

Will police presence deter use of drug injection site?

Balancing law enforcement with ease of access at North America's first supervised site for injecting illicit drugs won't be easy, Vancouver's police chief said as the site opened Sept. 15 (see pages 759 and 777).

But Chief Jamie Graham pledged to give Insite, which opened in the heart of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, "the best possible chances of success." He said police officers will encourage addicts to use the site and won't intervene unless they encounter someone for whom they have an arrest warrant or who is committing a criminal act.

Of the 60 officers who have been assigned to the Downtown Eastside since May 8 in a special policing initiative, 8 will be responsible for the area around the site — 2 at a given time. The same set of officers will be used in this role in hopes of establishing positive relationships with drug users. Graham says police will not enter the site unless asked by staff.

Deputy Chief Bob Rich says that misinformation among drug users about the police role may be one of the biggest challenges the site faces. However, he says news spreads fast on the streets, and once the word is out that the police are playing a supportive role, more people will use it.

Officials at the 2 groups operating Insite — the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority and the Portland Hotel Society — are confident it will be well used. Society spokesperson Mark Townsend predicts that 100 to 600 addicts will use Insite weekly.

Ida Goodreau, CEO of the authority, says the long-awaited opening involved "unprecedented cooperation" between the Vancouver police and 3 levels of government. Vancouver mayor Larry Campbell, the city's former coroner who has made harm reduction a centerpiece of his tenure, called the opening "an historic day."

In the past 5 years, 524 addicts have died from drug overdoses in the Downtown Eastside, including 37 in 2003. As part of the harm-reduction process, the site provides users with clean injecting equipment to reduce the spread of infectious disease, as well as counselling

and referral to drug-related services.

The provincial government has committed \$2 million for the first year of Insite's operation, and officials at the authority are confident they will find federal and provincial government funding to continue the operation. Health Canada is also spending \$1.5 million on a 3-year study of Insite's impact on drug users' health and neighbourhood crime rates.

The site will be open 18 hours a day, 7 days a week. Addicts enter the building through a secure entry, where they register before entering an injecting area that accommodates 12 users at a time and is supervised by a registered nurse. Peer workers from the Downtown Eastside will mingle with clients in the reception area and encourage them to use other health services while at the site. — *Heather Kent, Vancouver*

As it turns 20, country's largest AIDS-service group busier than ever

Twenty years ago a core group of gay activists and health care workers organized the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) to provide support and information to a panicked population. Twenty years later the panic has disappeared, but the organization is still going strong. "The early labelling of AIDS as a 'gay plague' persists today," community leader Michael Lynch said in 1983 during the initial organizing meeting. Lynch, a University of Toronto professor of English who became chair of ACT's Board of Directors, added: "The myth that gays are the villains, infecting the pure 'general population,' also continues, suppressing the appalling fact that we are the main sufferers of a horrendous disease."

Just over 2 weeks later, on July 19, 1983, ACT was officially announced to the world. Front and centre at the televised press conference was 28-year-old Peter Evans, a stage designer and the first Canadian to go public about his battle with the syndrome. (When he died 6 months later, Evans

was the 35th Canadian reported to have died of AIDS. Recent Health Canada data [November 2002] indicate that 13 357 deaths in Canada had been attributed to HIV/AIDS by the end of 1999.)

Today ACT is the largest AIDS service organization in the country, with the equivalent of 42 full-time staffers and an annual budget of more than \$5 million. Over 65% of its revenue comes via fundraising.

More than 18 330 cases of AIDS have been reported in Canada so far, and the peak year for reported AIDS-related deaths — 1477 — was 1995. By 2001 that had dropped to 431 deaths.

But Executive Director Lori Lucier foresees a long-term role for the organization. She says ACT continues to do outreach and prevention work, and to support smaller AIDS-service organizations that serve specific communities. ACT programs, says Lucier, will continue "to fill the gaps and address people's needs." — *Ann Silversides, Toronto*



ACT's start: Bill Mindell (left), Bert Hansen, (standing) and Peter Evans at a July 19, 1983, press conference.