

Anne O'Neil
301-8616 Fremlin Street
Vancouver, BC
V6P 3X3

Prime Minister Stephen Harper
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A2

July 9, 2008

Dear Mr. Stephen Harper:

I am writing to express my support for Insite, Vancouver's Safe Injection Site, and to request that you strongly reconsider your government's decision to appeal the recent BC Supreme Court decision. This decision essentially found that it would be unconstitutional for the government to interfere with the provision of health benefits to people in need at this health facility.

I have worked in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver for the past 10+ years, most recently in the area of improving living conditions for people making their homes in small single resident occupancy hotels (SROs). Many of the people I have been working with suffer from a combination of acute poverty, physical and/or mental illness, and addiction. Very often these SROs, their homes, are in a state of neglect and disrepair. These are some of the most vulnerable people in this country. They need our support and caring.

Those who live with addiction are very often struggling with mental health issues and poverty as well. It is very important that they receive the care and support they need. It is a mistake to think that the help provided by Insite is only of benefit to those in direct receipt of the care. In fact, the work done by Insite helps everyone in our society, in both practical and compassionate ways. For example, it lessens the spread of life-threatening and debilitating infectious disease, and decreases the expenditure of financial resources on emergency situations and serious illness that can easily be prevented.

All Canadians deserve to receive the health care they need, without judgment. The use of legal drugs (tobacco and alcohol) accounts for approximately 80 percent of the total cost of substance use in Canada, while illegal drug use accounts for the remaining 20 percent (Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, 2006). It is wrong to refuse to provide basic health care to those who suffer the health consequences of the disease of addiction to illegal drugs. Meanwhile we treat those whose health is impaired by other diseases related to the chronic use of alcohol and tobacco, as well as health consequences related to various other choices and circumstances.

Harm reduction strategies are not only supported by service providers and people who live and work in the DTES, current scientific research also supports this approach. Over 25 peer reviewed articles published in various sources, including The Lancet, the New England Journal of Medicine, the Canadian Medical Association Journal etc, demonstrate the need for Insite as part of the continuum of care required.

Moreover, the harm reduction approach is supported by the vast majority of British Columbians, including:

- the City of Vancouver, including current and former mayors (Mayor Sam Sullivan, Senator Larry Campbell and former Mayor Phillip Owen);
- the Province of British Columbia, including Premier Gordon Campbell, the Provincial Health Minister, and Vancouver Coastal Health;
- the MP and MLA for the community concerned;
- Liberal and NDP candidates at the federal level;
- the health care community, including the BC Nurses Union, many nurses and public health officials; and
- injection drug users, community groups, local businesses etc.

There is also support for Insite across Canada.

On top of all that the BC Supreme Court has decided that, for those who are involved in a severe addictive cycle, it is preferable that they use the substances they require in a clean medical facility under medical supervision, as opposed to a back alley, or alone in a hotel room.

The money spent on Insite is money well spent. Harm reduction is one of the necessary components of the four pillars strategy, which also includes prevention, treatment and law enforcement. Harm reduction is not offered instead of treatment, and neither does it suffice to offer treatment instead of harm reduction. This is not an either/or

proposition. Harm reduction is part of the continuum of care necessary for those living with severe addictions. Harm reduction is a point of entry to basic health care for those who are severely addicted and very often ends up being a life-saving precursor to treatment.

Please do not spend our tax dollars on legal fees to appeal what is a legally sound, compassionate, pragmatic, community supported, and evidence-based solution. Also please do not spend any more of our tax dollars studying this any further. The results are in. Your most recent Health Canada study states essentially the same thing as the 25+ previous reports, namely that Insite:

- saves lives by reducing overdose fatalities;
- reduces the spread of preventable, chronic, debilitating, life-threatening illnesses such as HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C;
- reduces public injections and various injection-related infections;
- reduces public disorder; and
- provides an entry point for people to obtain treatment.

It is time to recognize the value of Insite as part of an integrated harm reduction strategy and to move on as a Nation. Insite should remain open, and furthermore, there should be more safe injection sites to meet the basic health needs of our citizens.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Anne O'Neil, BSc, LLB

cc:

The Honourable Tony Clement, Federal Health Minister
The Honourable Robert Nicholson, Federal Justice Minister
Stephane Dion, Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada
Jack Layton, Leader of the NDP Party of Canada
Liz Evans, Portland Hotel Society
Mark Townsend, Portland Hotel Society
Libby Davies, MP, Vancouver East
Jenny Kwan, MLA, Vancouver-Mount Pleasant
Premier Gordon Campbell
Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan
Senator Larry Campbell