

LINES

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Office of the Prime Minister  
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Honorable Prime Minister Harper:

Very soon now, you will have to make some life and death decisions that will gravely affect thousands of drug addicted Canadians, their families, their friends and loved ones and their communities. As a mother who has struggled for 16 years to cope with a beloved son, who is addicted to heroin I can sympathize with your dilemma.

When I first discovered that my handsome, intelligent, 25 year old younger son was sticking needles in his arms I approached it very much as I did when I caught him smoking at age twelve. It was unacceptable behaviour and I would soon put a stop to it. My knowledge of drug addiction was mostly based on myth, urban legend and imagination. I had never knowingly met or talked to an active User. I imagined them to be wild, irresponsible, unpredictable, dangerous and rare.

I went through all of the usual emotions as each approach on my part met with failure. Each promise was broken even before it was made. I felt anger, guilt, frustration and most of all fear. Fear for his health, his safety and his future. There were countless, sleepless nights and anxiety ridden days as I gradually began to understand the many risks that are a part of the life of a drug addicted person. There were years of confusion as I struggled to reconcile the realities of dealing with a lying, cunning, secretive, thief and my memories of my laughing, loving little boy who had had so much joy in him.

Most of all I began to learn. I learned from personal experience, by reading and research, by talking with and befriending other addicts. I learned that there are as many stories about becoming addicted, as there were addicts. I learned that not even the experts know why some people can play with drugs for years and then walk away while others are hooked for life the first time. I remember my surprise when my son once told me that " The first time I took heroin was the first time in my life that I ever felt normal". It helped me to realize that my personal understanding of drug addiction was very shallow and naive. I stopped judging and started helping.

I gradually began to stop wishing for what might happen in some cloudy future and deal with the realities of the present. As long as my son and thousand of men and women like

him were caught in the net of addiction they were at extreme risk. I saw many of these folks driven to using puddle water to mix their drugs because they were denied access even to agencies paid to help them. I watched groups of 4 or 5 people pass around the only needle available knowing that they were each risking their lives but unable to resist and having no options.

I held a forty-year man in my arms while he sobbed and talked of suicide when he relapsed after 89 days in a Christian recovery program. Just one day before he was to graduate onto another stage of recovery he was thrown out without money, housing or hope. He had failed the program. Perhaps it is the program that failed him. It is not for me to judge.

About six years ago I saw posters that were being used to educate the public in New York about the value and economy of establishing Clean Needle Distribution Centres. Some showed the face of a Black woman, some of a Latino or White mother and a large syringe. The caption read "I don't condone the taking of illicit drugs but I know that clean needles will keep my daughter/son alive until there is a real option for him/her.

For years I have been promoting effective Harm Reduction that will reduce the health risks and staggering costs associated with Drug Addiction. I just celebrated my 65th birthday this month and my 16th year as a full time 24/7 volunteer. I have seen with my own eyes the benefits of Needle Exchanges and Supervised Injection Sites.

For the last three years I have hired, trained, supervised and coordinated the Peer Workers that are such a valuable asset to the staff of North America's first Supervised injection Site established in Vancouver, BC. We are the first in the world to hire active drug addicts. It has been a remarkable success. When you have staff members who know the life, understand the behaviours first hand, and are trusted because they are a part of that community of users, the participants are much more likely to take advantage of the many services that are a part this amazing project.

We have four full time Peer Supervisors, three part time Peer Supervisors and fifteen casual Peer Workers that cover 2 four-hour shifts per week. The casuals are paid cash after every shift. 70% of this special staff has been there from the beginning. Many of the Peer Workers have stated that they are now using less drugs or have gone into treatment on their own. This is a bonus we had not counted on when the SIS was first established.

It has shown myself and others in this field that real harm reduction works. I now have more than 300 positions a month filled by street people working in various areas of harm reduction. My organization is known as Life Is Not Enough Society (LINES). It truly has given people hope, confidence and feeling of belonging to a community instead of being a burden to it.

My dear son is still lost to his addiction, still homeless and hungry most of the time. I don't know if he will ever be free of this terrible affliction but I do know that if he

continues to have access to clean equipment and non-judgmental medical care he may live long enough to keep trying.

The public here has seen and knows what other citizens in other countries have proven for years. Supervised Injection Sites are the first steps in treating a problem that can be controlled and with God's guidance will one day be cured.

Sincerely and with Faith in your Judgment,

Thia Walter,  
Mother and Community Volunteer