



Community Dialogue Report

Building Trust in Our Neighbourhoods: Harm Reduction and Civil Society

**Held March 14, 2007 at Collingwood Neighbourhood House
Vancouver, British Columbia**

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Keynote Speaker Dr. Kerry Jang.

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Plenary Speakers Ian Marcuse, Clair McGougan, Bill McMichael, Mark Smith, and Robert Wilmot.

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A Note on Printing:

If you would like to print a copy of this report, please contact Matt Smith at matt@tacticaloutcomes.ca to receive a printable version of the report.

I. Introduction

The primary goal of organizing this event was to bring together different perspectives on harm reduction and community. It was recognized that there is a real need for us to expand our conceptions of harm reduction to incorporate a variety of perspectives, and most importantly to begin to include considerations for the community when supporting and implementing harm reduction programs. Without the support of the community, progressive harm reduction programs face the risk of being rejected by the very communities they are designed to enhance. Building trust, ownership and collaboration is the key to addressing this problem.

The task faced by the organizers was how to explore the possibility of collaboration among all of those who live and work in a community. The solution was clear - shine a light on individual successes, build confidence to reach beyond traditional ways of doing things and enable connections to others who are contributing to community growth and relationship building.

Collingwood Neighbourhood House was identified as a suitable venue for such a discussion. Over the past 20 years it has offered residents a wide range of programs, from communal activities to social services. It is a first point of contact for new immigrants and an enduring magnet for families, children and senior citizens, who not only profit from the wide range of activities but also help to organise them.

This dialogue involved participants from neighbourhood houses and community centres, business improvement associations and youth organizations, community health centres and policing centres. Special efforts were also made to encourage the participation of residents in the discussion; that is to say, the very people who stood to benefit most from potential collaborations. All told, some thirty participants came to Collingwood for a two hour discussion on what harm reduction means to them and to talk about what has worked and what hasn't.

Most importantly, participants came to brainstorm and share ideas on how to build harm reduction programs that suit the unique needs of Vancouver's neighbourhoods and help build trust in our communities.

II. Key Note Address (Précis): Dr. Kerry Jang

The New Realities of Harm Reduction

In the traditional sense, the term harm reduction refers to steps that can be taken to mitigate as much of the harm to an individual from drug and alcohol abuse as possible. However, the traditional approach to harm reduction does not pay much attention to reducing the harm caused by substance abuse to our communities. This is often due to an implicit assumption that communities will improve as a direct consequence of reducing harm to the individual substance user.

While this assumption is commonly true, in Vancouver there is a growing need to find explicit harm reduction approaches and programs that balance the needs of the individual with the needs of the community. The attempt to find such a balance and design programs with it in mind is at the heart of this dialogue.

I believe that the first step to achieving this balance is to be cognizant of a number of significant shifts in how harm reduction has been conceptualized, and to marry them to the successful elements of any community based program. The following outlines four such shifts that I have observed in the past five years of working in communities.

Harm reduction is a health issue.

Perhaps the most significant shift particularly among the general public and some levels of government, is the attitude that substance abuse cannot simply be framed as a criminal justice problem. Rather, substance abuse must be recognized and addressed as a health issue. A consequence of this shift in thinking is that it helps us to understand many of the programs offered by social service agencies, either by accident or design, as constituting a form of harm reduction.

When substance abuse is understood as a health issue harm reduction not only encompasses the obvious programs like needle exchange programs and supervised injection sites, but also youth/peer support or “buddy programs”, programs for single parents, or even children’s arts and craft programs. While these different kinds of programs are often categorized within the other four pillars of Vancouver’s drug strategy, the nature of social service agency programs suggests the folly of trying to conceptualize the four pillars as independent entities, each to be supported or funded out of the context of the others. The

reality is quite the contrary – all four pillars are interdependent and support one another, and each should be considered within the context of the others.

Every neighbourhood in Vancouver is unique.

When speaking of Vancouver’s neighbourhoods, one often hears about the “east-west” divide. That the neighbourhoods that fall west of Cambie Street are demographically, culturally, and historically different from those that fall east of Main Street is in some instances correct. However, it is also the case that the neighbourhoods within each region are unique and diverse in and of themselves.

Neighbourhoods in Vancouver have varying ethnic makeups. Some contain a higher proportion of youth and single mothers, some are closer to the downtown core, while others are much more residential. This diversity is evident when one examines the kinds of programs offered in each of the communities. Although one may find many of the same programs offered in all communities, such as youth outreach programs or block watch programs, those offered at each facility have been developed to fit the different needs of that particular neighbourhood.

It follows that what has worked in one neighbourhood may not work in another. Thus, harm reduction strategies must be community based and driven and have continuous input in order to meet the needs of that particular neighbourhood.

Successful harm reduction programs requires long term commitment.

A necessary condition for a successful marriage is commitment, specifically a commitment that extends for life, one that holds for better or for worse, through good times and bad. This very same commitment is required for successful harm reduction programs.

Too often funding for harm reduction programs are short-term, such as one-time non-renewable grants. Moreover, funding that is provided comes with many new “strings” and responsibilities. Such restricted funding does not allow any program to quickly adapt to the changing needs of a community.

Related to this issue is that funding decisions at times reflect the “paternalistic” nature of government in which programs are prescribed for communities. These programs are actually a *fait accompli* and the public meetings invited to solicit community feedback are in reality little more than public relation exercises, put together to inform the community of what has already been decided.

In contrast to this approach is how a needle exchange program was placed in the Collingwood community at the Evergreen Health Centre. Instead of simply introducing the needle exchange into the community without addressing concerns, Collingwood Neighbourhood House worked with residents and Evergreen to outline the scope of needle exchange services, the population it would be servicing, its hours, and the conditions for its operation. This led to the development and ratification of a formal community agreement that met the needs of the users, residents and service providers alike.

How we communicate can determine success or failure of a program.

In my experience, successful harm reduction programs create a sense of safety and belonging, and allow relationships to form. A key component of building trust is communication. Continual, open and respectful communication between service providers, residents and those people who intend to use the service is fundamental. Any failure to disclose any aspect of a program from its planning through to its implementation and operation leads to mistrust and sets the program up for inevitable failure.

Fostering communication not only requires the willingness to disclose, but also to dispel the “us” versus “them” attitude. For example, at Collingwood Neighbourhood House we refer to all people who are in the community as residents. We do not refer to people who are without homes as the “homeless” or persons with mental illness as the “mentally ill.” It is a conscious effort to reduce the use of labels that set up barriers between people. Labels like “drug addicts” or “mentally ill” do not convey the fact that these folks are human too and should always have a place in the community.

In recognizing these shifts in attitudes, harm reduction may be no more difficult than starting a new arts and craft program for children. It also highlights the necessity that harm reduction programs aimed at the substance user, such as supervised injection sites must be maintained for the long term. Long term success for any program depends on community input. The community can provide key input in deciding which harm reduction programs best meets the needs in their communities, help set the parameters for operation, and the scope of the program to ensure long-term success.

III. Community Dialogue: Harm Reduction and a Civil Society

i. Process

Participants

The dialogue involved more than thirty participants from a variety of backgrounds and neighbourhoods in east Vancouver. Participants included a mix of residents and those working in different social service sectors including: youth organizations, addictions counselling, community policing centres, business improvement agencies, and various other organizations.

Plenary Session

In an opening plenary session, we heard from five speakers representing a number of different organizations across east Vancouver. Each speaker was asked to briefly describe a successful program that has been used to build trust and reduce harm.

Breakout Group Session

Participants were divided into small discussion groups of between five and seven people and were tasked with exploring the following questions:

- Share with each other what is working (by design or accident) to reduce harm and build trust in your neighbourhood.
- Brainstorm what new programs, approaches or strategies could build trust and reduce harm in your neighbourhood.

The discussions were captured by note takers from the University of British Columbia's School of Community and Regional Planning. It is those notes which form the raw data for this report on the proceedings. At the end of the small group discussions, one member from each group was asked to summarize the discussion.

ii. Plenary Speakers

Speaker 1: Ian Marcuse, Grandview Woodlands Drug and Alcohol Coalition

Formed in 2003, one of the Coalition's initiatives was a community dinners program that was created in recognition of growing tensions in the community regarding homelessness and open drug and alcohol use in their neighbourhoods.

Over the past year, eleven community dinners have been held with more than 600 participants. The dinners included a good mix of people from different communities, with many Vietnamese and Spanish speaking residents participating. The Coalition provided transit services, childcare, and food, and the topics discussed included harm reduction, drug misuse, and multiculturalism. The dinners were held at different locations around the community and the Coalition conducted a lot of outreach work to ensure various groups in the community (geographically located, ethnic, youth, seniors, users and non users) were connected.

At the dinners, participants not only learned about the issues (through educational and prevention components), they also shared experiences. The dinners helped to build positive relationships, provided a place to talk about drug misuse in a friendly and respectful way, and gave people an opportunity to find out about services in their community. The community dinners reduced barriers and built trust by bringing together people together who don't normally interact with each other.

Speaker 2: Clair McGougan, Hastings-Sunrise Community Policing Centre

The Hastings-Sunrise Community Policing Centre established community clean ups that initially targeted graffiti – noting that the target was not all graffiti per se, but those things that were not acceptable to the community. This initiative was part of a process of coming to understand what was acceptable and not acceptable in this community. Once the amount of offensive graffiti was removed, the focus switched to garbage and litter clean-up.

The community clean ups, by being visible on the ground, have been instrumental in building credibility and participation within the community. The clean-ups are volunteer-driven and include a diverse group of participants. By engaging the community, the CPC has been able to build upon the idea

that the community is the “police”, that is, the community plays a key role in managing its own problems.

An important point that the CPC learned through this process was that it is essential to establish what works for each different community in Vancouver. While CPCs have a number of similar programs (i.e. block watch groups are common) each CPC also runs different programs in different ways according to the community. The speaker emphasized that the success of the CPC is their ability to identify local needs by asking people in the community what they want to see happen.

Speaker 3: Mark Smith, Triage Emergency Services and Care Society

In speaking about Triage’s experience establishing a facility in the South Fraser area, Mark Smith did not focus on what programs had worked to build trust, but instead discussed what should have taken place. Mark identified that the biggest mistake the organization made was going into a community while not knowing enough about it.

In hindsight, Triage learned that any new project or program must seek permission from residents before it is introduced into a community. This engagement cannot happen after decisions are made but instead must take place at the outset of any proposed project. One must engage in a real dialogue and provide information and education about who is (and isn’t) being treated and housed in the community. Residents’ questions and concerns need answering and full disclosure on plans in considerable detail is very important.

The key lesson learned was that program organizers must engage the community early and continuously communicate with affected residents.

Speaker 4: Bill McMichael, Collingwood Neighbourhood House

The success of many of the programs at Collingwood Neighbourhood House (CNH) was put down to an “ethic of care” and the attitude that “every problem is your problem.” NIMBY – “Not in my backyard” has instead been replaced with MOBY – “My own backyard”. This is the fundamental attitude that drives the development of all CNH programs.

It was emphasized that if policies are to benefit them, residents need to be involved in policy-making that affects their lives. What this means is that it is necessary to bring every voice to the table. For example, youth voices are not often heard in discussions of many traditional prevention

and education programs. Within CNH's programs youth participation is central.

One example given was the success of the peer prevention program "I Can Choose, We Can Choose", a prevention fair that is held twice a year at CNH and which is currently entering its ninth year. The fair involves students from local high schools talking to younger students (from primary schools) about transitioning to high school and its distractions, temptations, and joys. The success of this program is due to the fact that it takes the adults and 'experts' out of the picture and involves youth, who know best the issues that affect them.

Speaker 5: Robert Wilmot, Broadway Youth Resource Centre

This award winning centre now sees more than 3,500 marginalized, at risk, and multi-barriered youth and children annually. It was established in response to the Fraser and Broadway area of Mount Pleasant becoming a magnet for "troubled" youth.

Once established, the Broadway Youth Resource Centre (BYRC) observed that many of the youth were not always welcomed by the community. So BYRC representatives began attending the meetings of a local community group, Mount Pleasant Cares, to listen to people's concerns and to determine what they could do to connect youth and community. Mount Pleasant Cares and BYRC started with a project of cleaning up the neighbourhood which involved both residents and youth working together.

By cleaning up the area together it was discovered that not only were streets getting cleaned, but youth began to care about adults and the adults began to care about the youth. This process took place over quite a long period of time during which tremendous relationships and connections were fostered. And, while it was a slow process for these relationships to develop it was worth the effort and time as marginalized youth began to feel cared about and felt a sense of belonging in their community.

iii. Breakout Groups

General Outcomes

The following common themes arose out of the discussions within different groups:

1. Certain attitudes and stereotypes about homeless persons and those addicted to drugs and alcohol can create fear and misunderstanding.
2. Communication helps to break down barriers amongst individuals and groups that often do not trust one another.
3. There is a need to foster a sense of belonging amongst all members of the community, especially homeless residents and those that are new to the neighbourhood.
4. Including community members in planning and addressing community members concerns is key to ensuring the continued success of harm reduction programs.
5. Programs for youth are key to preventing and reducing harm to the most vulnerable sector of the population.



1. Attitude as a Barrier to Trust

Many of the groups emphasized that negative perceptions of homeless people and drug users create fear amongst other members of the community. The behaviour of some homeless people and those with addiction issues can sometimes be erratic; however one participant pointed out, such behaviour is often a necessary adaptation when one lives on the streets. For instance sleeping during the daytime allows a person who lives outside to be awake at night when threats to their person are much greater.

Participants emphasized the need to change our conceptions of homeless people away from viewing them as pathological or as problematic to viewing them as members of our community, with needs that deserve to be addressed.

Many participants were keen to emphasize that drug and alcohol abuse and addiction do not discriminate and can happen to anyone, young or old, rich or poor. Substance abuse often comes about because people are trying to find a way to cope with stress or numb pain. Many people who abuse drugs and alcohol have been victims of abuse or face pressures ranging from economic, to environmental to housing issues, especially so in Vancouver. In fact, one group emphasized that alcohol was the most common drug used by people as a coping mechanism.

“Expect that people can do better and want to do better in their lives.”

A number of groups observed that amongst seniors, fear and perceptions of homeless people and substance users is often the most negative. Seniors often feel that street people and those addicted to drugs receive too much help and that those people have chosen their situation in life. One explanation was that people from older generations grew up in an era where hard work was emphasized, while social programs were not. The need to engage seniors in talking about these issues in order to break down misconceptions about homelessness and substance abuse was seen as key to diminishing fear and mistrust within neighbourhoods.

Finally, a central theme that was emphasized in relation to community attitudes was that while acceptance and tolerance are vital to creating a sense of belonging, at the same time these attitudes must be coupled with expectations to respect one another and respect the neighbourhood in which you live.

Key Programs and Ideas

- Create programs through which immigrant communities and homeless people can meet each other on problems that all residents share.
- Engage seniors in talking about issues and equip them with a new vocabulary and understanding about homelessness and drug abuse issues.
- Encourage partnerships between police and community members to create a sense of ownership and responsibility on the part of residents in keeping their streets safe.
- Foster relationships between businesses and homeless residents.
- Neighbours for Peace Program –This program was cited as an excellent example of a public education campaign that attempted to reorient peoples’ thinking around a particular issue. This non-violence program was taught to area seniors, which they in turn used to teach to students in local schools about non-violent tactics for addressing problems or conflicts in their daily lives. This program taught both the seniors and youth a language and indeed a new paradigm that many of them did not grow up with.

2. Communication is Key

Communication and dialogue were highlighted as essential tools in countering commonly held negative attitudes towards homeless people or persons with substance abuse problems. Creating opportunities for respectful interaction between residents without homes or who abuse substances and other residents was repeatedly identified as the key to building community trust.

“Don’t assume you know what services people need.”

This interaction can take place through programs where different and sometimes conflicting segments of the neighbourhood are needed to work together. One suggestion was to try and involve all residents in programs such as street sweeps, food programs and multicultural exchange nights.

Continuous public education was also mentioned as an essential tool for breaking down traditional conceptions that dissuade people from wanting to associate with one another. Many groups emphasized the need to develop strategies around how to communicate with the larger, non-user community in order to convey clearly the work being done around harm reduction and the objectives that they serve.

Key Programs and Ideas

- Block Party Kit – This is a popular small grant program that helps people get to know their neighbours by organizing events together.
- Community dinners can help bring people together who don't normally interact with each other and helps to build relationships and trust.
- Develop better strategies for communicating to the non-user community to convey the need and importance of harm reduction programs.
- Encourage greater communication between different neighbourhood houses, community centres and service providers.
- Provide homeless residents with information inviting them to community centres and neighbourhood houses. This could be part of a meal or shower program that would provide regular contact with the community centre where information can be readily distributed.

3. Creating a Sense of Belonging

Many groups emphasized the need for people to be able to establish roots within the community. This applies to all residents, both new and old, homeless or housed. Marginalized members of the community might not seek out services or get involved in their community and so a number of groups stressed the importance of seeking out people instead of waiting for them to come to you.

Finally it was emphasized by a number of groups that non-judgmental responses are vital to ensuring that people feel comfortable and welcome in any environment.

Key Programs and Ideas

- Community breakfast programs that provide showers, breakfast and a chance for homeless residents to relax, socialize, and most importantly feel safe and welcome in their neighbourhood.
- Churches and other organizations that allow homeless people to use their addresses to apply for jobs and other social services.
- Supported, permanent housing for women involved in the sex trade.
- Blur the lines between the helper and who is being helped. This is critical in ensuring that people do not feel as though they are recipient of charity but instead that they are an integral part of the process. One must never take for granted that all people, homeless or housed, users or non users, have aspirations and dreams which should always be encouraged. Communication and training of staff and volunteers on this point is one way to meet this need.
- Find ways of pulling people off the streets and out of their homes to participate at community centres. This could take place in an expanded program of street workers who travel the city checking in on homeless residents.

“If you take care of basic needs some of the deeper, more relevant needs come to the surface.”
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- Create day shelters where homeless people can come and feel comfortable and not rushed. Help offered to homeless people should attempt to help them in the long term but also should address their basic needs.
- A welcome wagon model that would visit new members of the neighbourhood or those that had lived in the neighbourhood for some time but did not traditionally visit community centres, neighbourhood houses or other social service organizations.

4. Involving the Community

Many of the groups stressed the importance of communicating with the community as a whole to ensure that any programs are created to meet and continue to meet the actual needs of the community. Consultations allow community members the opportunity to express their fears and their concerns and to figure out ways to address these concerns. Involving the community also serves to inform and educate community members about programs and issues that they may not be aware of.

Evergreen Community Health Centre found that by holding dialogues in their community they were able to address many community member concerns and build up residents' trust for the programs that they were implementing.

Many of the groups however expressed a concurrent challenge as to how to bring people from the community to public meetings and involve them in consultations. Having information materials printed in different languages was one suggestion as a tool for reaching out to people in different cultural communities that otherwise might not get involved.

“Engaging people in the process. Otherwise they’re on the outside looking in.”

Key Programs and Ideas

- Communicating with residents about new programs and plans that will affect their neighbourhoods early on in the planning stage. The approach is not to only inform them of a proposed change, but seek their permission and input.
- Governments often try to control the flow of information. For trust and a collaborative spirit with affected communities to be developed, governments or agents of government must not withhold information from residents about any details of a proposed program. All aspects of a plan need to be disclosed and open for discussion.
- Create agreements such as the community Agreement Model at Evergreen Health Centre's needle exchange. A series of dialogues in the community enabled Evergreen to effectively take into account community concerns.
- Create programs that focus on outreach by going to where people are, instead of waiting for them to come to you.

5. Prevention is Harm Reduction

All of the groups emphasized the need for continued and creative efforts to prevent youth from engaging in problematic behaviour and preventing or at least delaying their use of drugs and alcohol. Prevention, one group noted, is a long term goal and one that must be sustained over a large period of time. Such initiatives do not therefore always receive support from politicians who are often interested in seeing immediate outcomes.

Many groups felt that it was vital to provide youth with after school activities and opportunities for them to hang out in a safe environment. Designing programs that allowed youth to express themselves creatively was also cited by a number of groups as a means for youth to express some of the difficult things that they experience in life.

Key Programs and Ideas

- I Can Choose, We Can Choose – a youth driven prevention fair held biannually at Collingwood Neighbourhood House involves youth teaching and learning from one another. Youth speaking with youth about drugs and alcohol feel more comfortable than speaking to adults because they share similar issues.
- Teach prevention and non-violence in creative and interactive ways, through drama, music, puppetry and metaphor.
- Educate youth about financial issues, debt education, saving money and provide general training for independent living. Business Improvement Associations can play a central role in this.
- Locate youth outreach workers close to Skytrain stations to identify at-risk youth and their needs.

IV. Beyond the Dialogue: A Call for Action

It is no easy task to capture the energy, sincerity, and humanity that the various speakers and participants brought to the dialogue. However, what all of the participants clearly and consistently emphasized was the urgent need for action, to build trust, break down barriers, and provide the harm reduction services that all of our communities so vitally need.

Residents of Vancouver should be proud of their support for progressive harm reduction programs, which recognize that substance abuse problems are best addressed from a medical and societal perspective.

This approach recognizes that substance abuse can take place for a variety of reasons and that often individuals who abuse drugs or alcohol have experienced abuse, trauma, or stress in their lives for which substances are used to cope. Acknowledging that drug and alcohol abuse does not discriminate and can happen to any person in any community, at any level of income and education, or of any ethnicity, allows one to recognize the need for continued support for harm reduction programs in all of our communities.

“We need action rather than just talk.”

However, continued support requires that community concerns and interests are integrated into harm reduction programming and planning. As such, when introducing new programs into neighbourhoods, municipal and provincial governments must ensure that meaningful dialogue takes place during the early stages of planning and not before decisions have been made.

Furthermore, governments need to provide opportunities for community members to raise their concerns about substance abuse and harm reduction programs. As one participant emphasized, there is a need for more dialogues and forums, to “get the fears out, all of them.” Bringing together individuals and groups that often do not interact can be very challenging but is the first step in building trust and inclusion within our communities. It is this kind of interaction and trust building that city and provincial governments must encourage if there is to be continued support for harm reduction programs in our city.