

'Give it a chance': A Victoria team takes a hard look at Vancouver's supervised-injection sites. At one of the sites, a drug addict has a message for doubters:

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Darren Stone, Times Colonist

Chris, a 28-year-old drug user from Victoria, sits on the steps of Insite, a supervised injection site in Vancouver. He says that if any other Canadian city needs such a place besides Vancouver, "Victoria is the next best place." A look at two Vancouver sites, A2.

VANCOUVER - Outside one of Vancouver's much-publicized supervised injection sites Friday was an addict from Victoria with a simple message about drug treatment: "Tell the people who have fears in Victoria to give it a chance."

Sitting on a cold concrete step in the gritty Downtown Eastside, Chris, 28, recalled how he used to shoot cocaine, heroin and crystal meth in Victoria three years ago, scurrying from a bathroom in a fast-food restaurant to a washroom in a mall and finally to the city's alleys and street corners.

"If any other city in this country, besides Vancouver, needs one [a safe injection site] Victoria is the next best place," said Chris, who was calm and mellow Friday after using Insite, one of Vancouver's injection sites. "This place saves lives," Chris said.

Faced with a rising number of stories from people such as Chris, a Victoria contingent of city and provincial politicians looked for solutions during a fact-finding tour of Vancouver's two injection sites.

Rob Fleming, Victoria-Hillside NDP MLA, Dean Fortin, city councillor, and Marianne Alto, a long-time HIV/AIDS policy developer and city council candidate, visited the Insite facility on East Hastings Street and the Dr. Peter Centre in Vancouver's West End.

Both sites allow users to inject drugs in a supervised medical setting with clean syringes, and both refer addicts to counselling services.

The fact-finding mission comes after a summer of public forums that sparked debate on the size, shape, scope and location of a possible Victoria injection site.

"Our visit advances that knowledge," said Fortin. "It was important to see how both sites involved an integration into a community, and that's going to be important no matter where and how we put it in Victoria."

Insite, which inside looks like a high-end hair salon with brushed metal, wood laminate and mood lighting, runs on a \$2-million budget. It averages 611 users a day.

Research by the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS suggests Insite has reduced needle sharing among some of the most high-risk drug users who suffer from HIV/AIDS. But critics say the research is far from conclusive.

While Insite focuses solely on safe injection, the Dr. Peter Centre has residential apartments where users can inject drugs, a safe-injection room run by registered nurses, a day-care service and privately funded music and massage rooms.

Both sites are two years into a three-year test period and receive partial provincial and federal funding, which Victoria would seek as well, said Fleming. "I was very impressed with both facilities," said Fleming.

"What we probably need to do is to talk further with some of the agencies that deal with this problem ... and see how we could introduce a service like this."

A Victoria solution may be "somewhere in-between" Insite and the Dr. Peter Centre, said Fortin. The city doesn't need the high capacity of Insite, nor the high budget of the Dr. Peter Centre, he said.

Victoria's next step will be developing a proposal for its own custom-designed local facility to discuss with the Vancouver Island Health Authority and the public, said Fortin.

The city's mayor and police chief, as well as the Island health officer and provincial health officer have said they support the idea of some sort of supervised injection site in Victoria.

Illustration:

• Colour Photo: Darren Stone, Times Colonist / Chris, a 28-year-old drug user from Victoria, sits on the steps of Insite, a supervised injection site in Vancouver. He says that if any other Canadian city needs such a place besides Vancouver, "Victoria is the next best place." A look at two Vancouver sites, A2.

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