

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) about Supervised Injections Services at Queen West

Queen West-Central Toronto Community Health Centre, 168 Bathurst Street



What is Queen West – Central Toronto Community Health Centre (Queen West)?

Queen West is an accredited community-based health and wellness service governed by a Board of Directors. We are one of 73 Community Health Centers (CHCs) across Ontario, all of which have inter-professional teams of service providers including physicians, nurse practitioners, social workers/counsellors, health promoters and community workers. For over 40 years, Queen West has worked to improve the health and well-being of individuals and communities who are at risk and/or face barriers to accessing high quality health care services and supports. Priority is given to low-income people, adults and youths who are homeless and street-involved, people living with substance use issues, people living with mental health issues, immigrants and refugees.

What services are provided at Queen West?

Queen West offers a broad range of services including medical and dental care, health promotion, counselling and mental health supports, HIV and Hepatitis C supports, treatment and education, anonymous HIV testing, wellness groups, practical supports (ID clinic, Voicemails, legal and housing), harm reduction including needle distribution and illness prevention, advocacy, and community engagement and development.

What is the new service being proposed at Queen West?

Queen West is planning to add a small-scale nurse led supervised injection service to its existing health services for people who inject drugs. This is a different model than Vancouver's InSite. The service will be located within the agency's existing program space with no change to the exterior of the building. It would entail the reconfiguring of existing space to an assessment and treatment room, an injection room with 3 supervised injection booths and an adjoining post-injection room totaling about 46 m² or 495 sq. ft. of space on the ground floor of our Centre. Hours of operation would be aligned with need and other programs and services offered at the Centre and will be staffed

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) about Supervised Injections Services at Queen West

at all times by a nurse, a coordinator/health promotor and harm reduction workers. Most of the people using the service will be existing clients.



Photo: Example of small scale supervised injection service at the Dr. Peter Centre in Vancouver.

Why is a supervised injection service needed at Queen West?

Queen West has been delivering harm reduction in the community for over 20 years. Queen West is one of the busiest needle distribution programs in Toronto. In 2015, we had over 15,000 client visits and distributed almost 300,000 needles. We serve a significant number of people who inject drugs, including people engaged in high-risk behaviours such as injecting alone, frequently, and in public.

Compared to the City overall, there are disproportionately high numbers of people who inject drugs within their catchment area, as well as higher rates of emergency department visits due to drug use in Toronto¹. A 2012 study of Queen West harm reduction clients found that 11% had experienced an overdose (in the past 6 months), over a third reported public injecting, 15% said that they inject in public most often, almost a third reported injecting every day, and 29% reported regularly (from one to three or more times a week), 42.5% had evidence of a current/past infection with hepatitis C and 51% did not have stable housing². Queen West clients who participated in studies told researchers and us that they wanted and would use an integrated supervised injection service.

What is a supervised injection service?

Supervised injection services are health services that provide a hygienic environment for people to inject pre-obtained drugs under the supervision of a nurse. In addition to supervised injection, individuals are provided with sterile injection supplies, education on safer injection, overdose prevention and intervention, medical and counselling services, and referrals to drug treatment, housing, income support and other services.

¹ Supplemental data based on the TOSCA Study, provided as a personal communication, May 2014, by A. Bayoumi. Derived using geographic data for the years 2004-2008, using multiple administrative health databases including: National Ambulatory Care Reporting System, Discharge Abstract Database, Ontario Public Drugs Benefit Program, and physician billing claims.

² Challacombe L and Millson P. 2012. Toronto I-Track Report. Queen West Central Toronto Community Health Centre Site Report. Public Health Agency of Canada, March 2012.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) about Supervised Injections Services at Queen West

Is this the only neighbourhood where a supervised injection service is being planned?

No. There are two other agencies planning to add supervised injection to their existing health services for people who inject drugs: Toronto Public Health-The Works (277 Victoria Street) and South Riverdale Community Health Centre (955 Queen Street East). Multiple, small scale supervised injection services are needed because drug use is spread out in Toronto. Research finds people will only travel a short distance to use a supervised injection service.

Will the supervised injection service increase crime in our neighbourhood?

No. Supervised injection services do not contribute to more crime. They are located in neighbourhoods where there is a demonstrated need, usually where drug use is already having an impact on the community. There is considerable research on this subject. For example, in the neighbourhood around InSite in Vancouver, there has been no increase in crime, and actual decreases in vehicle break-ins and thefts. Australian studies have found decreases in drug-related crime, public drug use and loitering.

Will the supervised injection encourage drug use?

No. There is no evidence that the provision of supervised injection services encourages increased drug use or initiates new users. There is little evidence that by providing better conditions for drug consumption they perpetuate drug use in clients who would otherwise discontinue consuming drugs such as heroin or cocaine, nor that they undermine treatment goals. Research in Europe and Vancouver identifies that when managed in consultation and cooperation with local authorities and police, they do not increase public order problems by increasing local drug scenes or attracting drug users and dealers from other areas.

Why do we need supervised injection services in Toronto?

Research has concluded that Toronto would benefit from multiple supervised injection services that are integrated into health services already working with people who inject drugs. There is a high demand for harm reduction services in Toronto. In 2015, there were over 100,000 client visits to harm reduction services, and almost 1.9 million needles were distributed. Overdoses in Toronto are on the rise. The number of people dying rose from 146 in 2004 to 206 in 2013 – a 41% increase. Of particular concern is the increasing role of opioids, such as heroin and fentanyl, in these deaths. Rates of HIV (5%) and hepatitis C (61%) infection among people who inject drugs are much higher than for the general population. In addition, a Toronto study found 36% of people who use drugs reported injecting in public places such as washrooms and alleyways.

Are there any benefits to these services?

International and Canadian research shows that supervised injections services have benefits both for individuals using the services and for the community, including:

- Reducing the number of drug overdoses and deaths;
- Reducing risk factors leading to infectious diseases such as HIV and hepatitis;
- Increasing the use of detox and drug treatment services;

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) about Supervised Injections Services at Queen West

- Connecting people with other health and social services;
- Reducing the amount of publicly discarded needles;
- Cost-effectiveness; and,
- Not contributing to crime or increased drug use in the local community.

Are there supervised injection services in other cities?

The first supervised injection service opened 30 years ago in Switzerland. Today there are more than 90 supervised injection services, in Europe, Australia and Canada. In Canada, there are two supervised injection services in Vancouver, and several planned for Montreal and Ottawa.

Is anything else being done to address drug issues in Toronto?

Many organizations across the city deliver a broad range of services to reduce the harms of substance use. This includes prevention programs as well as withdrawal management and treatment programs. Toronto also has a City Council-approved drug strategy that provides a comprehensive approach to alcohol and other drugs based on the four integrated components of prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and enforcement. Action is being taken across each of these areas. Implementation of supervised injection services will not eliminate harmful drug use, but they are part of the range of strategies to reduce harm. Details about the implementation of the Toronto Drug Strategy are provided every two years in a status report available at www.tph.to/drugstrategy.

Is there an opportunity for community input?

Queen West wants to continue to be a good neighbour and build on the strong community relationships we have now. Engaging with the local community will be an important part of the process of implementing this new service. We want to ensure people have accurate information about the service, and an opportunity to raise any issues or concerns that need to be addressed. Queen West will be hosting an 'open house' every Wednesday night in April from 5:30 pm to 7:30 pm. If you have any questions or concerns, please come by the health centre to talk and have a tour. You can also get in touch with Angela Roberson, Executive Director, or Lorraine Barnaby, Health Promoter at 416-703-8482. They would be happy to speak to with you or to come meet with your group.

Toronto's Medical Officer of Health is submitting a report to the March 21, 2016 Board of Health meeting informing the Board that three health services are planning to add small-scale supervised injection services to their existing harm reduction programs. The report recommends the three agencies begin a coordinated community consultation process.