Safe Injection Sites

DRUG ADDICTION IS A FACT OF LIFE IN CANADIAN CITIES. FOR YEARS, CANADA, ALONG WITH THE UNITED STATES, FOUGHT A WAR ON DRUGS. BUT IT'S A WAR, MORE AND MORE EXPERTS AGREE, IS BEING LOST. SOME CITIES ARE LOOKING FOR A LESS HARMFUL APPROACH; ONE THAT COULD TRIED IN MONTREAL.

SAFE INJECTION SITES

REPORTER=TOO D VAN DER HEYDEN

Vancouver

LIFE ON THE STREETS... ADDICTED TO HEROIN AND COCAINE. IT'S A WORLD OF DARK ALLEYS AND DIRTY NEEDLES. THOUSANDS OF CANADIANS SPEND THEIR DAYS IN A DRUG-INDUCED HAZE... ALWAYS LOOKING OVER THEIR SHOULDERS, UNABLE TO KICK THEIR HABIT.

CRACKING DOWN HASN'T REDUCED THEIR NUMBERS. SO IS IT TIME FOR A NEW SOLUTION?

VANCOUVER MAY BE THE MODEL. AS PICTURESQUE AS IT IS, IT ALSO HAS A DARK UNDERBELLY. THOUSANDS OF STRUNG-OUT JUNKIES LITTER THE STREETS IN SEARCH OF THEIR NEXT FIX.

Viviana Zanocco / Vancouver Coastal Health.
There is so much open drug use on this block that it's just. It's frightening, on a health level, on a law enforcement level, and just for people walking the street.

THIS AREA IS KNOWN AS THE DOWNTOWN EAST SIDE. THERE ARE MORE THAN 5000 DRUG USERS IN THE SAME AREA; THE HIGHEST CONCENTRATION IN THE WHOLE COUNTRY. BUT THANKS TO CITY HALL AND A GROUP OF LOCAL ACTIVISTS A VERY CONTROVERSIAL PROJECT WAS LAUNCHED TO OPEN A PLACE WHERE DRUG USERS COULD SHOOT UP UNDER SUPERVISION.

[Vanoccco] I think that we're just dealing with addiction differently than we have traditionally. We're seeing that it's a medically based issue and not just one that a couple of cops can come in and deal with.

THIS STOREFRONT IS THE CITY'S SOLUTION - NORTH AMERICA'S FIRST SAFE INJECTION SITE.

Ann Livingston fought 10 years to make it happen.

[Ann Livingston / Activist]
The safe injection site is just the first step to sort of say we acknowledge that this problem exists and we're going to begin to work on it. And so overdoses, the spread of disease, and the kind of you know bringing up the self esteem of those people who live on the streets and shoot dope all day that's what a safe injection site can do

(Vancouver City hall) now is the time for action
LOCAL ACTIVISTS PUSHED AND PRODDED POLITICIANS INTO HELPING.

[Philip Owen / Former Mayor of Vancouver]
People were saying well what's happening? You're the mayor and where's the leadership from city hall?

VANCOUVER'S FORMER MAYOR - PHILLIP OWEN - HAD THE POLITICAL WILL TO DO SOMETHING RADICAL.
[Owen] We've had it open since 21st of September. Four hundred and fifty people a day, twenty ODs, none of them have died, they've all been saved. And instead of that activity in the parks in the alleys on the public sidewalk in the public realm it's in a safe medical environment.

WITH SO MANY ADDICTS OUT IN THE OPEN VANCOUVER HAD TO ADAPT, BUT IT'S HARDLY THE ONLY CITY WITH A PROBLEM.

[Montreal] THOUGH NOT ON A PAR WITH VANCOUVER, MONTREAL HAS ITS SHARE OF USERS TURNING TRICKS AND SHOOTING UP IN ALLEYWAYS. THE QUESTION - IS A SAFE SITE NEEDED HERE?

["Geoff" / Recovering Drug Addict] To have somewhere to go without having to look behind my back and you know I think I think that would be great.

"GEOFF" IS KICKING HIS HABIT. HE KNOWS ABOUT LIFE ON THE STREETS.

["Geoff"] All the money you make is going toward your next hit. You can't really put anything on the side to get a place or anything. So you kind of get stuck. And the only thing that makes you happy is having enough money to get some more and you don't worry about the consequence.

[Teena-Marie Johns / Outreach Nurse, Anonyme] They have to do it in an unsafe fashion. Many times it's just in between cars or in an alley. They can potentially harm themselves by overdosing.

TINA-MARIE IS AN OUTREACH NURSE. TWICE A MONTH SHE'S ON THE STREETS - TREATING DRUG ADDICTS.

[Johns] You're trying to offer them respectful non-judgmental care. You're trying to help them not get sick. As a nurse I can't help but feel that we need to look at alternatives for people who use intravenous drugs.

[Thomas Kerr / Public Health Researcher] With an estimated 12 000 injection drug users here, a noticeable public injecting problem, and acceptably high rates of HIV infection, I think it's really clear that this city would benefit from a safe injection site.

A PUBLIC HEALTH RESEARCHER, THOMAS KERR HELPED MAKE THE VANCOUVER SITE A REALITY. LAST SUMMER HE MOVED TO MONTREAL.

[Kerr] There are a large number of injection drug users in this city engaging in a lot high risk behavior, including public injecting. So the problem's here, there's no doubt about that. Now the question is what do you do about it.

IRONICALLY MONTREAL, CHARACTERIZED AS "EUROPEAN" HAS MORE IN COMMON, ON THIS ISSUE, WITH AMERICAN CITIES THAN EUROPEAN ONES. IN EUROPE, SAFE SITES HAVE BEEN AROUND SINCE THE MID-1980s.

THE THEORY BEHIND A SAFE SITE IS SIMPLE. A DRUG ADDICT IS SO FAR GONE, THEIR SENSE OF SELF-WORTH SO DAMAGED, THE FIRST STEP TO RECOVERY IS A SAFE PLACE WHERE THEY WON'T BE JUDGED OR TREATED LIKE A CRIMINAL. ONCE IN A "SAFE" SITE, NURSES AND SOCIAL WORKERS GIVE COUNSELLING, TIPS ON HEALTH CARE. TRUST IS BUILT, OPENING THE DOOR TO TREATMENT.

[Darlene Palmer / Cactus Montreal] We know a lot of people are dying and the public doesn't. People are left, they're left to die in the street.

DARLENE PALMER WAS A HEROIN ADDICT FOR DECADES - HOOKING TO PAY FOR HER HABIT. NOW SHE WORKS AT CACTUS, A CENTER THAT HANDS OUT CLEAN NEEDLES.

[Palmer] I think the potential with a supervised injection facility is to reach out to the people that the traditional resources aren't reaching out to. And that's the idea
it's to get the people most vulnerable into the supervised injection facility so that they have better conditions and we have greater access. And, slowly of course, the idea is to reintegrate traditional services: health services, social services. And if we have more access, then we can have an impact.

DOCTOR PIERRE LAUZON SENT THE GOVERNMENT A STUDY SAYING AS MUCH BACK IN 2001. HE'S STILL WAITING FOR AN ANSWER.

[Dr. Pierre Lauzon / Drug Addiction Clinic, St. Luc Hospital]
The project was all wrapped up and written even before the project in Vancouver but it takes so long to get a decision. In Vancouver, it was steered by the municipal administration and they did a great political job at the municipal administration. We're left here with no political person taking this problem in charge.

(Montreal City hall) bonjour monsieur mayor
TRUE ENOUGH .. AT CITY HALL THERE'S NO ONE TAKING A FIRM STAND.
[Mayor Gerald Tremblay]
The Quebec health board has issued a report and we haven't got a copy yet we're going to look at it and then we'll decide what is the best decision we can take to promote the safety and security of our people.
[Louise O'Sullivan/Montreal Executive Committee Member]
We're waiting for the government, the provincial government, to let us know what their position is.

SO IT'S BASICALLY COME DOWN TO A WAITING GAME HERE IN MONTREAL WHEN IT COMES TO A SAFE SITE.
IT'S SIMPLY NOT A SEXY ISSUE AND CERTAINLY NOT A VOTE GETTER BY ANY MEANS.
ONE THEORY THAT POLITICIANS DON'T WANT TO UPSET PEOPLE, OR MAKE THAT VOTERS, WHO WOULD SEE A MOVE AS CONDONING DRUG USE. BUT IS IT POSSIBLE THAT THE POLITICIANS ARE UNDERESTIMATING THE PUBLIC?

HELENE BEAUDRY HAS BEEN LIVING NEXT DOOR TO THIS FOR MORE THAN 5 YEARS.
[Helene Beaudry / Ville Marie Resident]
In this area there's a lot of prostitution a lot of using and there's a lot of residents that are finding syringes in their yards and they have kids.

BEAUDRY WAS THINKING ABOUT HER OWN 10 YEAR OLD DAUGHTER. SO SHE GOT THE PARK ACROSS THE STREET CLEANED UP AND A BOX FOR SYRINGES INSTALLED.

[Beaudry] I'm not for letting people use drugs but for me I think that since no one is talking care of the problems I think it would be one of the solutions to help the residents not to be in on a daily basis contact with people shooting themselves on the sidewalks in the parks or in area near daycare or schools.

[Ontario Street]
IF MONTREAL EVER GOT A SAFE INJECTION SITE, IT WOULD PROBABLY BE HERE - ALONG ONTARIO STREET BETWEEN ST-HUBERT AND PAPINEAU. MANY PEOPLE IN THE AREA WE TALKED TO SEEMED OPEN TO THE IDEA.

[Man] That would be very good for the neighborhood if it's in the neighborhood. [Woman] I think it's a very good idea. 'Cause then we won't be seeing them on the streets and it will prevent contact with AIDS.

THE PROBLEM - MANY ARE FOR IT AS LONG AS IT'S NOT IN THEIR BACKYARD.

[Jean de Lavaltrie / Ville Marie Resident]
Do Mr. Charest in Westmount, do Mr. Trent want one injection center, which is very close from here, he is just in the center, why he put it beside and not in his yard.

THE QUEBEC GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN RELUCTANT TO MOVE ON THE ISSUE. HEALTH MINISTER PHILIPPE COUILLARD SAYS HE'S KEEPING AN EYE ON VANCOUVER, BUT THAT NO SITE WOULD OPEN HERE ANYTIME SOON.
[Owen] They should get in front this issue and think of a long term solution to the benefit of Canadians and future generation and help set a new standard in North America and fundamentally, hopefully lead the world.

[Geoff"] I think there is a need for it, &#8216;cause not everybody sees it but like I see it.

[Johns] People forget that these are actually people and human beings and we need to find a way to care for them.

MONTREAL'S HEALTH BOARD IS PREPARING A STUDY ON COCAINE ADDICTS WHO INJECT. THERE IS A POSSIBILITY IT WILL POINT TO THE NEED FOR A SAFE INJECTION SITE. IT'S EXPECTED THE STUDY WILL BE RELEASED AT THE END OF APRIL.