

Activist Noam Chomsky among 1,700 letter writers urging PM to extend experiment

Big names voice support for supervised injection site

By Mike Howell
Staff writer

A CAMPAIGN TO KEEP the city's supervised injection site open has generated more than 1,700 letters of support, including one from U.S. activist and linguist Noam Chomsky.

The campaign also got a boost from more than 100 Australian MPs belonging to that country's parliamentary group for drug law reform.

Part of Chomsky's short letter is posted on the campaign's website along with letters from Mayor Sam Sullivan, Albert Fok of the Chinatown Merchants' Association and Police Chief Jamie Graham.

"Though I cannot claim any special expert knowledge in this area, my understanding is that [Insite] has been a highly successful program, dealing effectively with the very serious

problems of addiction and its harmful effects on the individuals and on society in general," Chomsky wrote. "I would like to join those who are urging that their request be granted."

Insite at 139 East Hastings is the only legal supervised injection site in North America. It opened in September 2003 as a three-year scientific experiment under the watch of Health Canada.

With the experiment drawing to a close Sept. 12, campaign organizers and their supporters are urging Prime Minister Stephen Harper to extend the experiment or simply keep it open indefinitely as a health service.

Though the facility is allowed to operate because of an exemption under Canada's drug laws, Harper's health minister Tony Clement has to sign off on the exemption.

Harper has said his government will not

use taxpayers' money to fund drug use. He, however, hasn't specifically said that statement would apply to Insite.

As the *Courier* reported July 5, the non-profit PHS Community Services Society launched the letter writing campaign. The PHS operates Insite in conjunction with Vancouver Coastal Health.

The campaign has a website and former Vancouver Police Board member Gillian Maxwell is the spokesperson for the campaign called "Insite for Community Safety."

The Strathcona resident believes the campaign will put pressure on Harper and his government to keep Insite open. Maxwell noted the letter from the Australian MPs is significant because an injection site has operated in Sydney, Australia for five years. "It was the first one I had ever seen and I was struck by how ordinary

it was," said Maxwell, who visited the Australian facility four years ago. "It was my first experience of just how regular it could be and be part of our society without a big fuss."

Various evaluations of Insite show the facility is achieving its goal of reducing disease transmission, overdose deaths and moving addicts into treatment.

Several studies are posted on the campaign's website at www.communityinsite.ca. A report by the conservative think tank Fraser Institute, arguing the war on drugs is a failure, is also on the website.

Other supporters of Insite include the Chinese Cultural Centre of Greater Vancouver, AIDS Vancouver and Brent C. Olson, a recovering addict who wrote that without Insite, "I'm almost 100 per cent sure I would not be here to write this letter."