

'A facility like this could save them'

Dr. Thomas Farley, Philadelphia's health commissioner, discusses his city's plans to open the nation's first safe consumption site, where IV drugs can be used under a watchful eye

BY EMILY GREEN
SENIOR STAFF REPORTER

In a nation under siege by a burgeoning opioid epidemic, Philadelphia is among the areas hardest hit. The crisis there is claiming lives at a higher rate than in any other large U.S. city, with drug overdoses in 2017 resulting in an estimated 1,200 deaths.

Behind each fatal overdose is a human being who struggled with addiction until it ultimately took their life.

On Jan. 23, Philadelphia officials announced they want their city to be the first in the United States to open a sanctioned safe consumption site, which they hope will keep some drug users alive long enough to seek treatment.

Already operating in Canada and parts of Europe, safe consumption sites serve as indoor spaces where intravenous drug users can consume illegal drugs under the watchful eye of medically trained professionals who can intervene with life-saving measures in the case of an accidental overdose. These

facilities also ensure safe and sterile injection practices, which cut down on the spread of infection and disease – and they serve as a valuable connection to treatment when drug users are ready to quit.

In Portland, a campaign aimed at opening a safe consumption site locally launched in November. Safer Spaces Portland, however, has yet to gain public support from any city- or county-level politicians.

While Philadelphia is not the first city to grab headlines in its effort to open a safe consumption site, several important prerequisites paved the way to its recent announcement.

In May, the Mayor's Task Force to Combat the Opioid Epidemic in Philadelphia recommended safe consumption sites as one of 18 solutions that together, it said in a

report, "have the potential to turn the tide on the opioid epidemic in Philadelphia."

Additionally, Philadelphia voters recently elected a district attorney who ran on a progressive platform aimed at reforming the city's criminal justice system. Support of safe consumption sites from the city's top prosecutor, Larry Krasner, along with support from the police commissioner, mayor and city council, made the decision to open such a site possible.

But not everyone's on board. There is pushback from several state-level politicians, including Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro, who released a statement in opposition.

One Philadelphia official leading the effort to open a safe consumption space is Dr. Thomas Farley, the city's health commissioner. He said he expects a safe consumption facility to be up and running in six to 18 months.

Farley recently participated in Philadelphia's Point in Time Count of its homeless population, where he interviewed several people under a bridge in an area of the city where heroin use is most intense.

This gave him the chance to "really get a sense for what their lives are like and how tough it is to deal with this problem of addiction," he said.

He saw how easily one of them could make a fatal mistake while hastily injecting drugs under that bridge. But he also saw how a safe consumption site could lengthen what may otherwise be a short lifespan.

"A facility like this could save them," he said.

Before coming to Philadelphia, Farley served as health commissioner for New York City and worked for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Louisiana Office of Public Health. Most recently, he was CEO of The Public Good Projects, a nonprofit that leverages mass media messaging to promote health and prevent disease.

Street Roots spoke with Farley several days after the announcement in Philadelphia to find out how various city agencies came to a consensus on such a controversial program and what's at risk considering the opposition his city faces from higher levels of government.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PHILADELPHIA PUBLIC HEALTH

Emily Green: As the health commissioner for New York City, you advocated for policies that further restricted substance use – such as raising the age of legal tobacco use making the city's parks smoke free. You seem like an unlikely proponent of safe consumption sites. What happened?

Thomas Farley: I think that they're entirely consistent. We want people to not start using substances in the first place, and having restrictions on accessibility of those substances is a way to do that. That's true for tobacco, that's true for alcohol and likewise for opioids – we are trying to get doctors to prescribe fewer opioids. However, we recognize that some people, no matter what we try, get dependent on these drugs, and in the case of opioids, we are seeing enormous numbers of people dying from these drugs. We want to keep people alive until they can get into treatment. For those folks, enabling them to use in a way where they don't die, for harm reduction. It's part of our imperative to save lives.

E.G.: You co-chaired the mayor's task force that originally came up with safe consumption sites as a recommendation for combatting your city's opioid epidemic. Also on that task force were the police and prison commissioners and a DEA agent. How did you get law enforcement on the same page as harm reduction advocates?

T.F.: At the time of the task force, law enforcement was firmly opposed to the idea of supervised consumption facilities. But the police commissioner for Philadelphia was at a meeting of other police chiefs, and he spoke to the police chief from Vancouver (B.C.). He was quite taken by the Vancouver police chief's strong endorsement of the supervised consumption facility there – that it saves lives. His opinion was that it didn't create crime, it didn't prevent crime, it wasn't about crime. It was about saving lives and that he, as police chief, was in favor of that, and so our police commissioner really took that to heart.

E.G.: Seattle has already set aside more than \$1 million in funds for a safe consumption site, but on Jan. 23, Philadelphia

Dr. Thomas Farley is the health commissioner for the city of Philadelphia.

ONLINE

Read previous Street Roots coverage about safe consumption sites at news.streetroots.org/safeconsumption

See FARLEY, page 10