

## Regional strategy needed to fight drug problem

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Byline:

Tackling the Greater Vancouver drug problem requires a regional approach, a GVRD-led forum on drugs and crime heard Monday.

Tom Hetherington, addiction services manager for the Pacific Community Resources Society, was among the presenters who says local plans are often uncoordinated.

"Problematic substance use crosses municipal boundaries - all people are impacted by it," he said in an interview.

"If one was to put a lot of pressure on the Downtown Eastside, those people will move somewhere - they may move to New Westminster or Burnaby or Surrey."

Coordination is particularly important in offering treatment and prevention, he said.

But Hetherington said attempts for regional action on drug abuse have failed before.

The last time was around 2002, he said, when some city councils feared a Vancouver-style "four pillars" approach - particularly the harm prevention components like **safe injection** sites and needle exchanges - would be exported around the region.

"That seems to be a hot button issue," Hetherington said. "The communities who weren't in favour may have slowed that down."

He said his own definition of harm reduction includes abstinence, which he said is the best form.

Pacific Community Resources is a Surrey-based, front-line agency that works with addicts from Delta to Chilliwack and Langley to Maple Ridge.

Hetherington said needle exchanges in particular offer "enormous" health benefits.

"It's keeping people alive," he said. "The people who are addicted are not going to stop because we don't give them clean needles," he noted.

Dave Park, chief economist for the Vancouver Board of Trade, said measures to stem crime can't be ignored.

He said the estimated cost of property crime in Vancouver in 2004 was \$130 million.

"Almost all crime is directly linked to drugs," he said. "Maybe we should be looking at a regulatory approach rather than a prohibition approach."

Chronic criminals should face stiffer sentences to deter others, he said.

"We haven't done much to discourage them through sentencing."

Park said society must seize on the young years of an addict's life to change behaviour, before patterns get entrenched.

Hetherington also said more must be done to encourage the vast majority of youths who don't use hard drugs.

His message to parents and teachers: Reward positive behaviour - don't take it for granted.

"It's so easy to catch kids not doing things right," he said. "Catch them doing something right and tell them."

The forum was the latest of a series being held by the GVRD downtown at the Wosk Centre For Dialogue as part of its Sustainable Region Initiative.

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