

Subject: Research, examine, and develop actions to establish a supervised drug consumption site within the Richmond General Hospital Precinct to address the growing public health crisis related to drug addiction and overdose deaths.

Members of Council: Laura Gillanders and Kash Heed

Meeting: General Purposes Committee

Notice Provided on: January 30, 2024

For Consideration on: February 5, 2024 in accordance with Procedure By-law No 7560

Background

Supervised consumption sites provide a safe and controlled environment for people to use drugs, reducing the risk of overdose and other health complications. Health professionals are present to intervene in case of emergencies and provide immediate medical assistance. These sites have proven to be effective in preventing overdose deaths. Staff are trained to administer naloxone, an opioid overdose reversal medication, and can quickly respond to overdose situations. This can save lives and provide an opportunity for individuals to seek further treatment and support.

Public drug policies should not push drug users into unsafe areas such as alleys and hidden alcoves, instead they should establish safe places to consume drugs. Many of these people have no place to live so they are outdoors and visible, living in tents or lying on benches, in doorways or alleys as this is their living space, all in the public eye. By providing a designated space for drug use, supervised consumption sites will help reduce public drug use and associated risks, such as discarded needles and drug-related crime. This can improve the overall safety and cleanliness of the community while dealing with some of the disorder issues.

The sites offer a gateway to healthcare and support services for people struggling with acute drug addiction. They provide an opportunity for individuals to engage with healthcare professionals, social workers, and addiction counsellors who can offer guidance, referrals, and support for treatment and recovery. The sites provide sterile equipment and safe disposal options, reducing the risk of transmitting bloodborne infections such as HIV and hepatitis C. They also offer testing and treatment for these diseases, contributing to public health efforts.

Studies have shown that these sites can be cost-effective in the long run. By preventing overdose deaths and reducing healthcare costs associated with first responder response, emergency room visits and infectious diseases, these sites can save money for the healthcare system and society as a whole.

These sites are part of a continuum of care to recognize the inherent dignity and worth of individuals struggling with drug addiction. They provide a non-judgmental and supportive environment, offering a compassionate response to a complex health issue. These sites aim to reduce stigma and discrimination, promoting the well-being of individuals. Correspondingly, drug detoxification plays a vital role in the continuum of care for people struggling with drug abuse. By addressing the physical dependence on drugs, detoxification sets the stage for successful rehabilitation and long-term recovery and should be considered as a next step.

As our soon to be retired courageous BC Coroner Lisa Lapointe articulated, "They're trying to stay warm or stay dry or stay safe...If public drug use is greater, is it due to decriminalization or is it due to more people having nowhere to live? Decriminalization didn't cause inflation. Decriminalization didn't cause the housing crisis."

It is important to note that the effectiveness and benefits of supervised consumption sites may vary depending on the specific context and implementation. However, evidence from existing sites in various locations suggests that they can play a crucial role in addressing drug addiction and its associated harms. During 2023, 2,511 people lost their lives in BC through toxic drug poisoning: we have a responsibility aimed at political intervention as 26 of those lives were lost in Richmond.

Motion

1. That Staff administer a practicability analysis to gauge the potential benefits and challenges of implementing a drug consumption site within the Richmond General Hospital Precinct. This analysis will evaluate the impact on public safety, healthcare costs, and community perceptions, providing evidence-based recommendations for the successful implementation of a supervised drug consumption site to address the growing public health crisis related to acute drug addiction and overdose deaths;
2. That Staff collaborate with Coastal Health as the Authority responsible to fund and provide services onsite, both the Provincial and Federal Governments, local healthcare providers, and community organizations in establishing the drug consumption site. This collaboration will ensure that individuals accessing these sites receive comprehensive care, including access to addiction treatment, harm minimization services, and counseling;
3. That Staff recommend to Council a process to establish a task force comprised of representatives from law enforcement, legal services, healthcare professionals, community organizations, and individuals with lived experience of drug addiction to develop guidelines, protocols, and best practices for the implementation of the drug consumption site, ensuring its effectiveness, acceptance, and safety;
4. That Staff recommend to Council the resources required for community education and awareness campaigns about supervised drug consumption sites. These campaigns will aim to dispel misconceptions, reduce stigma, and promote understanding of the public health benefits associated with these sites;
5. That Staff recommend to Council a monitoring and evaluation system to assess the effectiveness of the implementation of the drug consumption site. This system will collect data on overdose rates, healthcare utilization, and referrals to addiction treatment, allowing Council to make informed decisions about the future of this site; and,
6. That Staff develop a process to ensure that community concerns and perspectives are considered during the planning and implementation process.