

“The best thing that the City did was an incredibly comprehensive consultation with the community. They engaged the community and that created momentum that helped the other Four Pillars partners get moving.”

—Gillian Maxwell, Chair, Keeping the Door Open

The Four Pillars Drug Strategy

DEVELOPING AN INNOVATIVE STRATEGY

Like other major cities, Vancouver has drug use and abuse. The effects are most visible in the Downtown Eastside (DTES)—the historic heart of the city, and a community rich in history, architecture, and human diversity.

Drug addiction, poverty and social breakdown are difficult problems. There is always a temptation to merely contain and conceal them, rather than face the issue. The City of Vancouver has refused to throw up its hands and give up. To aid residents struggling with the social, health and criminal ramifications of the drug trade, the City of Vancouver has pursued an effective, if controversial, mix of approaches known as the Four Pillars Drug Strategy.

A GROWING PROBLEM

In the 1990s, drug addiction in the DTES increased sharply, driven by a combination of cheaper drugs, poverty and unemployment, cuts to social services, and the closure of some mental health facilities. Health problems flared, especially HIV and hepatitis C infections – overdose deaths increased by a factor of 10 in five years. Traditional approaches, such as increasing police presence, were simply not helping, and the failure of the “drug war” elsewhere suggested that they never would.

A CHANGE IN FOCUS

The search for effective solutions led to Switzerland and Germany, which had also experienced a rise in drug addiction and associated health issues during the late 1980s and early 1990s. They had chosen to shift focus, seeing addiction less as a criminal matter, and more as a matter of public health. Their Four Pillars approach struck a balance between prevention, harm reduction, treatment and law enforcement. Research showed that it worked.

This radical approach bred controversy in Vancouver, but maintaining policies that did not work was not an option. The City adopted Four Pillars as policy in 2001, bringing together partners including the City, the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority and Vancouver Police. Since then, the strategy has succeeded in improving health and social issues in the Downtown Eastside.

THE FOUR PILLARS APPROACH AT A GLANCE

Prevention: Promoting healthy families and communities, protecting child and youth development, and preventing or delaying the start of substance use among young people.

Treatment: Offering services that help people come to terms with problem substance use and lead healthier lives, including counselling, methadone programs, residential treatment, housing support and ongoing medical care.

Harm Reduction: Reducing the spread of deadly diseases, cutting public drug use, preventing overdose deaths and increasing contact with health care services and treatment programs.

Enforcement: Increasing public order and safety by targeting organized crime, drug dealing, drug houses, and problem businesses connected to the drug trade.



DARING INITIATIVES

Of all the Four Pillars initiatives, the most controversial was the 2003 opening of North America's first supervised injection site. At InSite, drug users can inject their own drugs in clean facilities where staff are on hand to prevent overdoses, offer health services and counselling, and provide information aimed at reducing harm.

Vancouver Coastal Health reports show that InSite has reduced the number of overdose deaths and hospital visits. HIV and hepatitis C infection rates are down. Fewer people are injecting in public, and the amount of drug litter in the Downtown Eastside has decreased. InSite has also drawn more people into detoxification programs and addiction treatment. The Onsite facility, offering detox and transitional housing services, opened above InSite in 2007.

The opening of InSite has not produced the social harms predicted by its critics; arrest rates have not increased, and vehicle thefts and break-ins are substantially down. It has not increased the rate of relapse into addiction, or discouraged drug users from seeking to quit.

STEADY PROGRESS AGAINST A DAUNTING CHALLENGE

The Four Pillars Drug Strategy is improving the lives of people in the DTES. Reaching out to marginalized people with compassion, and emphasizing public health, brings drug users to the support and treatment they need to live healthier lives.

There are still many people in need of help, and progress is slow, but compared to jurisdictions that have focused only on criminal sanctions, Vancouver has achieved a lot. Those directly involved with the project say they see steady progress, and peer-reviewed third-party studies show significant improvements. There is now steady demand for treatment and measurably reduced harm. The Four Pillars Drug Strategy is an innovative homegrown solution that's helping to solve a very difficult issue, while respecting the rights and dignity of the drug user.



Photos by The Blackbird

A city worker counsels a Downtown Eastside resident at InSite.

