



To:

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RE: Coordinated Efforts to Reduce or Eliminate Harm Reduction Across Canada (Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario)

The Canadian AIDS Society acknowledges the government's initiative in developing the **Homelessness and Recovery Treatment Hubs** and supporting abstinence-focused programs. While these efforts represent progress, they **fall short of addressing the full spectrum of needs** required to combat the rising HIV rate and broader public health concerns.

We are deeply concerned by the closure of harm reduction services, which have been proven to save lives and reduce the transmission of HIV. **The elimination of these programs, particularly at a time when HIV acquisition rates have risen by nearly 25% (24.9%), will exacerbate the crisis and increase preventable healthcare costs.** Discontinuing essential services, such as safe consumption sites and syringe distribution, **risks increasing mortality rates, exposing more individuals to a dangerously tainted drug supply without care, and causing a rise in publicly discarded syringes.**

Since 1987, Canada's drug strategy has included prevention, treatment, and enforcement. Harm reduction was initially part of this strategy. but has been inconsistently applied, removed in 2007 with the National Anti-Drug Strategy, and only later reinstated. **The absence of harm reduction has not led to improved outcomes; rather, it has shown that failing to address the realities of substance use worsens the public health crisis.**



We are particularly concerned about the impact on youth and families. In 2021, 15.6% of Canadians aged 12 and older engaged in heavy drinking, while 5% of youth aged 15 to 19 (101,000) used stimulants—highly addictive drugs that can lead to severe health issues. Without safe consumption sites, these youth are more likely to use drugs in unsafe environments, increasing their risk of overdose and exposure to crime.

Furthermore, the increased availability of alcohol could compound these risks, as alcohol use often correlates with higher rates of drug experimentation and misuse. In 2019, 11% of Canadians aged 15 and older reported past-year use of sedatives, with 3% of youth aged 15 to 19 (72,000) and 12% of young adults aged 20 to 24 (272,000) affected. The combination of alcohol with these substances can be deadly, further emphasizing the need for safe consumption sites.

Illegal drug use among young adults is also a significant concern, with 14% of those aged 20 to 24 (310,000) reporting past-year use of at least one illegal drug in 2019. **Safe consumption sites provide a controlled environment and access to health services**, reducing the risk of overdose and long-term harm. Closing these sites would likely lead to an increase in public drug use, exposing children and families to greater risks, including accidental exposure and drug-related crime.

Substance use among youth not only endangers their health but also can strain family relationships and contributes to social instability. **The closure of safe consumption sites could exacerbate these issues, while expanding alcohol access could further endanger these populations** by increasing the likelihood of alcohol-related violence and accidents.

While the integration of homelessness services with substance use programs is a positive step, it is insufficient without proper safeguards and training for shelters not included in these hubs. **History has shown us the dire consequences of displacing vulnerable populations without adequate support—consequences we fear may be repeated.**

Substance use is a complex issue requiring a comprehensive and expanded approach, not a reduction of services. The Canadian AIDS Society urges all levels of government to collaborate with us in developing a truly effective strategy that replaces harmful enforcement practices with housing and support services, balancing recovery efforts with proven harm reduction methods. Together, we can protect the most vulnerable, safeguard youth and families, and build a foundation for long-term health and well-being.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ken Miller".

Ken Miller
Executive Director
The Canadian AIDS Society
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