

Drug policy 'headed in right direction,' U.S. prosecutor says

BY GREG JOYCE, VANCOUVER

Governments in Canada should steer completely clear from adopting or emulating any current drug policies in the United States, an outspoken prosecutor from New York State told an international conference in Vancouver yesterday.

"My advice to Canada is stay as completely far away from U.S.

drug-law policy as possible," said David Soares, the district attorney for Albany County. "You [Canada] are headed in the right direction."

In a blunt and scathing condemnation of his state and country's ineffective drug war, Mr. Soares said lawmakers, judges and prosecutors in the U.S. know their system is ineffective.

But they support it anyway because it provides law-enforcement

officials with lucrative jobs.

The vast majority of people incarcerated as a result of drug laws in the U.S. are young black and Latino males, he said after a speech at the 17th International Conference on the Reduction of Drug-Related Harm.

Harm reduction has been a movement developed during the past two decades as a complement to the harsher but ineffective absti-

nence-only policy. It essentially recognizes that drug use won't be eliminated and tries to find methods to reduce negative consequences.

Mr. Soares was elected in his state on a ticket to fight what he termed the "Draconian" drug laws that call for long prison sentences for crimes that in Canada would be considered minor.

Legislators in the United States

lack the willpower to overhaul drug laws despite their ineffectiveness at curbing drug use and crime because "reform is scary," he said.

"We understand enforcement — that we do well. Harm reduction forces a person to think and it forces you to question your law enforcement philosophical approach."

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In Canada, a harm-reduction experiment known as the North American Opiate Medication Initiative is under way in Vancouver and Montreal.

The controlled clinical trial that began in February, 2005, distributes heroin to addicts who can't or

won't use methadone. There are an estimated 60,000 to 90,000 heroin addicts in Canada.

The NAOMI project hopes to help addicts stabilize their habit so they can get other aspects of their lives back on track. Similar studies have been done in Switzerland, the Netherlands and Germany. They have resulted in a drop in drug use

and crime, and improved physical and mental health, and employment prospects, proponents say.

Mr. Soares suggested that the heavy-handed drug fight in the U.S. is perpetuated by authorities' need to "give people a wonderful living" by hiring more police, more judges and more prosecutors. He said, not sarcastically, that the

well-known U.S. penchant for building more and more prisons is an accepted "economic development strategy."

Legislators who believe in harm reduction will have their futures in politics threatened by taking a progressive stand on harm reduction, he said, adding that often in the United States, authorities speak

out only after they have retired.

Mr. Soares defeated the Republican candidate in Albany County in November, 2004, completing what some observers in the state said was one of the most stunning political upset in New York political history.

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