

"DEAD PEOPLE DON'T DETOX"

Attack on Needle Exchange Threatens Lives

The recent attack on the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU) needle exchange table at the corner of Main and Hastings is a direct attack on people of the Downtown Eastside (DTES). Evidence shows that peer to peer health initiatives work!

The Vancouver Police Department (VPD) closed our table under the guise that VANDU volunteers were engaged in illegal activities and therefore had to act. This is an outright lie! Since the night in question they have stuck to their story and intimated that they had all the evidence on film. What really happened is on film and backs up what VANDU has been saying all along. Yes one of our volunteers got up from the table and went around the corner and consumed some crack. (This is definitely a no-no and as in the only other instance where our volunteers have screwed up, we reprimanded that person and removed them from the program.) The charge that we were dealing is a fallacy. The undercover officer is clearly seen on film walking up to someone standing beside the table and then being led away so that what looks like a drug deal takes place. I stress that this was just a person standing beside the table and not a VANDU volunteer. This begs the question; Would they shut down a 7/11 store just because a dope deal happened just outside their doors. I think not. Lately the VPD has been quoted as saying that they are not against needle exchange but yet they still are fighting against the return of the table to the corner of Main and Hastings. Please let your views be heard. Write the Police Board and demand the return of the table so that this life saving initiative can carry out its good work.

Another problem that has arisen since the night in question is the letter writing campaign by the principals at both DEYAS and at Vancouver Native Health suggesting that our needle exchange was not working. One only has to see the latest stats that show that HIV rates and overdoses have plummeted since the inception of our table. Our subtle but strong message to use safely that goes along with every exchange is the main reason that these stats have gone down. I would suggest that the 2 above named organizations look at their own respective agencies before they paint VANDU's kettle black. Deyas' rigid limitations and Native Health's denial of AIDS meds to people still using were 2 factors in Vancouver having the most explosive HIV epidemic in the free world. They have since corrected these follies but at what cost.

In closing I would like to say that we at VANDU aren't perfect (all work performed at VANDU is by volunteers) but we work very hard in keeping our community safe and our neighbors alive. Just remember "Dead people don't detox".

Dean Wilson
President VANDU
(604) 723-3184 (Please contact me if you need any info on the DTES and Harm Reduction)