

Toronto Drug Strategy – a comprehensive approach

The Toronto Drug Strategy is based on a comprehensive and integrated approach that guides City of Toronto policy, program and funding decisions on substance use issues. This approach is comprised of the following four components:

Prevention refers to interventions that seek to prevent or delay the onset of substance use as well as to avoid problems before they occur. Prevention is more than education. It includes strengthening the health, social and economic factors that can reduce the risk of substance use. This includes access to health care, stable housing, education and employment. Effective programs start with the very young and extend through all life stages. They use a range of health promotion strategies and target policy and legislative change. Examples of prevention include mentoring programs, developing communication and problem solving skills and limiting the sale of alcohol.

Harm reduction refers to interventions that seek to reduce the harms associated with substance use for individuals, families and communities. It can include, but does not require, abstinence. The focus is on the individual's behaviour, not on the substance use itself. Effective harm reduction approaches are pro-active, offer a comprehensive range of coordinated, user-friendly, client-centered and flexible programs and services and provide a supportive, non-judgmental environment. Examples of harm reduction include needle and condom distribution and maximum blood-alcohol limits for driving.

Treatment refers to interventions that seek to improve the physical, emotional and psychological health and well-being of people who use or have used substances (and sometimes their families) through various psychosocial and psychopharmacological therapeutic methods. The goal is to abstain from or to manage their use of substances. Effective treatment is evidence-based, easily accessible and has the active involvement of the person being treated. Examples of treatment include withdrawal management (detox), residential and out-patient treatment, counselling and substitution therapies (e.g. methadone maintenance therapy).

Enforcement refers to interventions that seek to strengthen community safety by responding to the crimes and community disorder issues associated with the importation, manufacturing, cultivation, distribution, possession and use of legal and illegal substances. Enforcement includes the broader criminal justice system of the courts, probation and parole, etc. Effective enforcement also means being visible in communities, understanding local issues and being aware of existing community resources. Examples of enforcement include community policing initiatives and drug treatment courts.

All four components are needed to effectively respond to substance use issues. Each component has its own distinct characteristics and interventions, but it is essential that they are integrated or co-ordinated to ensure they are complementary. Balance is also needed among the components to ensure the appropriate range of responses is available and that resources are applied equitably. A key feature of this approach is that it balances the health issues of the individual user with the public order issues of neighbourhoods and communities. This helps bridge what historically have been polarized interests.

This approach is not new; it is used successfully by cities in Europe, Australia and elsewhere in Canada. The City of Vancouver pioneered this approach in Canada and is using it with considerable success throughout their city, most particularly in the Downtown Eastside.

Visit our web site www.toronto.ca/health/drugstrategy