

# Backgrounder

## Street Outreach Services

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### AIDS VANCOUVER ISLAND'S STREET OUTREACH / NEEDLE EXCHANGE CRISIS

- AIDS Vancouver Island's *Street Outreach Services* (SOS) provide core services for people who use drugs by injection. The needle exchange service is located in downtown Victoria at 1601 Blanshard Street, in the same building as the organization's education and support services.
- In order to address the increasing need for services in Victoria's downtown, AVI would like to offer more extensive education, advocacy and outreach programs in concert with a new needle exchange location with capacity for mental health and addictions counselling.
- An additional \$105,000/year in operating costs would need to be in place before moving the exchange to a stand-alone location. In addition to this, funds would be required for the move and for any renovations necessary to transform a new location into a fully functioning harm reduction facility. AVI and their community partners believe that there would be significant health and social benefits achieved with the addition of complementary services, which include mental health and addictions counselors and an educator/advocate. These additional services would cost \$110,000/year.
- Concerned community leaders, including representatives from the City of Victoria, the Victoria Police, neighbours and the business community have come together to develop a plan for the relocation of *Street Outreach Services*. The plan will include: fundraising for the move and operations, coordination with the Victoria Police, and the development of a *Good Neighbour Policy* with the City of Victoria, the police and the neighbourhood/s impacted by AVI's Street Outreach Services programs.
- AVI and the City of Victoria are jointly working on a *Good Neighbour Policy* for the needle exchange program's current and future locations. The policy will address issues such as cleanliness, security, physical appearance and behavioural challenges. The development of the policy will engage all stakeholders in identifying neighbourhood problems and provide mechanisms for addressing issues, both as they arise and in order to prevent their reoccurrence.

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### STREET OUTREACH SERVICES PROGRAM AND SERVICE OVERVIEW

- AIDS Vancouver Island's *Street Outreach Services* (SOS) provide services for people who use drugs by injection. The program is a core component of AVI's responsibility to contain HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C and other communicable diseases. SOS services are provided in Victoria, Courtenay, Campbell River, the Cowichan Valley and in Port Hardy.
- In addition to the life-saving distribution and exchange of needles, SOS provides treatment information, referral services, prevention information (e.g. safe sex, vein care), condoms and related prevention supplies. SOS ensures accessible needle disposal for users by providing syringe drop boxes and teams of volunteer "rig diggers" who patrol the area surrounding the exchange and collecting abandoned syringes and related paraphernalia. AVI's education department has developed HIV/HCV programs targeted to this population, and provides regular workshops and peer education sessions.



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### PROGRAM STATISTICS

- In 1996, SOS exchanged 128,000 syringes to 545 clients. In 2005-2006, SOS distributed over 1 million syringes across the island to more than 2,000 clients. During these ten years of dramatic service increases, funding for the program has remained fixed, with no increases for more than a decade.
- In 2005-2006, the Victoria program accepted an additional 427 clients and distributed 830,000 syringes with a return rate of 97.3%. 1560 active clients in Victoria used SOS services on approximately 25,000 separate occasions.
- In the spring of 2005, 250 people who inject drugs in Victoria volunteered to complete an anonymous questionnaire and blood test as part of the *I-TRACK Survey*.<sup>1</sup> Findings from the survey included:
  - 1 in 10 users were HIV+ and 7 in 10 were HCV+.
  - 1 in 4 injection drug users infected with HIV or HCV don't know they're infected.
  - Many users infected with HCV or HIV share their drug using equipment.
- Needle Exchange Programs (NEPs) are inexpensive and cost effective. Studies have shown that a NEP with a modest staff complement will, over a 5-year period, prevent at least 24 HIV infections and provide a cost savings of \$1.3 Million.<sup>2</sup>
- The BC Ministry of Health has reported that each new HIV infection costs from \$188,000 to \$225,000 in direct expenses and as much as \$1 million in indirect expenses related to sickness and years of life lost.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada. *I-Track: Enhanced Surveillance of Risk Behaviours among People who Inject Drugs. Phase I Report, August 2006*. Surveillance and Risk Assessment Division, Centre for Infectious Disease Prevention and Control, Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Strike C.J., Challacombe L., Myers T., & Millson M. (2002). Needle exchange programs: delivery and access issues. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 93 (5), (pp. 339-343).

<sup>3</sup> Source: B.C. Ministry of Health Planning and B.C. Ministry of Health Services, *Priorities for Action in Managing the Epidemics – HIV/AIDS in B.C.: 2003-2007*, September 2003, p.1.



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