

VANDU

Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users

our mission: to improve the lives of people who use illicit drugs through user-based peer support and education.

May 27, 1998

Response to the Open Letter to the Mayor from various Gastown, Strathcona and Chinatown groups:

VANDU disputes the allegation that the few meager resources for people who use drugs "assist or facilitate the use of drugs" in the Downtown Eastside. There are, in fact, too few resources for drug users which cause large numbers of users to stand on the streets angering merchants and residents.

- Drug users are excluded from most government low-income housing and live in terrible conditions in deteriorating hotels. City by-laws are not enforced, tenants suffer and landlords profit.
- People who live in unhealthy circumstances lose hope and become ill costing our healthcare system millions of dollars. Welfare gives a recipient \$175 a month to survive on and when a person becomes ill as a result of inadequate shelter and food and goes to the hospital it costs \$1500 per day. We clearly need more decent housing in all neighbourhoods in Vancouver.
- Drug dealing and crime cannot be curbed in our neighborhood until legal maintenance of drugs are provided to addicts.
- The welfare rates are so low, since they were cut 21% in 1996, that recipients who don't use illicit drugs increasingly participate in illegal activities just to survive. Why didn't Gastown, Strathcona and Chinatown representatives protest these destructive cuts?
- There are people who use drugs living in the Downtown Eastside who have lived here for many years and pay taxes through their rent and are clearly stakeholders in our community.
- There are successful programs implemented to deal with the epidemic of drug use to reduce crime, stop the spread of disease and reduce overdose deaths in many cities in Europe. Why not here? Our experts have recommended these programs in every study published. (The Cain Report and HIV AIDS and Injection Drug Use A National Action Plan are 2.)
- If the safety of citizens on Carall and Hastings Streets is threatened surely it is women in the sex trade who are being beaten and murdered who are most at risk not tourists.
- VANDU believes that the citizens of our neighborhood and city can work together to come up with solutions to these extremely serious problems. We call for a dialogue between the Gastown, Strathcona and Chinatown groups, drug users, service providers and the police. VANDU's attempts to enter into such discussions have been ignored and shunned so far.

To implement the demands put forth today will add to the death and destruction we experience on a daily basis. We challenge the groups in our community to put forth real practical solutions. Otherwise we will understand that a continued policy of annihilation of drug users and poor people is the "final solution".

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