

August 13, 2018

Mayor Strimling –

I read with interest last week's article in the Phoenix regarding Jesse Harvey's work in attempting to introduce safe injection sites to Portland. In the article, you are quoted as being open to exploring his ideas. I very much support Mr. Harvey's work and am reaching out to you based on your perceived openness to this issue. The question I would ask of you is this: what data do you need to facilitate Mr. Harvey's work moving forward?

I am an environmental engineer who works here in Portland. I am also a passionate advocate for public health and believe deeply that we are currently viewing drug use and addiction through a lens that does not support health-focused decision making. Addiction is a disease, as I think all of us who have personally experienced or watched a loved one work toward sobriety and living clean are aware. Addiction is brutal. Getting clean is brutal. Staying clean is brutal. There is nobody I know who doesn't currently have friends, family members, children, partners or parents who are struggling with addiction and its impacts. This is a reality that impacts all of us.

The harm reduction model – including the provision of clean injecting equipment and safe injection sites – is based on a belief that drug users don't deserve concomitant health punishment simply because they use drugs. Without clean injection equipment and safe places to inject, those who inject drugs have a significantly higher likelihood of engaging in practices including syringe sharing and syringe re-use as well as increased likelihood of not receiving medical attention in the event of overdose. Practices like syringe sharing and syringe re-use significantly, in turn, increase a drug user's risk of contracting blood-borne illnesses. An individual who injects drugs does not deserve HIV, Hepatitis C, or dying from overdose simply because of their addiction and our societal beliefs about who "they" are and how "they" behave.

While there is no denying that the actions of drug users can impact community in a range of social, financial and legal ways, the influence of community - in terms of laws, enforcement practices and social supports – also significantly shapes the safety of an individual's drug injection practices. There is also no denying that there are those in community, as well as in government, who believe that advocating for the health of injecting drug users is tantamount to facilitating or advocating for drug use. This argument – believing that somehow the provision of a safe injection site will encourage injecting drug use – is as backwards as the belief that sex education encourages sexual behavior. For both issues, the truth is that the provision of services that allow for health-focused decision-making improves quality of life for those individuals in the position to require those services. Improving quality of life for those individuals, in turn, improves health and safety within the broader community.

I am writing you to encourage your exploration of this issue and to ask what you need to increase your support of Mr. Harvey's work.

Sincerely,
Karen Merritt, PhD