

# Teater Health Solutions

## Policy brief: Safe consumption sites

### SUMMARY:

As the Colorado legislature considers legislation to a safe consumption site (SCS) in the Denver area, there has been a lot information and misinformation shared by constituents. This policy brief will look at the scientific evidence of the benefits and risks of SCSs and make policy recommendation based on the available information.

### SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM:

It is estimated that there are 7,500 people who inject drugs in the Denver area. A recent survey of individuals at the Harm Reduction Action Center found that 91% of those had used drugs in public in the past 3 months. Of those, over half had overdosed at least once in the past year. Denver reported 201 opioid overdose deaths in 2017.

There are at least 102 SCSs operating in 63 cities around the world in ten countries (Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Luxembourg, Spain, Denmark, Greece, Australia and Canada)-but none in the United States.

### EVIDENCE OF THE EFFECT OF SAFE CONSUMPTION SITES:

#### Positive impact:

- Reduced overdose deaths. A study by Marshall et al found a 35% decrease in overdose mortality in an area within 500 meters of the facility. There was no effect on other areas (Marshall, Milloy, Wood, Montaner, & Kerr, 2011).
- Increased likelihood of getting into treatment and recovery and stopping IV drug use (DeBeck et al., 2011).
- They save money.
  - A study of the Vancouver site (Insite) found that over \$5 is saved for every \$1 spent (Andresen & Boyd, 2010).
  - A study of Insite also found that just by reducing HIV infection there is a net savings of \$14 million per year (Pinkerton, 2010).
- They reduce HIV infection (Pinkerton, 2011).
- Reduce ambulance calls (Salmon, van Beek, Amin, Kaldor, & Maher, 2010).
- The reduce violence against women who inject drugs (Fairbairn, Small, Shannon, Wood, & Kerr, 2008).

#### Neutral impact:

- They do not increase crime in the area. In fact, one study showed no increase in drug-trafficking, assaults or robberies, but a decrease in vehicle break-ins (Wood, Tyndall, Lai, Montaner, & Kerr, 2006).
- They do not increase drug use (Kerr et al., 2006).

### Negative impact:

- I could only find one study that reported a negative impact of SCSs and it was retracted after publication because of poor methodology that resulted in a corrupt conclusion (May, Bennett, & Holloway, 2018).

### SCIENTIFIC REVIEWS:

- A recent review of scientific articles found: “Consistent evidence demonstrates that SCFs mitigate overdose-related harms and unsafe drug use behaviours, as well as facilitate uptake of addiction treatment and other health services among people who use drugs (PWUD). Further, SCFs have been associated with improvements in public order without increasing drug-related crime. SCFs have also been shown to be cost-effective.” (SCF refers to safe consumption facilities.) (Kennedy, Karamouzian, & Kerr, 2017)
- A review by the editors of Scientific American found that SCSs save lives. In reference to the possibility of a SCS in Philadelphia, the editors conclude: “If this site does get off the ground, it could finally pave the way for other cities to follow suit—giving communities new hope that the rising death toll from the opioid crisis might finally begin to reverse.” (Editors, 2018)
- A review by Ng et al found that SCSs are beneficial to people who inject drugs and to society (Ng, Sutherland, & Kolber, 2017).

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

There appears to be *no evidence* of any adverse effect of safe consumption sites. In fact, there is significant evidence that SCSs save lives, reduce health costs, save money, and get more people into treatment for their disease of addiction.

Several studies have shown that the most significant benefit of SCSs is in the immediate vicinity. Therefore, the SCS should be located in an area of high injection drug use.


One of the main purposes of government is to protect the most vulnerable in our society. Individuals with the disease of addiction who inject drugs have an age-adjusted mortality rate that is about 8 times greater than those without addiction (Ng et al., 2017). They often also have very limited resources and social support. Many are homeless. This population is among the most vulnerable in our society. Passing legislation to support the development of a safe consumption site in Denver is good policy.

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