



OPIRG Brock Supports Needle and Syringe Programs

There is concerning misinformation being spread in Niagara regarding Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs). OPIRG Brock would like to reaffirm our support for HR programs and NSPs and address some of the issues being raised.

1. NSPs are proven to be effective at reducing transmission of blood-borne pathogens such as HIV and Hep C. In order for this to work, people need access to new supplies with low barriers for service.
2. Narratives focusing on the visibility of Harm Reduction (HR) supplies, specifically needles left in public, are a lightning rod for fear mongering, NIMBYism, and stigmatizing attacks on people who are homeless who use drugs, and the vital services they rely on. The stigma surrounding sharps (needles)* in public often boils down to people being afraid of others who use drugs, and not wanting a visual reminder that we live in a society with such devastating poverty and alienation.
3. Niagara Region's NSP provides two mobile outreach vans which go across the region dropping off and picking up supplies five days a week. On any given night the outreach vans can pick up thousands of used supplies - significantly more than what is brought in by community clean ups.
4. Needle stick injuries from sharps left in public are rare, and transmission of disease from such injuries is even more rare. In such extreme cases, Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) is a readily available healthcare measure that can neutralize long term harm to an individual. In contrast, HIV and Hep C spread from lack of new HR supplies can cause widespread suffering, death, and undue burden on the healthcare system. While needles found in public are unsightly and should be minimized, it's a small price to pay for the benefits of NSPs.
5. Many of the people who access NSPs are without housing, people living with mental health issues, people with mobility issues, and people in extreme circumstances of socio-economic hardship and personal crisis. There are legitimate reasons why some have difficulty returning supplies, and these people need our compassion and support, not more stigma and alienation.
6. Some have suggested alternatives such as having to give used supplies in order to get new supplies. This would effectively mean no NSPs for the most vulnerable people who need the program, and put individuals and the community at greater risk of HIV and Hep C transmission. Another misguided suggestion has been a cash incentive to return supplies. This method would turn used sharps into a street currency and motivate people to take out more supplies than they need just in order to return them.
7. There are options for improving services in Niagara:
 - The mobile NSP does a good job at collecting used sharps, and there are currently volunteer community clean ups run by the NSP which could be expanded.
 - Building a region-wide, cross-sector commitment to addressing the lack of affordable housing to ensure people are housed safely.
 - The Consumption and Treatment Services (CTS) could use more funding, better hours, and more locations, which would also help with the litter.
 - Some cities have mailbox style sharps disposal bins in parks which could be useful here.
 - There are lots of potential solutions that don't involve attacking vital services that vulnerable people who use drugs rely on.

Attacks on NSPs are attacks on low income people who use drugs. Let's punch up rather than down by fighting for better housing and services for all!