



News Release Communiqué

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NEARLY 250 ORGANIZATIONS ACROSS CANADA CALL FOR PRISON-BASED NEEDLE AND SYRINGE PROGRAMS

Canada's governments urged to uphold the human rights of people in prison

TORONTO, June 1, 2016 — Close to 250 Canadian organizations have signed a statement urging federal and provincial governments to immediately implement prison-based needle and syringe programs (PNSPs) in institutions across the country. Representing the views of a broad cross-section of Canadian civil society, the statement highlights the overwhelming scientific, empirical and human rights rationale for Canada's governments to act without delay.

"People in prison face far greater risk of HIV and HCV infection simply because they are denied access to sterile injection equipment," said Sandra Ka Hon Chu, Director of Research and Advocacy with the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network. A proven harm reduction strategy, access to sterile injection equipment has been successfully implemented in prisons in numerous other countries for decades, and is recommended by a wide range of health experts and organizations. "Needle and syringe programs exist in communities across the country," said Chu. "Yet they remain unavailable in Canada's prisons."

The failure to provide essential harm reduction services in prison also has a disproportionate impact on Indigenous people, who make up about 4% of the population in Canada, yet represent approximately 23% of the federal prison population. As Emily Hill, a lawyer with Aboriginal Legal Services, notes, "Already, Indigenous people in prison have rates of HIV and HCV that are significantly higher than other prisoners. The absence of PNSPs further exacerbates the negative implications of incarceration for Indigenous peoples' health and well-being."

"This is a matter not simply of prison health, but of public health," affirmed Dr. David McKeown, Medical Officer of Health for the City of Toronto. "PNSPs have been proven to increase referrals to drug treatment programs, reduce overdoses, and promote workplace health and safety by reducing the likelihood of accidental needle-stick incidents. The overwhelming evidence of their benefits can no longer be ignored."

"The federal government has committed to evidence-based policy making; we already have over two decades of Canadian and international research on PNSPs. Now is the time to make progress on this vital issue," added Chu. "I encourage the Minister of Public Safety to take this issue up as a priority."

To ensure the accessibility and positive health outcomes of the program, the delivery of PNSPs should include ongoing and meaningful consultation with relevant stakeholders. This is not only the signatories' view, but also one of the six recommendations outlined in a new research report titled *On Point: Recommendations for Prison-Based Needle and Syringe Programs in Canada*. Visit www.prisonhealthnow.ca for more information and to read the full report. To read the statement and to see the full list of signatories, see <http://www.aidslaw.ca/site/canada-cant-wait/>.

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