



**HIV COMMUNITY LINK**  
(prevention + support + advocacy)

## **Position Statement: Harm Reduction**

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### **Introduction**

Harm reduction is a public health approach designed to reduce the individual and community harms associated with risk behaviour. A core belief of this approach is that communities may never eliminate individual participation in risk behaviours, but the harms associated with those behaviours, such as disease, death, crime and suffering, can be reduced. Harm reduction does not condone illegal risk behaviours but acknowledges that these behaviours exist. In the interest of public health and the needs of affected populations, associated harms should be mitigated.

Examples of drug-related harm reduction programs and strategies include:

- needle and syringe exchange programs
- provision of safer inhalation supplies
- safer injection facilities
- replacement therapy such as methadone programs
- health and drug education
- HIV and sexually transmitted disease screening
- counselling
- medical care and treatment referrals

### **HIV Community Link (HIVCL) Policy**

Individuals who use drugs are at high risk of contracting HIV, hepatitis C (HCV) and other communicable diseases. HIVCL firmly believes harm reduction is a key component of a holistic and comprehensive approach to health and wellness.

### **How does harm reduction affect drug use?**

There are those who would argue providing drug equipment enables drug users to continue using as opposed to ceasing drug use and may lower the age of first use.

However, extensive research shows that providing safer injection supplies does not increase drug use or lower the age of first injection<sup>1</sup>.

### **What are the legal implications?**

There are those who would argue distributing drug equipment is illegal and therefore should be prohibited.

However, safer injection supplies are legally distributed in Canada as medical devices used in the "...mitigation or prevention of a disease..."<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network concludes that new or unused crack pipes are devices that prevent disease and therefore not instruments for illicit drug use<sup>3</sup>. It is the opinion of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network that the distribution of safer inhalation kits is legal according to the Criminal Code of Canada.

### **What are the costs?**

There are those who would argue that harm reduction is not an efficient use of public funds.

However, by reducing HIV and HCV transmission, public health care costs are substantially reduced. For example, a single needle costs around \$0.10, whereas the total estimated costs of an HIV infection is \$1,300,000 per person, and treatment of one HCV infection may approach \$54,000 in medication costs alone<sup>4,5</sup>.

### **Harm Reduction Creates Access to Support Services**

Often harm reduction services are the first point of contact with health and social service providers for individuals engaged in risk activities. By providing these services, there is an opportunity for the individual to form a relationship with a non-judgemental service provider. By building this relationship, individuals who use drugs are more likely to seek services such as basic needs support, counseling and treatment.

### **Harm Reduction Saves Lives**

Evidence-based practice continues to demonstrate that harm reduction initiatives save lives. Distribution of harm reduction supplies reduces HIV and HCV transmission.

Harm reduction is a key principle in all aspects of HIVCL and the organization firmly believes that individuals have the right to health care services, regardless of willingness or ability to cease the risk behaviours. Harm Reduction is an essential and cost-effective component of a comprehensive continuum of care to prevent disease transmission and save lives.

### **Sources:**

1. World Health Organization. (2004). *Effectiveness of sterile needle and syringe programming in reducing HIV/AIDS among injecting drug users: Evidence for action technical papers*.
2. Government of Canada. Food and Drugs Act R.S., 1985, c. F-27. s.2
3. Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network. (2008). *Distributing safer crack use kits in Canada: Questions and answers*.
4. Kingston-Riechers, J. (2011) *The Economic Cost of HIV/AIDS in Canada*. Canadian AIDS Society.
5. Alberta Blue Cross. *Interactive Drug Benefits List*. [https://www.ab.bluecross.ca/dbl/idbl\\_main1.html](https://www.ab.bluecross.ca/dbl/idbl_main1.html). Accessed March 2, 2013.