

It's time for change in the fight against heroin

Last week, Street Roots, along with the NAACP of Oregon and the Mental Health Association of Portland, hosted a social justice mayoral forum on police accountability, mental health and homelessness.

Street Roots asked mayoral candidates Jules Bailey, Ted Wheeler and Sarah Iannarone if they would be open to looking at a safe injection site for drug users in Portland. All three mayoral candidates at the forum said yes.

It was a breath of fresh air.

Wait a minute, slow down Israel. What exactly are you talking about?

Safe injection sites for drug users are common in Europe, Canada and Australia. The sites offer a dedicated space where intravenous drug users can inject previously obtained drugs out of public view and under the supervision of medical professionals.

Staff is there to intervene with life-saving measures in the event of an overdose and to provide further education. Most importantly, staff also provides counseling and a connection to resources when users are ready to quit – and quit they do.

One study of Vancouver B.C.'s injection facility, Insite, found that before the study period ended, 23 percent of respondents had stopped injecting drugs, and another 57 percent had entered treatment.

The reality is that without a safe injection site, restrooms around the city are being used to inject hidden from view. Ask any business owner downtown.

A report on opiate trends released in December by Multnomah County notes that over a two-year period in 2013 and 2014, American Medical Response ambulances responded to nearly 1,200 non-fatal opiate overdoses. Of those responses 254 were in public areas, 105 were at local businesses, 47 were at bars and 20 were in public parks.

In Ithaca, N.Y., a 29-year-old mayor named Svante Myrick is rolling out a four-tiered strategy that includes working with drug users to create a new model of prevention, treatment, a harm-reduction and law enforcement strategy and lastly, a supervised injection site.

It's about time.

"My father was a drug addict. He split from the family when I was 5, 6 years old," Mayor Myrick told the Associated Press. "I have watched for 20 years this system that just doesn't work. We can't wait anymore for the federal government. We have people shooting up in alleys. In bathroom stalls. And too many of them are dying."

Groups around the country, including in San Francisco, Seattle and New York City, are currently exploring opening a safe injection site for drug users. Portland should be too.

It's time for the Multnomah County Health Department and county leaders to rise to the occasion.

Historically, the county has said it's a matter of both money and political will. Fair enough.

We understand the complexity of the situation – especially knowing how hard health officials and others work to maintain needle exchange programs to help curb the rate of hepatitis C and HIV among drug users.

We continue to take steps in the right direction by making naloxone, a drug that can reverse a heroin overdose, more available to the general public and by creating biohazard drop boxes in public spaces. Just this month, the health department installed two such drop boxes on the Eastbank Esplanade and under the Burnside Bridge to help dispose of used needles in downtown.

Can we get four more please?

We should all know by now that the war on drugs in American is a failure.

Street Roots' Emily Green reported in August of last year that Multnomah County's homeless population is hit disproportionately with drug overdoses. "While homeless individuals make up less than 1 percent of the county's total population, they accounted for 25 percent of heroin-related deaths in 2014. A total of 57 homeless people died with heroin listed as a contributing or primary factor in their death during the past four years."

"I'm 40 years old. In my lifetime the amount of friends and peers I've lost to heroin overdoses rivals any other form of death combined – more than car crashes, natural causes, cancer, and other illnesses. It's a narrative that many of us share, especially in the United States."

Street Roots reporting also found from 2010 to 2014 there were 344 deaths where heroin was found present in the bloodstream and categorized as heroin-related death by the state medical examiner. In 2014 alone there were 122 heroin-related deaths in Oregon, 80 of which were in Portland's tri-county area.

Unfortunately, people are dying every day in America of heroin overdoses.

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The truth is I want my friends and peers to have the support they need to have as many options as possible to both get help and remain healthy – even as they are struggling with an addiction.

As a community, we need to fully commit to changing our approach. The writing is on the wall. Like it or not, drug users need a safe place to use drugs.



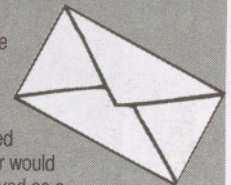
DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

Israel Bayer is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach him at israel@streetroots.org or follow him on Twitter @israelbayer.

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Street Roots

211 NW Davis St.
Portland, OR 97209
503-228-5657
Fax: 503-227-3117
www.streetroots.org
www.news.streetroots.org
Hours: 7:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Mon.-Fri., 7:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Sat. and 7:30-11 a.m. Sun.

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israel@streetroots.org
Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl
joanne@streetroots.org
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cole@streetroots.org
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