

Long-overdue and still deficient: Correctional Service Canada's Prison Needle Exchange Program

April 24, 2020



Sandra Ka Hon Chu

Director of Research & Advocacy
Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network

Co-authors Richard Elliott, Steve Simons, Laurie Edmiston,
Janet Rowe www.prisonhealthnow.ca

Conflict of Interest Disclosure: I have no conflicts of interest.

www.aidslaw.ca

Drug Use, HIV & HCV in federal prison

30% of women and 14% of men in federal system are incarcerated on drug-related charges; 80% of men entering federal prison have substance use issue.

14% of women and 17% of men admit to injecting drugs within last 6 months in federal prison; **about half shared their injection supplies.**

Estimated HIV and HCV prevalence among federal prisoners is 8 and 10 times higher, respectively, than population as a whole.

In the absence of an officially sanctioned, accessible source of sterile injection equipment, people who inject drugs are more likely to re-use and share injecting equipment, increasing risk of transmitting HIV / HCV.

Prison-based needle and syringe programs (PNSPs)

PNSPs have functioned successfully in 9 countries for nearly 3 decades. Evaluations demonstrate their effectiveness at reducing needle sharing, overdoses, abscesses, needle stick incidences by guards during cell searches, and HIV and HCV transmission. Until recently, however, despite evidence of need and effectiveness, Correctional Service Canada (CSC) neglected to implement this essential health service.

4 main models worldwide:

1. Dispensing machines
2. Peer distribution
3. Community worker distribution
4. Prison health care staff distribution



CSC's 2018 concession

In 2012, a former prisoner and four HIV organizations challenged CSC's failure to provide prisoners with **equivalent access to health care (i.e. sterile injection equipment)** as breaching constitutional rights.

Eventually, the federal government announced that it would introduce a "Prison Needle Exchange Program" in two federal prisons in 2018, and begin in 2019 to extend the program to all federal prisons.

To date, the program is in 11 of 43 federal prisons.

Needle exchanges coming to 2 Canadian prisons



Corrections Canada will begin 1st phase of its needle exchange program in June



Rafferty Baker · CBC News · Posted: May 14, 2018 4:17 PM PT | Last Updated: May 14



Harm-reduction advocates say the needle exchange program is long overdue, but prison guards say they are wondering what happened to the correctional service's zero-tolerance policy on drugs. (CBC)

Problems with the Prison Needle Exchange Program (PNEP)

But the model adopted is unlike models elsewhere, and details of the PNEP reveal **serious deficiencies**, e.g.:

- security staff are gatekeepers to PNEP participation;
- widespread sharing of information regarding prisoners' participation;
- twice-daily “visual inspections” of PNEP kit;
- one-to-one exchange of equipment.

As a result, there has been minimal uptake of the program, which is evidence that the restrictions imposed are undermining the program — rendering it ineffective.

Prison health is public health. Prisoners should have **easy, confidential access** to the program. Litigation is continuing to ensure that CSC implements the PNEP expeditiously in all federal prisons and in accordance with best practices in public health, so as to respect prisoners' asserted constitutional rights.