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HARM REDUCTION
ASSOCIATION

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INTERNATIONAL COALITION TO INTERVENE TO SAVE VANCOUVER SAFE-INJECTION SITE

February 17, 2011 — An international coalition of harm reduction experts — comprised of the International Harm Reduction Association (IHRA), the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, and CACTUS Montréal — has today been granted intervener status to appear before the Supreme Court of Canada to support Insite, Vancouver’s supervised injection site, against the Canadian government’s attempts to shutter it.

In a landmark 2010 decision, the British Columbia Court of Appeal ruled that Insite fell within the jurisdictional authority of the provincial government, since the supervision of injections of illicit drugs within a health-care setting constituted a matter of public health, and as such did not violate federal health or drug laws — a decision the federal government lost little time in appealing. This appeal is now before the Supreme Court of Canada.

“Insite abides by international law, by our own Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and by the law of the province of British Columbia,” says Richard Elliott, Executive Director of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network. “Insite is also an international success story. Yet the federal government continues to ignore not only scientific evidence, but legal precedent as well.”

Indeed, despite repeated calls for harm reduction strategies from health professionals and civil society organizations, the current Canadian government chose to axe all harm reduction measures from its National Anti-drug Strategy. Instead, it introduced a variety of ill-advised bills that will further criminalize and incarcerate more people with addictions, while also refusing to implement proven harm reduction measures inside prisons.

“There is extensive evidence that safe-injection sites save lives, often by reducing the injection behaviour that can transmit HIV and hepatitis C,” says Rick Lines, Executive Director of IHRA. “Furthermore, harm reduction measures are supported by all international conventions promoting the rights and health of the individual — and Canada has signed onto these very same conventions.”

The outcome of this appeal will carry serious implications for other jurisdictions across Canada looking to emulate Insite's success by implementing their own safe-injection sites.

"The support in British Columbia for Insite is part of a groundswell across Canada," says Louis Letellier de St-Just, funding member and board president at CACTUS Montréal, a non-profit organization with one of the first needle exchange programs in North America since 1989. "But despite strong support among local government and public health officials in Montréal and Québec City, politics and ideology are still endangering lives. We should be opening more Insites nationwide, not cutting off a lifeline."

Adding insult to injury, a 2009 provincially funded report acknowledging the benefits of safe-injection sites and calling for their implementation was recently revealed to have been suppressed for a full year by Quebec's Minister of Health. Despite this climate of resistance, CACTUS has announced its intention to open a supervised injection site in Montréal later this year.

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