding cut will have the most significant impact on ARCHES' clients. The consumption site will be reduced to low-level mobile consumption, a significant reduction in capacity with an already high volume client base. This raises significant public health concerns as these users end up displaced throughout the city, creating a spike in unsafe use. Adding to these challenges is another significant public health concern—COVID-19. A lack of resources for safe injection clients will put a larger burden on the emergency healthcare system, which is already overrun by the pandemic. All these factors raise several questions around the timing of this decision by the government, as well as the short-term and long-term strategies for dealing with safe injection sites moving forward.

Safe Injection Sites in Calgary

Supervised consumption sites, also known as safe injection sites, play a key role in harm reduction and treatment for individuals facing substance use challenges. These sites not only provide a place for individuals to use drugs in a monitored environment but also provide services like counselling and opioid-addiction treatment. Sheldon M. Chumir Health Centre contains Calgary's supervised consumption site - Safeworks - and is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The Centre provides a supervised space for individuals to use drugs, sterile supplies, medical interventions in the case of overdoses, education on harm reduction topics, wound care and client advocacy. As of March 2020, the site has had more than 130,000 visits since it opened in Oct 2017. There have been no deaths at the Centre but the staff have responded to over 1500 overdoses.

Despite the benefits offered by the Centre, a March 2020 report compiled by the Alberta government's Supervised Consumption Services Review Committee noted that opioid related

deaths have increased between 100 and 400% in the 500-metre radius around the sites. A police report from January 2019 showed that a 250-metre zone near the Safeworks inside the Chumir centre has witnessed increasing levels of crime and need for police services. Residents and business owners in the area have pointed out that the neighborhood no longer feels safe and have observed violent incidents. This situation is improving with the help of proactive patrols, but supporting harm reduction while maintaining the safety of the community will likely continue to remain as a difficult issue.

This issue should also be tackled on a systemic or policy level. For instance, the decriminalization of opioids could be useful to ensure that drug users have access to a safe supply and limiting the pressure on Calgary's single supervised consumption site. The COVID-19 pandemic has overshadowed the opioid public health crisis in Calgary, but it is essential that sufficient resources and attention are dedicated to the opioid crisis to appropriately support those struggling with addictions.

Considerations for Safe Injection Sites

The difficult balancing act of making the community around safe injection sites feel safe while also providing adequate healthcare services to those who need it involves strategic planning. Factors to consider the safety and effective execution of these sites can include:

- Safe injection sites need to be designed, developed and monitored, have a hygienic environment to reduce harm
- Focus on counselling, peer support and treatment to those willing to participate.
- Location that is not disruptive to businesses and neighbourhoods, but is also accessible.
- Plan to eliminate needle debris
- Analysis of fiscal capabilities and constraints (e.g. funding sources)
- Plan for drug trafficking and prostitution
- Increased security/monitoring/protection for violence, overdoses, crime and death.

Conclusion

Safe injection sites are a compassion-based approach to reducing overdose deaths, transmission of diseases, and public substance use. Research has shown that these sites help are a cost-effective method of intervention and reduce public health system costs by averting viruses, reducing diseases, averting overdose deaths, and by increasing medication assisted treatment for certain drug addictions. Alberta's safe injection sites help by providing "connection to housing and supports, medical support, overdose prevention and interventions, counselling, safe injection supplies, access to opioid treatment". Sites aim at getting to the root of addiction problems but their successful execution depends on how well they've been planned out and how well different variables have been considered.

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