



NEWS RELEASE

Community AIDS Organizations Unite to Oppose Additional Drug Cops: Cite fears of increased HIV rates and lack of evidence of effectiveness

March 21, 2003

VANCOUVER - Community AIDS organizations have united in their opposition to the funding of additional police as a strategy to address the ongoing drug problems in the Downtown Eastside without additional substantial resources for the other three pillars of the four pillar approach.

In a letter to Mayor Campbell and the Vancouver Police Commission, the coalition, including the BC Persons With AIDS Society, AIDS Vancouver, and the YouthCO AIDS Society, cited fears about increased transmission of HIV due to enforcement practices and stressed the lack of evidence supporting the effectiveness of enforcement as a strategy to deal with addiction.

The letter, sent March 20, notes, "absent from the debate regarding how to deal with the drug problem in the Downtown Eastside has been the great deal of evidence demonstrating that law enforcement can have a highly negative impact by forcing drug users into higher risk environments."

"We are concerned that, without adequate drug treatment and HIV prevention measures in place, the intense police pressure that is already present only drives users deeper into the hotels and alleys where HIV is spread," said Rick Barnes, a spokesperson for AIDS Vancouver.

As an example, the letter cites the recent police effort dubbed 'Operation 24/7' that has involved keeping a continuous police presence on the corner of Main and Hastings.

"Operation 24/7 is a prime example of the limited, and often negative impacts of enforcement," said Malsah, Acting Chair of the BC Persons With AIDS Society (BCPWA). "All they've done is displace drug users two blocks closer to the tourist area of Gastown, and scared addicts in desperate need of sterile syringes away from the needle exchange."

Malsah noted the nighttime exchange operation experienced a 50% reduction in sterile syringes being provided in the wake of 'Operation 24/7'.

When police announced their plan to re-deploy 50 officers from other areas of the city, they originally stated that "the health authority has specifically asked for increased police enforcement," a claim later contradicted by the health authority.

"In the light of such misrepresentation, the whole attempt should be seen as a transparent attempt by VPD to garner a greater share of resources directed to the bloated and ineffective 'enforcement' pillar," said Sheena Sargeant, Acting Executive Director of the YouthCO AIDS Society.

The groups signing the letter stressed that drug treatment services remain woefully inadequate and pointed to the great number of studies showing that providing drug treatment was more cost effective than law enforcement.

"The total number of detox beds in the lower mainland can be counted in terms of dozens, whereas the total number of addicts can be counted in terms of thousands," said Ms. Sargeant. "Why would we put more money into enforcement?"

The letter noted that incarceration as a drug strategy was even more expensive.

"We now have a great deal of evidence to suggest that HIV risk in prison is greater than in the community," said Malsah. "Considering that there is absolutely no grounds to suggest that incarceration is an effective way to treat addiction we want policy-makers to start funding programs that actually reduce harm, not exacerbate it."

The coalition strayed away from reports of police misconduct and wished to focus the dialogue on cost-effectiveness. "Although we are concerned about reports of police brutality against persons at risk of HIV, we have really come together because we would like see an evidence-based public health policy," said Rick Barnes.

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ATTACHED: ***Backgrounder – The Impacts of Enforcement Strategies
Letter – Community Organizations to Campbell, et. al.***