

Convening Community Conversations about Safe Consumption Spaces

A new discourse about substance use and addiction—among policymakers, in the media, and in the public—is currently taking place in the United States, largely driven by the opioid epidemic. This epidemic, and the subsequent rise in overdose deaths that have accompanied it, has been addressed through a host of policy changes, new funding initiatives, and public health approaches. As innovative solutions are being explored, harm reduction strategies are being viewed in a new light.

While harm reduction programs have never received full acceptance in this country, tolerance towards them have ebbed and flowed, based on current events and public health trends. For example, the confluence of rising IV opioid use and transmission rates of HIV and Hepatitis C – the direct result of sharing infected needles – has created a perfect storm in which syringe exchange programs have been (re)considered for public funding, partially if not wholeheartedly. Also, there has been increased visibility of harm reduction programs, as they have often taken the lead in overdose prevention, including naloxone training and distribution.

As harm reduction programs have become more accepted in the current opioid crisis, there have also been opportunities to spark a larger conversation about harm reduction that includes safe consumption spaces. In safe consumption spaces, active drug users can self-administer their own substances under clinical monitoring and supervision. Under such supervision, doses can be checked; in some cases, drugs can be screened for fentanyl and other potentially lethal additives; and when overdoses occur, they can be immediately reversed. Throughout this process, individuals with substance use disorders (SUDs) can be engaged and potentially moved towards treatment and recovery.

The overriding controversy around harm reduction programs has been largely based on assumptions that they condone and/or promote illegal drug activity. This controversy becomes compounded with safe consumption spaces because, true to their name, they are places in which individuals with SUDs are actively using illicit substances.

Safe consumption spaces have a steady track record of operating in Europe and Canada, but none currently exist in the United States. With specific attention to decreasing overdose deaths, several cities – like Seattle and Baltimore – are presently working toward establishing a safe consumption space. In February 2018, the City of Philadelphia announced its invitation to private organizations to operate safe injection sites.

However, while there is clear evidence that safe consumption spaces are a sound public health vehicle that save lives, they continue to arouse elements of fear and resistance among many policymakers, funders, and the public. Establishing a safe consumption space in this country continues to be a heavy lift and further advancement necessitates an open dialogue in which thorny issues are raised, difficult questions asked, and conflict can be acknowledged.

Community Convenings

The National Council for Behavioral Health believes that an important next step in advancing safe consumption spaces is to bring together community stakeholders to present facts, discuss issues, and make decisions regarding the possibility of a safe consumption space in their community. Because feelings are often strong and can become galvanized, a well-facilitated community forum allows opportunities for feelings and opinions to be aired and acknowledged, while balancing them with facts and scientific evidence to generate more light and less heat.

To address this proactively, we propose conducting community convenings in areas that are experiencing high levels of opiate addiction and deaths due to overdose. These communities may be in the early stages of contemplating safe consumption spaces or may be considering a broader range of public health strategies that include safe consumption spaces.

The National Council has seasoned experience in convening learning communities in a variety of contexts and with specific affinity groups. Based on this experience, we are poised to organize and facilitate the kind of community convening discussed, whether they are a one-off or a series that is staged over time and across specific communities. In deference to the extensive groundwork that has already been laid, we propose conducting every aspect of this work in close collaboration with both national and local/regional harm reduction coalitions.

To build a successful community convening – one that assists the community to move in a forward direction on the issue of safe consumption spaces – we recommend the following design components:

- Working collaboratively with national and local/regional harm reduction coalitions
- Forming a small planning group with diverse stakeholder representation including community leaders and members, civic groups, business, elected and agency officials, SUD treatment and prevention professionals, harm reduction leaders and active drug users, recovery community leaders, educators, and representatives from other community institutions
- Engaging stakeholder groups throughout the process
- Designing a meeting format that includes: structured agenda, formal presentations, facilitated dialogue, and follow up work
- Creating opportunities for community leaders and members to air grievances and objections and work through conflict, as well as to explore positive benefits to community
- Creating learning opportunities to explore models of safe consumption spaces, including permanent, portable, and pop-up spaces

- Establishing a meeting timeframe of approximately three hours (half day or evening venue)
- Holding the event in a community venue that is easily accessible to all stakeholders
- Providing opportunities to capture presentations and dialogue through notetaking and audio and/or visual recording, culminating in a proceedings report

For communities and geographical areas in which safe consumption spaces are being considered, it is necessary to create venues in which potential buy-in can be obtained from all stakeholders. Community convenings can offer a process that is both strategic and transparent with the potential for complete stakeholder buy-in during the planning phase and few or no surprises if and when the idea of a safe consumption space comes to fruition. A report of the meeting proceedings, which highlights concerns, issues, and resolutions can be a guiding document that informs further action, including a more detailed community assessment, implementation goals, and a strategic plan.

The National Council has the subject matter expertise; skills in meeting design, facilitation, and community learning; and political acumen to assemble, conduct, and pilot the type of community convening we are recommending to move this issue forward.