

Optimism for prison syringe programs

Despite decades of international experience that indicates prison-based needle and syringe programs (PNSPs) improve inmates' health and make prisons safer for both prisoners and staff, Canadian prisons have not adopted the practice. Advocates are optimistic, however, that the federal Liberal government will be more open to the idea than their predecessors.

"The current federal government has expressed its commitment to evidence-based policy-making," Sandra Ka Hon Chu, director of research and advocacy for the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, wrote in an email. "In light of the overwhelming international evidence and experience demonstrating the ways in which PNSPs promote prisoner and workplace health and safety, and the growing consensus among public health, medical, harm reduction, prisoners' rights and human rights organizations in support of these programs, I am optimistic that PNSPs will soon be available in Canada."

To help make that a reality sooner than later, the legal network recently

got close to [250 Canadian organizations](#) to sign a statement urging the federal and provincial governments to immediately implement PNSPs. Providing access to sterile injection equipment is a proven harm-reduction strategy that would reduce rates of HIV and hepatitis C in prisons, according to the statement. Lack of access to harm-reduction services has a "disproportionate impact" on indigenous peoples, who make up nearly a quarter of the federal prison population, the statement notes.

According to Ka Hon Chu, other benefits of PNSPs include less needle-sharing and fewer overdoses, an increase in referrals to drug treatment programs and lower odds of staff needle-stick incidents from concealed, used syringes. Despite these and other benefits, the programs were not adopted by the previous Conservative government because of its desire to be seen as "tough on crime," according to Ka Hon Chu. That meant the idea of harm-reduction programs for prisoners was a nonstarter. "Instead, it opted for a 'zero tolerance' policy on drugs in prison, which has proven to be an

unattainable goal in Canada and in every other jurisdiction in the world."

That zero-tolerance policy remains intact, and unauthorized needles are still considered contraband in federal prisons, Lori Halfper, a spokeswoman for Correctional Service Canada (CSC), wrote in an email. "Creating a drug-free environment to help offenders work towards rehabilitation and a successful return to the community is a critical priority for the CSC and one that means greater public safety for all," wrote Halfper. "CSC is committed to preventing, controlling, and managing infectious disease in correctional facilities to protect the health and safety of staff, inmates, and ultimately the community."

According to Halfper, the CSC's approach to addressing infectious disease includes screening and testing, education, access to peer support workers and substance abuse programs, HIV and hepatitis C treatment, opiate substitution therapy and health promotion initiatives on the risks of tattooing. — Roger Collier, *CMAJ*

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Canadian prisons have a zero-tolerance policy on drug use.