

# Out of *Harm's Way*

Promoting Health  
and Wellness



Fraser Health provides a wide range of health care services to approximately 1.5 million people living in communities stretching from Burnaby to White Rock to Hope. The Health Authority recognizes that the population it serves is diverse, and the services it offers need to match this diversity.

For Fraser Health's Mental Health and Addiction Services,

## A Public Health Response

Fraser Health views addiction as a public health problem that needs a public health response. Some people who engage in problematic alcohol or drug use may not choose, or be able to accept, abstinence as a goal. Rather than setting abstinence goals, a harm reduction and health promotion approach recognizes an individual's strengths and needs, and meets the person wherever they are in their course of recovery. This approach empowers them to establish their own goals and supports the person to achieve them.

In the context of addiction, harm reduction is a practical response that focuses on keeping people safe and minimizing

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this means providing services for individuals wherever they are in their lives – from services for those who use substances, to services for individuals who want to reduce their substance use and dependence, to services for people who want to stop using altogether.

## Examples of Harm Reduction Programs

Education and outreach, referral to health and social services, and early intervention, identification and prevention are all important components of harm reduction. Formal harm reduction programs are also in place, such as:

**Needle Exchanges:** Distribute sterile syringes and collect used syringes with the goal of reducing the risk of transmission of HIV, hepatitis C and bacterial infections from the use of non-sterile injection equipment. While not its primary intent, needle exchanges also improve public order, as fewer syringes are discarded in public spaces.

**Safe Injection Site:** (This service does not currently exist in Fraser Health.) Provide a clean and medically supervised place where drug users can inject substances they have acquired on their own. In addition to reducing the transmission of diseases resulting from needle sharing, Supervised Injection Sites also provide an immediate response to overdoses and provide an opportunity for people to be linked to health care and addiction treatment services.

**Methadone Maintenance Therapy:** A long-term treatment for heroin dependence. Methadone maintenance has been shown to improve physical and mental health, social functioning, quality of life, pregnancy outcomes and connections to other health and social services.

## Frequently Asked Questions About Addiction And Harm Reduction

### Why do we need harm reduction?

Most people who are struggling with substance misuse have many problems that need different kinds of treatment and support. For some, their drug and alcohol use is a symptom of other significant problems, and using substances is one means of coping. For people who don't want to, or aren't ready to quit, or can't maintain their recovery, harm reduction can effectively prevent them from getting worse – from contracting diseases like HIV. Harm reduction interventions enhance a person's ability to access health care and social services, and the more people feel connected to this system of care, the more likely they are to enter addiction treatment.

### Does harm reduction work?

Harm reduction has been proven to save lives and improve the quality of life for people challenged by addiction. People who use drugs and alcohol are often alienated and marginalized, making their situation even worse. Harm reduction reduces health care costs because it prevents a person's health from deteriorating

further, and reduces drug-related overdoses, disease transmission, injury and illness, as well as hospital use. BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS researchers estimate the lifetime drug costs of treating a person with HIV ranges between \$250,000 to \$750,000.

### What are the benefits of harm reduction?

Effective harm reduction keeps people safe and minimizes death, disease and injury from high-risk behaviour. The benefits are many and include:

- Reduction in HIV and hepatitis C infection
- Reduction in overdose deaths
- Reduction in drug injection and drug paraphernalia in public places
- Reduction in needle sharing
- Education about safer injecting practices
- Education about safer sex and sexual health
- Increased opportunity to deal with substance-related issues
- Minimized engagement in the sex trade
- Increased opportunity to develop a better understanding about the consequences of drug and alcohol use
- Increased opportunity to develop effective strategies to cope with life issues
- Reduction in crime and increase in employment among people that use substances
- Increased family ties



- Increased referrals to treatment programs, and health and social services
- Decreased feelings of anxiety by family members worried about their loved ones.

### How does harm reduction benefit the community?

The benefits to the community are realized through improvements in public order, including reductions in open drug use; discarded drug equipment such as used syringes; reductions in drug-related crime, associated enforcement and criminal justice costs; and reductions in the spread of HIV.

### Does harm reduction make it easier for people to use drugs and prevent them from quitting?

Harm reduction measures are designed for people who are challenged by substance misuse. There is nothing about harm reduction that encourages a non-user to begin using drugs or alcohol. For people challenged by drug or alcohol addiction, harm reduction connects them into health care, improving the likelihood they will, at some point, enter treatment.

### Is Fraser Health the only health authority to introduce harm reduction measures?

Harm reduction measures are in place in every health authority throughout the province. However,

Fraser Health is the first to create a formal policy to direct the activities of all service providers and ensure clients receive the best possible health care.

### What can community leaders and residents do to support Fraser Health's harm reduction policy?

Everyone has a role to play in keeping our communities as livable as possible, and our citizens as healthy as possible. Fraser Health invites community leaders and residents to learn more about harm reduction measures and their positive impact on people who are challenged by substance use and dependency. Viewing harm reduction measures as a vital part of a comprehensive array of health care services for people who use substances, will help to reduce the prejudice and stigma associated with drug and alcohol use, and enhance the individual's chances to fully regain their health and recover from their illness.

## Access to Health Care

Some people believe that abstinence needs to be the goal of any service related to problematic substance use. Some go even further and say people should be denied services if they aren't willing to commit to addiction treatment. But these approaches to health care delivery don't apply to any other part of the health care system. For example:

**Car Accidents:** People who don't wear a seat belt, or who travel over the posted speed limit and are injured in a traffic accident, are not denied treatment or identified as a low priority in emergency rooms.

**Respiratory Illness:** People who continue to smoke after a diagnosis of cancer or another kind of lung disease, still receive health care for their illness.

**Diabetes:** A chronic health condition, people who choose not to change unhealthy lifestyles that contribute to the illness still access health care services.

**Flu:** People who choose not to have a flu shot are still entitled to treatment if they become ill.





injury, disease and death associated with substance use and dependence. Harm reduction recognizes abstinence as a possible outcome for individuals challenged by addiction, but the commitment to permanent abstinence is not a prerequisite for receiving health care and treatment.

Reducing harm is an approach that is not confined to addictions alone. Examples of harm reduction measures in other settings include:

- Hand washing to reduce the spread of disease
- The use of seat belts or infant car seats
- Wearing a helmet when cycling
- Putting on knee and elbow pads while rollerblading
- Smoking outside the home so family members aren't exposed to second hand smoke
- Use of a designated driver for events that involve alcohol.

### Adopting a Harm Reduction Policy

In 2007, Fraser Health's Mental Health and Addiction Services adopted a Harm Reduction Policy to ensure all service providers implement harm reduction practices and standards of care in their daily service delivery.

Harm reduction is a client-centred approach and includes a range of practical strategies and interventions that correspond to the client's goals and motivation for change. Harm reduction also respects self-determination and builds on an individual's strengths and existing capacity.

Harm reduction is a vital part of the health prevention and promotion continuum. It involves a range of support

services and strategies focused on reducing the adverse health, social and economic consequences of substance use to individual drug and alcohol users, their families and the wider community.

### Benefits of Promoting Health and Reducing Harms

Research has demonstrated that harm reduction interventions reduce illness, disease, disability and death associated with problematic substance use. For example, providing clean syringes for use by individuals who inject drugs has been shown to reduce the spread of diseases like Hepatitis C and HIV that are transmitted through needle sharing. Evidence also suggests that harm reduction interventions support individuals to engage in a process that maintains or enhances their functioning level. And for some, these interventions keep them healthy until they are ready to take part in addiction treatment.

Harm reduction focuses on keeping people safe, while providing opportunities to improve their health and decrease the negative impacts from substance use. The more connected people are to support services, the healthier they become. Research shows that up to 80 per cent of substance users in harm reduction programs refrain from entering into further risky behaviours, such as sharing syringes, reckless driving, criminal activities and risky sexual activities.

To learn more about Fraser Health's Harm Reduction Policy and measures, contact Dr. Akbar Bayanzadeh, Fraser Health Addictions Leader at 604 587 4685.