



BACKGROUND

AVI's Harm Reduction Services

- AVI's needle exchange has been operating as a mobile service since June 1st 2008. Services are currently limited to providing needle exchange services on the street with staff traveling on foot, by bicycle, or operating out of a parked vehicle.
- AVI has offered needle exchange services since 1988. Victoria is currently the only city of its size in Canada without a fixed site needle exchange.
- Needles distributed **prior to fixed site closure** on average per month January to April 2008 by all needle exchange providers: 45,400. Needles recovered averaged at 36,900 per month during that period.
- Needles distributed by all needle exchange providers **following the fixed site closure** from June 2008 to February 2009 average 30,000 per month, with levels dropping to 16,000 per month during the cold, wet weather. Needles recovered averaged 20,400, leaving nearly 87,000 unaccounted for.
- In the past eighteen months, many positive steps have been taken in improving the capacity of harm reduction services and moving towards a distributed model of needle exchange in Victoria. A distributed model means offering various models of program delivery, which would increase options for the distribution and collection of harm reduction materials.
- Currently, the major piece missing from a distributed model is the existence of a stationary needle exchange service where counselling, support, and other services can be offered. The achievements of the past eighteen months have laid the foundation for the success of a fixed site needle exchange.

Changes over the past eighteen months

Important changes to harm reduction, addiction treatment and housing services in Victoria 2007-2009:

- On October 29, 2007, **VIHA announced an increase in funding for AVI's** harm reduction services. The \$100,000 increase enabled AVI to hire a third staff person for the service, to undertake client engagement and to expand educational services. This was to address the recommendations put forth in the review of the needle exchange conducted in the fall of 2007. Prior to this, funding for the service had not increased since 1993, despite an increase in client load from just 200 in 1993 to 1500 in 2006.
- The **Mayor's Taskforce** in 2007 led to an increased awareness of the steps needed to be taken to address homelessness, mental health and addictions in our community. The subsequent establishment of the **Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness** has insured a commitment from high-level stakeholders to continue working on these issues and to continue a focus on housing people who struggle with these multiple challenges.
- AIDS Vancouver Island now provides expanded educational programming for people who use drugs by injection. Participation rates in health promotion programming have been high, **with over 30 people attending weekly sessions.**

- There has been increased peer-involvement in needle exchange services. **SOLID** (Society of Living Intravenous Drug Users) has increased their community presence. The **Street Advocacy Group (SAG)** – a group representing AVI needle exchange clients – was created in January 2008 to facilitate community-building amongst their peers and advocate on behalf of their peers with the non-drug using community.
- In July 2008, funding from the United Way enabled AIDS Vancouver Island to create a **drug treatment counsellor position**. The availability of this service through AVI increases the support available to clients who use drugs – to assist them in taking the steps needed to stabilize their lives, decrease their consumption, and to access treatment or Detox. For many of the “hardest to reach” clients, it is an essential first step in making changes to their lives.
- In the spring of 2008, VIHA established the **Victoria Needle Exchange Services Community Advisory Committee**, which includes representatives from neighbourhood associations, downtown schools community, downtown faith groups, the Downtown Victoria Business Association, the Victoria Police, the City of Victoria, service providers, and VIHA. The Committee has been meeting monthly to provide input and feedback on issues related to policy, program development and the delivery of health and social services by needle exchange programs.
- VIHA has engaged in leadership to create standards for needle exchange service delivery, to better coordinate services and statistics gathering. **The Needle Exchange Service Providers’ Committee** has met monthly since June 2008, which has led to a stronger network of needle exchange providers in Victoria.
- VIHA also created a **working group** consisting of the **city, police, VIHA and AVI** to monitor the issues regarding needle exchange, to ensure consistent communication between the groups, review potential mitigating strategies and potential fixed locations. This has increased the level of partnership between the organizations.
- **Secondary needle distribution has been strengthened.** In Victoria, there are several organizations that provide needle distribution services where this is not their primary service. Since the closure of the fixed site needle exchange, these services have been strengthened, with better coordination and statistics gathering.
- Following recommendations from the Mayor’s Taskforce, in January 2008 VIHA committed the funding needed to establish several **assertive community treatment (ACT) teams, in addition to the Victoria Integrated community outreach team (VICOT)** – multi-agency groups of skilled professionals brought together to serve the homeless in the Victoria downtown core who suffer from mental illnesses and/or addictions.
- **VIHA provided funding for expanded addiction treatment services** in the South Island, investing 1.75 million to add 21 new community medical Detox and stabilization beds that will increase access to care for adults who suffer from severe addiction.
- **A Safe Needle Disposal Toolkit** was produced and distributed by the Downtown Victoria Clean and Safe Committee in January 2009. The Toolkit was created to inform businesses and residents in downtown Victoria about how to handle abandoned drug paraphernalia.