



NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 29, 2007

VIHA AND AVI ANNOUNCE NEEDLE EXCHANGE ACTION PLAN FOLLOWING EXTERNAL REVIEW

VICTORIA – The Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA) and AIDS Vancouver Island (AVI) today jointly announced an action plan for needle exchange services designed to more effectively meet the health needs of street drug users and help improve public order in the neighbourhood.

Building on the recent \$7.6 million commitment VIHA has made to enhance health care supports and services for homeless people in Victoria who suffer from addictions, the health authority will invest an additional \$125,000 to support the plan that flows from recommendations provided by an in-depth external review released today.

“We share the public’s concerns about the issues surrounding the Cormorant Street needle exchange and are committed to act on the recommendations as part of our needle exchange action plan,” said Mike Conroy, Chief Operating Officer for VIHA. “However, we know these efforts alone will not resolve all of the issues without a demonstrated commitment from other partners to act on the recommendations stemming from the Mayor’s Task Force on Homelessness and the housing first approach recommended by the Task Force expert panel.”

The goals of the action plan are to improve public order, promote client and staff safety, develop standards and agency collaboration, and formalize engagement processes with the local community. Immediate steps to be taken are as follows:

- Develop standards and protocols to govern behaviour in and around the needle exchange;
- Increase needle exchange options for clients by increasing the number of sites alternate for drop-off or pick-up of needles, including foot and mobile exchange options, and more drop boxes;
- Identify and develop downtown drop-in centre options for the homeless in the late afternoon and evening hours as an alternative to gathering on the streets;

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- Implement the recommendations to develop stronger client engagement practices in the operation of the needle exchange;
- Establish ongoing operational relationships between the police and the needle exchange;
- Work with the local community on the implementation of the action plan;
- Integrate health services in mental health and addictions with housing and other social supports as directed by the Mayor’s Task Force report, including integration of ACT/FACT teams and Street Nurses to support the health needs of clients; and
- Pursue a Safe Consumption Service through the Section 56 exemption process with the City of Victoria.

“We welcome this review and its affirmation that needle exchange is a health service that saves lives,” said Katrina Jensen, AVI executive director. “We look forward to working with VIHA, our staff, clients, community partners and community members to improve this critical service.”

VIHA will also develop clear expectations for contractors in the management of similar services, and remains committed to continuing to work with AVI and other agencies on effective, sustainable, long-term solutions for street involved people.

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BACKGROUND

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NEEDLE EXCHANGE ACTION PLAN

On October 19, 2007, as a response to the Mayor's Task Force on Homelessness recommendations, the Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA) announced a plan to invest \$7.6 million to improve health care supports and services for homeless people in Victoria, including enhanced addictions services.

Building on this commitment, VIHA and AIDS Vancouver Island (AVI) have jointly reviewed and agreed to act on recommendations stemming from an external expert review of the issues surrounding the Cormorant Street needle exchange. VIHA and AVI will strike an Implementation Advisory Committee composed of community stakeholders to oversee this action plan and review the rest of the recommendations.

This includes an additional investment of \$125,000 to help implement the following:

Public Order/Safety

- Include clients in the development of standards for behaviour in and around the needle exchange
- Establish formal operational relationships with the police such as developing joint roles and responsibilities for monitoring behaviour
- Funding of an additional \$100,000 by VIHA to add a third full time position so that there are three staff on duty at most times except dinner breaks
- Invite local community involvement, including the neighbourhood associations, with the Implementation Advisory Committee
- Review the needle exchange space for potential safety enhancements
- Develop safety guidelines for staff to implement behaviour protocols with clients including consequences for contraventions
- Enhance needle exchange options including a mix of fixed site, mobile, and foot with more needle drop boxes
- Identify afternoon and evening drop-in opportunities in various locations
- Hours of operation to be reviewed with feedback from the community and clients
- Establish clear job duties for staff and volunteers and identify training opportunities
- Further integrate the street nurses into the operations of the needle exchange to be more active partners in the service
- Pursue a Section 56 exemption process with the City of Victoria for Supervised Consumption Site
- Support the implementation of the Mayor's Task Force to enhance housing options for this population

Client Engagement

- Develop a client advisory committee
- Develop mechanisms for client involvement within the needle exchange
- Establish site behaviour expectations with clients and address every infraction
- Ensure staff are trained to provide education around harm reduction and health promotion for clients

Standards, Training, Coordination as set out in the Mayor's Task Force Recommendations

- VIHA work with community agencies to develop an overall system of care
- VIHA lead the development of standards, practice guidelines, training, and evaluation processes
- VIHA work to better integrate Mental Health, Addictions, and Communicable Disease services
- VIHA improve the direct referral process to mental health and addiction services

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