



Cops say no to drugs: DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE: Crackdown on open drug use as streets littered with needles

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Open drug use will no longer be tolerated on the streets and back alleys of the Downtown Eastside.

Tomorrow, after two years of looking the other way, Vancouver police will begin arresting addicts who shoot up in public, seizing their drugs as evidence and pursuing charges of narcotics possession.

Police say the crackdown is an effort to encourage drug addicts to use the Insite safe-injection site.

"It's called enforcing the law," said Insp. John McKay of the city-wide enforcement team. "We're going to give [addicts] a legal reason to use [Insite]. People are getting tired of tripping over 18,000 needles a month."

That many discarded needles are found littering the streets and alleys in a four-block radius around the injection site every month, McKay said. There are an estimated 7,500-8,000 intravenous-drug users in the area and complaints about open drug use are coming thick and fast, he said.

The Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users supports the push to use the injection facility but says police are going about it the wrong way.

"That's just going to clog up the courts. It's not going to do anyone any good," said VANDU president Diane Coburn. "The money could be better spent opening up another injection site."

Coburn says addicts resort to getting their fixes on the street because there are often waits of between 10 and 45 minutes at the injection site.

Since staff at the site are not permitted to help users shoot up, many people, especially women, choose the streets instead, she said.

VANDU is organizing a protest rally and march, to begin at noon tomorrow at 139 E. Hastings.

Since Insite opened its doors in September 2003, the average daily use has been about 650 injections. Coburn estimates as many as 1,500 injections take place every day in the immediate area.

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