

Improving Safety in the Downtown through the Ambassadors Program

Issue:

Local Businesses are suffering or may suffer from impacts of a narcotic crisis in Lethbridge. They may be affected by the intimidation from intoxicated individuals nearby, increase in crime and loitering, all of which may result in the devaluation of property value.

Background:

In 2017, some 22 people had died from narcotic overdose in Lethbridge which is a cause of concern for the city.¹ In response, ARCHES in early 2018 received approval from the Provincial Government to open Alberta's first supervised consumption site in Lethbridge.² The area chosen for this new site was placed in between 10th and 11th Street and 1st Avenue. Supervised consumption services are health services that provide a safe and hygienic place for people to use drugs while supervised by trained staff. They connect people to health and social services who provide harm reduction support such as sterile equipment and they encourage safer drug use. However, illegal drugs are not provided by the facility. Supervised consumption services are often called safe injection sites.

Since the opening of this new injection site, local businesses and community members have raised concerns that both the opening of the site and the crisis have detrimentally affected their businesses by increasing the presence of negative users in the area.

Findings:

The Chamber has conducted its own survey and round table discussion regarding the impact of the opioid crisis on the business community in Lethbridge. Nineteen representatives from the business community participated in the roundtable discussion. They represented businesses from a variety of areas throughout the city. In summary we found that:

- Many businesses are finding injection needle debris on their properties and they are not adequately trained to remove such debris from their premises.
- Employees and customers feel unsafe or intimidated by those who are under the influence of drugs and alcohol. However, those who took part in the round table discussions said that while intimidating, generally the intoxicated people have not been violent towards the public.
- Businesses near the supervised consumption site are experiencing a decrease in customer traffic and profit loss as a result of the intimidation or the perceived lack of safety.
- There is an increase in public indecency in the areas affected by the crisis.
- There is an increase in theft and vandalism to property.

¹ Ramsey, Caley. *Lethbridge Emergency Crews Called to 42 Drug Overdoses in 1 Week*. 26 Feb. 2018, globalnews.ca/news/4048260/lethbridge-drug-overdose-calls/.

² Ehrkamp, Lauara. *Supervised Consumption Sites Approved in Alberta*. Alberta Press Release, 18 Oct. 2017, www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=48785E3E69B49-9105-2633-859863F554B6D3AD

Recommendations:

The Chamber recommends the City of Lethbridge create a group of city ambassadors in coordination with local law enforcement as recommended by the Lethbridge Police Department and BRZ:

- This type of organization working with all parties, could help create a safe environment for the community and allow for businesses in the area to thrive.
- This may alleviate the negative feelings surrounding the Safe Injection Site in Lethbridge.
- These volunteers will not be trained to fight crime but more for monitoring and alerting law enforcement of suspicious activity or criminal activity.
- Volunteers are there to help the business community and the general public.
- This may increase the quality of life of users, provide better treatment and allow for cost re-allocation into other areas.

This style of program was effectively implemented in Winnipeg, it is called the “Downtown BIZ Watch Ambassadors”. As stated in the Winnipeg Free Press: “The Watch are the eyes and ears for police, reassurances to the public, information and assistance to local people and visitors and a natural succession planning model for bringing talent into law enforcement. The Watch have helped improve the perceptions of our downtown, providing SafeWalks, making presentations on personal safety, keeping an eye on crimes and saving the lives of the most vulnerable. Our program has proven effective.”³

The Chamber recognizes that these recommendations will not fully address all the issues concerning the Opioid Crisis as it is a very complex matter. Furthermore, the Chamber will continue to work with the business community to find more comprehensive solutions.

³ *Collaboration key to a safe downtown, Winnipeg Free Press, 9 February 2018.*