

## **Winnipeg Free Press – EDITORIAL**

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*Community steps in where government lags*

THERE are times when the community feels compelled to step in where government has failed — even if it's illegal to do so.

Earlier this month, a temporary, unsanctioned supervised consumption site popped up in a field near Higgins Avenue. Over one weekend, organizers and volunteers from the Manitoba Harm Reduction Network distributed more than 5,000 clean syringes and 130 Naloxone kits, which are used to reverse opioid overdoses, to at least 260 people.

Based on those numbers, it's clear there's a public-health need that is not being met. And based on the growing number of drug-related deaths in this province, it's clear that political avoidance and delay are only contributing to a tragic situation.

More than 129 Manitobans have died of a drug overdose this year, according to a report from the chief medical examiner's office. And we're on pace to exceed 2020's devastating tally, which saw 372 people die of drug overdoses. The Winnipeg Fire and Paramedic Service responded to 1,226 opioid-related calls in 2020, up from 398 calls a year prior.

Addiction is a complex issue that can't be wished away by virtuous thinking. There's a whole web of support that is needed to help people in the throes of addiction, from accessible detox and crisis medical facilities to mental health counselling and long-term and out-patient rehabilitation programs to stable housing and food security. But recovery can't happen without effective, lifesaving overdose prevention.

That's where supervised consumption sites come in. They are barrier-free, on-the-ground harm reduction services that allow people who use drugs to do so in a clean, safe environment surrounded by staff who are trained to prevent and intervene in overdoses. Such intervention is crucial, because the likelihood of a fatal overdose increases when someone uses drugs alone.

Many supervised consumption sites also offer illicit-drug testing to ensure safe supply, offer basic health services and provide direct connections to the available web of addiction supports. Contrary to the incorrect belief that these sites promote illegal drug use, the relationships formed between staff and clients can actually help people get on the road to recovery.

Manitoba is the only province outside of the Maritimes without a supervised consumption site, and it's not because the public is opposed. In February, an Angus Reid poll found 63 per cent of Manitobans support the development of a local supervised consumption site. There simply remains a lack of political will.

Former premier Brian Pallister was vocally opposed to the sites. And so far, neither candidate Heather Stefanson nor Shelly Glover has made mention of them in their Progressive Conservative leadership campaigns (MLA Shannon Martin had voiced support for supervised consumption sites before dropping out of the race last week).

At the municipal level, there seems to be more support but also ample foot-dragging. Councillors Sherri Rollins and Cindy Gilroy have previously advocated for the development of a site in Winnipeg, and Ms. Rollins was on hand volunteering at the unsanctioned pop-up site. Mayor Brian Bowman has consistently said he's open to the idea, while also consistently blaming the province for his inaction.

Provincial approval for such a program isn't necessary; financial support is. A report presented to city council in June found that while there is no provincial legislation prohibiting the creation of a safe consumption site in Manitoba, funding from all three levels of government would ensure its success and effectiveness.

The community has already responded. It's time for public officials to use their power for the public good.