



Writing Sample

REDUCING HARM: WHY CALGARY NEEDS SAFE INJECTION SITES

The following essay was published in the Mount Royal University Writing for Academic Success course materials. The essay is required reading for students learning about rhetorical arguments.

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Calgary is a jewel in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. With its high standard of living, bountiful job opportunities, and great natural beauty, people are migrating here in record numbers. In fact, Calgary's population has ballooned in the last ten years from 1,076,000 in 2002, to 1,385,800 in 2012. A resilient job market has benefitted many Calgarians even in the midst of a worldwide recession.

With so many benefitting from a strong economy, Calgarians rightly take pride in 'giving back' through community outreach programs. There are more volunteers per capita in Calgary than any other major Canadian city.

However, Calgary also faces serious social issues like homelessness and crime. According to the RCMP, addiction to illicit drugs like heroin and opium are on the rise. Although many Calgarians are unaware of the extent of the problem, a number of concerned citizens and social workers have been working to reduce some of the risks that drug addicts face. Fatal overdoses and the spread of transmittable diseases like HIV and Hepatitis C are a real issue.

To combat the problem, Vancouver, Quebec City, Montreal and Toronto have opened safe injection sites – called Insites – where drug users go to inject drugs in a safe, controlled environment. Shelly Tomic, a 40-year-old Vancouver woman who has been fighting drug addiction most of her life said, "We're looking for that life preserver and Insite is that life preserver." Unfortunately, (as of 2012), Calgary still has no such life preserver; drug users must resort to shooting up in parks, public restrooms and other public spaces, putting themselves and the general public at risk.

Calgary should provide a safe injection site to reduce the risks associated with injected drug use.

What opponents say

Critics of Insite point out the high costs of operating safe injection sites. In Vancouver it costs about \$2 million a year to operate one facility, which is open seven days a week. However, the costs of not having safe injection sites are also worth considering. Taxpayers may pay even more if drug users wind up in the prison or healthcare system.

When drug users do not have access to clean needles, they will often share them with others. The resulting spread of communicable diseases, like HIV or Hepatitis C, often requires expensive medical treatment. Insite has been shown to reduce the spread of disease and thereby reduce the costs of treating patients. A drug user can be rehabilitated, but if they become infected with HIV or Hepatitis C, it is a lifetime affliction – and a lifetime expense for taxpayers.

Opponents say that safe injection sites simply enable people to continue what they are already doing – injecting harmful drugs. Admittedly, some research suggests, "drug-consumption sites merely serve to rubber stamp the use of illicit drugs unless they come equipped with accessible, effective drug-rehabilitation programs."

"We're keeping them as addicts, as opposed to trying to get them to be former addicts, where they can once again contribute, maybe do some things that they've always wanted to do as opposed to being stuck in a vicious circle."

However, since the early days, nearly ten years ago before rehab programs were available, much has been done

to improve drug users' access to rehabilitation. Debra McPherson of the B.C. Nurses Union points out, "Over 500 went to detox last year. Over 200 were prevented from overdosing accidentally." Clearly Insite is not merely about enabling; it is about breaking the cycle of addiction and saving lives.

Some who are opposed to Insite insist society is sending mixed messages to drug users by appearing to support their habits. As Toronto police Chief William Blair said, "The ambiguous messaging that comes out of a society that says you can't use these drugs, they're against the law, but if you do, we'll provide you a place to do it in."

Chief Blair is not alone in his opinion; according to studies conducted in Ottawa and Toronto, many in law enforcement are skeptical of harm reduction strategies. As one Ottawa police officer said, "We're keeping them as addicts, as opposed to trying to get them to be former addicts, where they can once again contribute, maybe do some things that they've always wanted to do as opposed to being stuck in a vicious circle."

Evidence of effectiveness

Admittedly, the lack of support by some in law enforcement is cause for concern, but naysayers are discounting the important message safe injection sites send: society cares about the health and welfare of drug addicts and wants to help them break their deadly addictions.

"Insite has proven beyond a doubt its value to the community."

By having Insite locations in Calgary, it would send a powerful message that Calgarians really care and sincerely want to help. Calgarians largely support progressive policies as long as they are proven effective. So it's worth considering Insite's track record.

The first Insite opened in Vancouver in 2003. City officials have had over a decade to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Recently, Vancouver's mayor, Gregor Robertson, expressed his support of the facility. "Insite has proven beyond a doubt its value to the community."

Robertson is not alone in his support of Insite. When the Harper government tried to shut Insite down, five of Robertson's predecessors – Sam Sullivan, Larry Campbell, Phillip Owen, Mike Harcourt and Art Phillips – collectively sent an open letter to the federal government arguing that Insite should remain open.

The research backs them up. It shows a clear reduction in the transmission of infectious diseases, fatal overdoses and continued drug use.

Calgary would be well served by opening an Insite. It's not a perfect solution, but it's an important move in the right direction. Illicit drug use is a complex and challenging problem. For some it is a matter of public safety, for others it is a matter of life and death. For Shelly Tomic, access to Insite turned her life around and freed her from addiction.

By supporting progressive social change, by petitioning local politicians, and by voicing support for safe injection sites, Calgarians will be saving lives. Reducing harm is a worthy cause, and as Shelly Tomic can attest, very achievable as well.