



Media Release – Wednesday 28 February 2007

AIDS Vancouver Island announces plans to relocate needle exchange

Victoria - AIDS Vancouver Island (AVI), Victoria's principal needle exchange service provider, has announced it is seeking another location to provide its critical services to its clients.

"AVI and its community partners recognize the present location of the needle exchange is no longer appropriate," said Marilyn Callahan, board chair of AIDS Vancouver Island. "AVI is currently working with community groups to develop strategies to move the exchange to a non-residential location where services can be increased to address Victoria's substance use crisis while minimizing impacts on the local community."

Several sectors of the community — including the City of Victoria, the Victoria Police, neighbourhood stakeholders, leaders of the Victoria business community, and partnering service providers — have held meetings to develop a plan for the move of the city's primary needle exchange.

Although a new location has not yet been chosen, AVI's board and management have determined that the program will require the addition of specialized staff and additional annual funding supports from various levels of government and from the private sector in order to sustain the program in a stand-alone location.

"We want to assure the public that this relocation will carefully consider the needs of the whole community," said Marilyn Callahan. "We also recognize that strong community support and new resources are required to move this program in a manner that guarantees access to the critical services our clients need to save their lives and to provide them with specialized care to win their struggles with addiction."

"The City is committed to assisting AVI find an appropriate location for the vital services it provides, while restoring a safe and quiet environment for our residents and businesses in the neighbourhood of Cormorant Street," said Mayor Alan Lowe.

Deputy Police Chief Bill Naughton said he "is pleased to be working with such a solid and committed group of organizations to develop a sustainable solution that restores public safety and order in our community."

AVI has scheduled meetings with the Vancouver Island Health Authority to discuss appropriate funding levels prior to securing a new location for the program. In addition, AVI will be seeking support from the private sector, foundations and other funding sources in order to ensure that needle exchange services can be delivered as effectively and as efficiently as possible for many years to come.

AIDS Vancouver Island has provided community health services focused on the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C in Greater Victoria and in locations across Vancouver Island since 1985.

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STATEMENT FROM MARILYN CALLAHAN
BOARD CHAIR, AIDS VANCOUVER ISLAND

28 February 2007

"The needle exchange needs a new home and the purpose of this press conference is to announce the formation of a broad coalition of citizens and groups dedicated to finding that home.

It is no "Victoria secret" that the needle exchange has outgrown its facilities on Cormorant Street. Quite the contrary. AIDS Vancouver Island, the organization that has operated the needle exchange since 1989, has known for some time that we need better designed and better located facilities. We need to bring people off the street into a courtyard and drop in space. We need to have space for coffee and discussions with staff and volunteers. We need resources for all of this and for security in the building and neighbourhood.

Those using the needle exchange, and the numbers have quadrupled in ten years, are not all living on the streets; some are living in neighbourhoods throughout Victoria with steady jobs and supporting families. But those without homes, and jobs and families have substantially greater needs and a needle exchange can be the entry point to basic health care, including nutrition and shelter, addiction services and help finding the strength and hope to change their life course. They are taking a responsible step in limiting the spread of HIV and Hepatitis C by coming to the exchange. We need to be there to provide increased opportunities so that they can take the next step.

One infection prevented can save about \$200,000 in health care costs and offer a person, often a young person, an opportunity for a full and healthy life. It's a bargain. And the needle exchange is one of the most obvious and proven methods for preventing the spread of infections.

In the past 10 years we have received no increase in funding although we now exchange over 1 million needles in Victoria and Vancouver Island, up from 128,000 ten years ago.

Today I want to introduce some members of our coalition who have taken leadership in the campaign to find new quarters for the exchange. As well we are looking for others who want to join us in the development of the facility and its ongoing operation. We need space away from residential areas yet near to town, we need help with renovations and furnishings, we need increased operating grants from our core funders so that we can operate the service as it should be run. We are grateful for the support of leaders in the Victoria community in finding ways to reach these goals."

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Backgrounder

Street Outreach Services

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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Backgrounder

Street Outreach Services

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*.¹ 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.²
- 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.³

¹ 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.

² 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).

³ 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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AIDS VANCOUVER ISLAND'S CURRENT FUNDING CRISIS

- AIDS Vancouver Island (AVI) is presently negotiating with its principal funder, the Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA), after VIHA announced on January 11, 2007, a new funding model for HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C prevention and support services. The new model, if deployed, will reduce south island resources to AIDS Vancouver Island and partner agencies by 37.5 per cent (\$450K).
 - On January 29, 2007, the Downtown Service Providers Committee (DSPC) held a press conference to address the funding cut and demanding a commitment to restore the funding. On this same day, VIHA offered one-year transition funding to the 3 affected Victoria-based organizations. Negotiations are ongoing.
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AIDS VANCOUVER ISLAND'S PROGRAM AND SERVICE OVERVIEW

- AIDS Vancouver Island (AVI) is a community-based AIDS service organization. AVI has provided harm reduction services and HIV/AIDS prevention and support programs in Vancouver Island communities since it was founded and registered as a charitable organization twenty years ago (1986).
- In 2003, AVI added hepatitis C prevention and education to its mandate, although no additional funding was allocated by the agency's funders for these additional responsibilities.
- After establishing a core service base in southern and central Vancouver Island, AVI responded to a request by VIHA in 2003 to assume responsibility for service delivery in the north island region. AVI now operates service offices in Greater Victoria, Nanaimo, Courtenay, Campbell River and Port Hardy in addition to a mobile needle exchange service in the Cowichan Valley. AVI's service responsibilities also include the Gulf Islands.
- AVI has managed one of the Canada's longest-running needle exchange programs since 1989. The program provides needle exchange, health promotion and harm reduction information. This important service opens doors for clients to access the organization's education, support, and advocacy services for people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C and other communicable diseases.
- AVI is respected by funders and peers for its ability to develop targeted and innovative interventions designed to prevent the transmission of HIV and HCV and to ensure healthier outcomes for its clients. AVI continually adapts its programs and services to changing demographics of HIV and HCV infections, and increasingly, HIV/HCV coinfection. In recent years, injection drug users, aboriginal people, women and youth are at special risk of contracting HIV infection and AVI has responded accordingly.
- AVI staff are responding to epidemiological shifts by providing increased outreach to vulnerable environments, from prisons to the street, among men who have sex with men, queer youth, intravenous drug users, the homeless, aboriginal people and women.

