

ANKORS Needle Exchange / Mobile Outreach AGM Report

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2020/21

To say that ANKORS Mobile Outreach Program had a busy year would be a massive understatement! In addition to the complexities of switching the program from Serge to myself after his many years as coordinator, I also had to operate and adapt it as Covid 19 swept the planet. The program worked hard throughout the pandemic to meet the harm reduction/support needs of the street entrenched community of people who use drugs (PWUD) throughout the West Kootenay/Boundary Region. Engaging in this work during Covid presented new hurdles in a job that was already highly demanding. In pre-pandemic times, this program necessitates sensitivity, finesse, compassion, and delicate responsiveness to make a positive impact on the lives of the people it serves. People can be edgy, aggressive, and paranoid if they are sleep deprived from using meth or going through opioid withdrawal; often there are complex mental health issues to navigate and heightened levels of stress to work around for people who are trying to survive brutal poverty and marginalization, and many of the physical spaces visited during outreach can simply be dangerous. Add Covid 19 to all that and it becomes easy to understand why 2020/21 was such a challenging year. My job required entering situations where people with compromised immune systems were grouped tightly together in small spaces like tents, trailers, or packed houses. I had to keep myself safe from contracting Covid (and potentially spreading it), while also doing my best to provide the highest level of harm reduction services and support to the many people who came to rely on the program. As support services became extremely limited throughout the region due to Covid protocols, many PWUD in the West Kootenay/Boundary Region turned to me for supplies and support. To illustrate, prior to the pandemic, the program averaged about 80 home visits per quarter with approximately 90 regular individuals served. By the 2nd quarter, I conducted over 220 home visits with between 130-40 individuals served. What kept me going was the people themselves. I found myself continually inspired by the resilience of the West Kootenay/Boundary street involved community of PWUD and how they were able to both survive and take care of one another during this unprecedented time. Specific wins for the program were many, such as: not contracting Covid; stabilizing the largest homeless camp in the region with the help of other ANKORS staff and Interior Health (in Grand Forks); distributing hundreds of liters of drinking water and PPE to the homeless PWUD community; bringing the number of women to men served by the program closer into balance; increasing harm reduction services and support for people aged 19>29, etc., but the number one success was hearing directly from street involved people throughout the area that they felt consistently cared for and supported by ANKORS Mobile Outreach.