

# UNDER WATCHFUL EYES

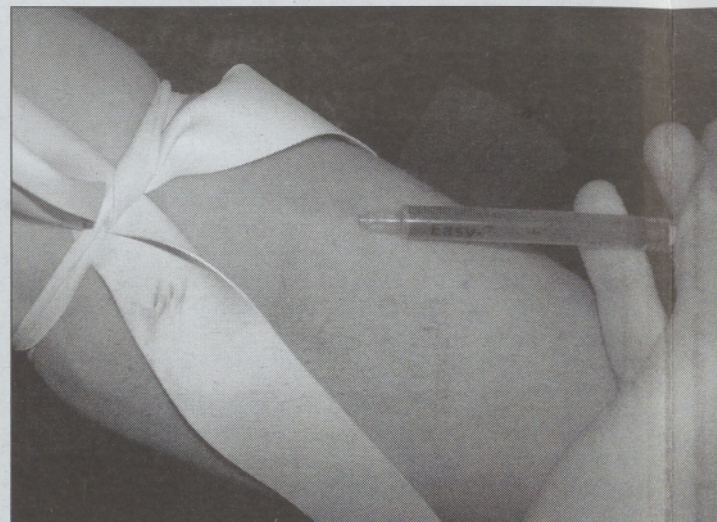


PHOTO COURTESY OF INSITE

Insite in Vancouver, B.C., was North America's first legal supervised consumption space. Within the first 12 weeks of opening in 2003, Insite was responsible for nearly 50 percent reductions in public injections, improper syringe disposal and other injection related litter, according to a study by the Canadian Medical Association. Some U.S. cities are considering opening a similar facility.

## Safer Spaces Portland is pushing for the opening of a safe consumption space to minimize risks for drug users

BY EMILY GREEN  
SENIOR STAFF REPORTER

A campaign to open a safe consumption space in Portland has officially launched, with members making their first public appearance at an Oregon Health & Science University event Thursday, Nov. 16.

The campaign, Safer Spaces Portland, is just getting its feet off the ground, but organizers said they hope to build a broad coalition that includes all stakeholders working together.

OHSU's School of Public Health invited campaign members and other proponents of a safe consumption space to speak to health care professionals at the Lucky Labrador Pub on Northwest Quimby Street about how these spaces could help prevent fatal drug overdoses in Portland.

"Someone who has overdosed and died from opiates does not have a chance for treatment," Sam Chapman, Safer Spaces Portland's co-founder and advocacy director, told Street Roots. Chapman brings nearly a decade of drug-policy-reform advocacy experience to the campaign.

"If successful treatment is the end goal, safe consumption spaces are a great starting point for that conversation," he said.

Across Multnomah County in 2015, there were 569 emergency medical service responses to overdoses in which naloxone, an opioid-overdose-reversing medication, was administered, according to the tri-county's most recent report on opioid trends. More than half of those responses were dispatched to public places or businesses – a fact the campaign says illustrates the need for a safe consumption space locally.

These spaces are facilities where people can safely use illicit drugs, such as heroin, without fear of arrest and under the supervision of trained medical professionals who can intervene in the case of an overdose – and serve as a connection to resources, such as treatment.

Across the U.S., cities including San Francisco and Seattle are inching closer to opening the nation's first sanctioned safe consumption space. While Portland isn't likely to be the first, campaign organizers say it doesn't need to be that far behind.

Joining Safer Spaces Portland at the OHSU event was Shannon Riley. As a project manager for Vancouver Coastal Health, Riley's work is focused on legal consumption spaces in housing and public areas in Vancouver, B.C. She previously worked at Insite, the first legal safe consumption space in North America.

Street Roots asked Riley and Chapman why Portland needs a safe consumption site, the campaign's strategy and challenges that

might stand in the way.

**Emily Green:** *You were a nurse at Insite. How did having a safe consumption space in Vancouver impact the community there?*

**Shannon Riley:** I saw it personally impact the community in a number of different ways. First of all, it was a place for people to come in off the streets, either away from using alone in private housing, or away from using publicly, to come into a space that was for them – a medical space, that had sterile supplies, that had medical professionals. It was a sterile space for them to use their medicine, where they weren't at risk for incarceration, or they weren't at risk of rushing and then causing themselves more harm. A place for them to create community, and build trust with a medical system that has really left them stranded for so long. People who use drugs

are definitely subject to so much stigma from our larger community, and so I would say that supervised injection spaces are actually where treatment begins, so that's a place where people can build that trust and have that safety, where they can eventually consider other things in their life and have a little bit more confidence to take those steps – even if it's

just being a little bit more healthy or finding housing, or reconnecting with loved ones. It's the place to jump off and create positive change.

**E.G.:** *What do you think Portland can learn from previous attempts to open safe consumption spaces in other parts of the country and other parts of the world?*

**S.R.:** It's a multi-pronged approach. I think community activists need to play a role. We have seen that so much in Vancouver. There is so much community activism here that has really laid the groundwork for supervised injection. I think we had around four to six different community-led supervised injection spaces that were peer-run. Within bureaucracy – local government and provincial government – just paying attention and pushing the boundaries as much as possible and being ready to jump as soon as change is possible.

**E.G.:** *What services do you envision this space would provide to people using drugs in Portland?*

**Sam Chapman:** From a fundamental standpoint, we want to create a safe space for people to use in a private, supervised setting with trained health professionals on staff. I think over time we also envision social workers and other health professionals being on site to help users better understand how they can access a variety of different treatment options. What we've seen historically is that forced

treatment is often ineffective, but when people have the option and feel they are in a safe, comfortable setting to have these conversations, that the likelihood of them exploring those options is much greater. And we believe a safe consumption space is an ideal place to have those conversations.

**E.G.:** *What is your strategy for making this a reality?*

**S.C.:** Right now our main focus is to engage the public through a clear and concise education campaign that really highlights the current and immediate need for a safe consumption space here in Portland. Some of the most recent stats are from 2015, but in 2015 there were more than 500 overdose responses here in Multnomah County, and 103 of those 500 overdose responses resulted in a fatality, so that's more than 1 in 5 people (who had an overdose response) having fatal overdoses here in Multnomah County. I think it's something that we want people to be aware of. I think that people generally understand that there is an opioid problem and epidemic, and we really want to help focus in on what that means for people here in Multnomah County.

The second aspect of our strategy is working with public health professionals, as well as elected officials, to really explore what makes sense in terms of moving this issue forward here in Multnomah County and in Portland, and we've already started some of those conversations with the county and the city, along with Outside In, which is the current needle exchange program here in Portland.

**E.G.:** *What is going to be the biggest challenge?*

**S.C.:** One of the biggest challenges, to my mind, is not if we will eventually come to the realization that there is a dire need for safe consumption spaces, but where and how. Locating a facility like this can often be controversial, depending on where a viable site might be, and that's why it's so important that we have coalition partners – whether they be businesses, health professionals, the city, real estate developers. There's a lot of different stakeholders in this conversation, and it's important that we bring them in upfront, as opposed to moving forward and then coming to them later on. We want to engage all stakeholders upfront in a very clear way, so we can address concerns upfront and find solutions collectively.

**E.G.:** *How can people get involved?*

**S.C.:** We'd love to hear from anyone who wants to be a volunteer. They can email us directly at [scs4pdx@gmail.com](mailto:scs4pdx@gmail.com). Follow or like our Safer Spaces Portland Facebook page ([Facebook.com/SaferSpacesPDX](https://www.facebook.com/SaferSpacesPDX)). It's a great way to stay up to date with the most recent news, events and information. We're also launching a website at [SaferSpacesPDX.com](http://SaferSpacesPDX.com).

[emily@streetroots.org](mailto:emily@streetroots.org); Twitter @greenurites

### FACT SHEET



77%

Of syringe exchange clients polled reported experiencing homelessness or unstable housing in 2016.



3 MILLION

Used syringes were properly disposed by Outside In & Multnomah County syringe exchanges in 2015. Syringe exchanges and SIFs decrease public disposal in parks by providing spaces for people to properly dispose.



>50%

Of heroin users surveyed wanted to quit or cut down but report many barriers to treatment.

Source: Tri-County Regional Opioid Trends 2016

\*SIF = supervised injection facility

GRAPHICS COURTESY OF SAFER SPACES PORTLAND