



Provincial Model for Safe Consumption Sites

Canada's opioid crisis continues to have a devastating impact on the health and well-being of Canadians, as evidenced by the large and growing number of hospitalizations and deaths attributable to opioid use. Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in both opioid use and opioid-related overdoses throughout Nova Scotia. It is estimated that 12,000 people in Nova Scotia are dependent on opioids, with fewer than 2000 currently on opioid agonist therapy. It has also been reported that on average, there are approximately 60 overdose deaths attributed to opioids each year in Nova Scotia. These adverse outcomes have led to a consensus that Nova Scotia is in the midst of an "opioid crisis".

The results of a countrywide overdose crisis have led to increased investments in addiction and treatment from the Nova Scotia government, as well as the development of a provincial Opioid Use and Overdose Framework that supports harm reduction². Harm reduction is a comprehensive, just and science-based approach to substance use. It includes policies, strategies, and services which aim to minimize the negative social and health impacts associated with drug use and assist individuals who use drugs live healthier lives³.

Despite the positive work that has been achieved thus far, the implementation of additional harm reduction strategies, such as safe consumption sites, are needed in order to prevent further senseless deaths.

Safer Consumption Sites (SCSs)

Safer Consumption Sites have been identified as an important component of harm reduction strategies in many places of the world, including Canada. In Canada, the first SCS, Insite, opened in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside in 2003 in response to an HIV epidemic and record number of overdose deaths in British Columbia. Since that time there has been increasing interest in SCSs throughout Canada, with 16 SCSs approved across Canada. However, there are currently no SCS facilities available in Nova Scotia². SCSs provide a safe, hygienic environment in which people who use drugs can consume illegal drugs that they already possess under the supervision of a trained health care professional (or a trained allied service provider or peer). SCSs have been extensively evaluated and have been found to not only reduce mortality and morbidity, but also to reduce public disorder¹. For instance, since the opening of Vancouver's SCS, Insite, there has been a 35% decrease in the number of lethal overdoses and a 30% increase in detoxification and methadone maintenance initiation. Additionally, since its inception in 2003, not a single fatal overdose has occurred on the premise⁴. SCSs have also been shown to be cost effective and create safer environments for people who use drugs and the broader public by providing an alternative to dangerous injection tactics like syringe sharing, syringe reuse, and improper disposal of soiled injection materials. At the same time, SCSs can effectively promote and link people who use drugs to a broad continuum of other essential health and social services, such as primary health care, supportive services like income and housing assistance, connections with peers, and facilitate pathways to treatment and recovery¹.

Overdose Prevention Sites (OPS) are one model of SCSs. OPS are similar to a safe consumption site, but OPS is intended to be a temporary location that can be opened quickly, as opposed to a permanent safe injection site that can require months or years of planning and consultation before opening its doors.

Dalhousie Medical Students strongly support the recommendations prepared by the Overdose Prevention Site Working Group and support the establishment of Safer Consumption Sites in Nova Scotia, as a means to decrease opioid dependence morbidity and mortality. We call upon the Government of Nova Scotia to support the implementation of an Overdose Prevention Site in Halifax as the first step in the establishment of Safe Consumption Sites in Nova Scotia.

¹The Harm Reduction Working Group. (2017, September). Toward a Provincial Model for Needle Distribution and Disposal and Safer Consumption Sites: Findings and Recommendations. Government of Nova Scotia: Halifax, NS

²Department of Health and Wellness. (2017). Nova Scotia's Opioid Use and Overdose Framework. Retrieved from <https://novascotia.ca/opioid/nova-scotia-opioid-use-and-overdose-framework.pdf>

³ Harm Reduction International. (2019). What is harm reduction?. Retrieved from <https://www.hri.global/what-is-harm-reduction>

⁴Ng, J., Sutherland, C., Kolber, M. (2017). Does evidence support supervised injection sites? *Can Fam Physicians*, 63(11):866. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5685449/>