

SOLID OUTREACH SOCIETY

NEX OUTREACH HEALTH EDUCATION HARM REDUCTION

1056 North Park St * V8T 1C6 * 250 – 891 – 9299 * operations@solidvictoria.org

March 4 2022

Re: 3 year renewal of temporary use permit for 1056 North Park

Dear Mayor and Council,

When we started our cannabis substitution program as a way of addressing the overdose emergency we never could have imagined that the amount of people dying of overdose would be higher now than when we started (when we started 1600 people were dying yearly in BC; this year 2,224 people died of overdose in BC). The most recent coroner's report (Feb 2022) showed that an average of **two people died in Victoria every week in 2021**. This is a shocking number that surprised even us who have seen friends and colleagues die this year.

We know from current research that even more people would have died if we hadn't been providing innovative services like this program, and for this reason our program continues to receive support from provincial policy-makers. Due to the ongoing nature of the overdose emergency, it is clear to us that a 3yr renewal of our TUP is realistic given the ongoing urgent need for a wide range of overdose prevention services in Victoria. A renewal of less than 3yrs only increases the administrative and financial burden on our organization for providing a life-saving service to address an immediate and urgent emergency need for residents of Victoria.

Survey responses to our TUP request showed that **71.4% of respondents are supportive of our request for the renewal permit for our program**. This is in keeping with what we have heard more generally from neighbours over the past few years. Most opposition comes from a fear that people who are visibly street-involved are aggressive, violent and dangerous. We have not found this to be true. At most we find that people who do not have housing and who are socially marginalized can sometimes engage in inappropriate uses of sidewalks, either because they may not have a place to do a particular activity or because they have been marginalized and disrespected for long enough that they do not feel part of the reciprocal process of creating shared space that respects everyone.

We spend a considerable amount of time working with individuals accessing our services to make sure sidewalks are passable for all residents and that activities on sidewalks are within reason for individuals waiting to access any service or business on the street. As outlined in our initial TUP agreement, we have street ambassadors able to respond to any needs on the street and to ensure our members are accessing services indoors. Over the past few years we feel we have shown that this approach works.

Formal request

We are seeking to renew our current temporary use permit (No.00015) for **3yrs** to allow "distribution of cannabis as an ancillary use to a harm reduction service" at our harm reduction space at 1056 North Park (note: the entire property inclusive of 1056 North Park, 1802/1804/1806 is listed as 1802 Cook in city plans).

Background

We received our initial 18m TUP for this use on October 26 2020. At the time, 18months was decided by council to allow a period of assessment of our services in the neighbourhood, with the idea that we would reapply for a longer time period after 18m had ended with satisfactory outcomes. Our services have remained

the same since we started, with little change in operations and service use. The sole change at this site has been in land ownership, as we purchased the building (1802 Cook St) where we provide our services in May 2021. Please find below our description of request for TUP, as well as attached for an updated letter of support from the Regional Medical Health Officer's Office (renewed in Oct 2021).

After 2+ years of operating, this unique overdose prevention and harm reduction program has attracted the interest of provincial policy-makers (who we meet with quarterly), and the province has been in conversation with Health Canada about creating more appropriate policy for supporting these types of overdose prevention programs during our ongoing overdose emergency. We continue to work with UVic's Canadian Institute of Substance Use Research on a second phase of research on impacts of this service for people who use illicit drugs. Overall this program has been stable and effective and we are seeking to continue this program while we continue to work with researchers and policy-makers at regional, provincial and federal levels of government.

Description of Proposal

This temporary use permit is to address city zoning requirements for one part of our overall programs: *to allow us to distribute free and at-cost cannabis products to individuals to assist with withdrawal and/or reducing opiate use during the ongoing overdose emergency.* All our other peer-to-peer harm reduction services including support groups, access to safer use supplies and assistance accessing health services and income supports, are covered under the current commercial zoning at this address.

This proposal includes no changes to the infrastructure of this address. It is solely to meet city requirements for distribution of cannabis, while recognizing that our low-barrier therapeutic model for cannabis distribution is incompatible with current city zoning regulations that are limited to recreational retail uses.

The language of our temporary use permit request is intended to address a gap in current municipal zoning regulations that is geared towards recreational selling of cannabis, and which only allows distribution of cannabis with a 'cannabis retail storefront' zoning designation. This cannabis retail storefront designation is unsuitable to our service, which is aimed specifically at serving individuals who are currently denied access by recreation-oriented regulatory framework for cannabis which disallows subsidized and low-cost access to cannabis.

A good analogy for this proposal is the difference between a liquor store as a retail service, and a managed alcohol program as a health service. We are seeking rezoning that is reflective of our distribution of cannabis as an overdose prevention tool that is a component of our low-barrier health services that serves individuals who often do not access health services elsewhere in Victoria. Recreational cannabis stores cannot meet the needs of individuals we serve because the cost of cannabis is higher than the relative cost of street opiates.

Cannabis must be free or significantly cheaper than street drugs to be an effective withdrawal management tool. This is what we offer. This is why it is unique and why it works.

This is a pilot overdose prevention project we are undertaking in consultation with researchers at UVic's Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research (see report attached), and with Chief Medical Health Officer Richard Stanwick (see letter of support attached). At this point, there is promising evidence showing the role of cannabis substitution in reducing the risk of illicit drug overdoses among those at most risk (see M-J Milloy 2020) and improving the health and wellbeing of individuals who use the program (see Pauly, Urbanosky and Nichol, 2019).

Community plan

Our service is compatible with community plan values of:

- Inclusivity and Accessibility: Respect and respond to the perspectives, values and needs of Victoria's many individuals, groups and communities.
- Individual Well-Being: Help ensure that all residents have secure access to basic needs, such as food, housing and services, as well as the skills and abilities required to flourish.
- Adaptive and Responsive: Remain flexible and adaptive and ensure that mechanisms are in place to deal with changing, unpredictable circumstances.

Benefits and amenities

Primary benefits to community include life-saving overdose prevention services for low-income and precariously housed residents. Further benefits include health benefits to individuals who use cannabis to limit and manage their use of illicit drugs, and effective access points for individuals to gain access to other health and social supports.

Need and demand

The need for effective low-barrier overdose prevention services is acute in the blocks around our service, and an average of 2 people die of overdose each week in Victoria. This location is walking distance from Pandora 900-block and downtown, where many low-income individuals who use illicit drugs reside. There is no current zoning at other locations that meets this particular requirement for Health Services including distribution of cannabis to individuals with substance use disorder. Under the current regulatory framework, any location where we provide this service would require a similar rezoning or use permit.

Neighborhood and Impacts

We feel this service has been part of a unique blend of services on Cook st for a wide range of individuals and ages, and that provides a life-saving service to people in Victoria who are at high risk of overdose death.

71% of neighbourhood respondents expressed support for our TUP request and for our service in general. Impacts include an increased sense of welcoming services for diverse range of individuals in our neighbourhood.

Concerns we heard from 28.6% of respondents included that the street presence of people who are visibly suffering makes people feel uncomfortable, threatened and afraid. We have clarified in neighbourhood meetings that we need to focus on inappropriate behaviours, not fears based on perceptions of inappropriate people, to avoid discriminatory thinking based on appearance (social profiling). We also heard a perception of increased instances of vandalism and theft in the vicinity, though in neighborhood meetings it has often been debated whether criminal behaviour in the neighborhood has in fact increased and whether it makes any sense to attribute this behaviour to our services.

Responses to neighbourhood impacts

Visibility of individuals accessing our services is not an issue so long as individuals are using the street and sidewalk in ways consistent with bylaws and proper sidewalk uses. Nonetheless we have designed our services to minimize the need for individuals to wait outside, so visibility of individuals accessing our services is less than that of neighbouring businesses – for example, we only see a line of individuals just before opening time at 9am. This is most often less than 10 individuals, and we are able to move individuals into and through the service at 9am. We have a street ambassador who is available on the street to ensure appropriate use of sidewalks by individuals who may be accessing our service, and to encourage individuals to access our services rather than spend time on the street. We also encourage members to stay inside our service at all times to discourage congregation on the street.

We have seen very few disturbances, and have never had a window broken. We have supported artists in muraling both sides of the building to discourage graffiti, and have seen zero graffiti since our mural program started. Our service is designed to create a sense of belonging and community for individuals who do not have this – a sense of belonging that encourages mutual aid and mutual respect towards each other and to others in our community. This is always a process, but we believe we are assisting in creating this sense of working together with respect for all residents of North Park, including individuals who lack appropriate housing in our neighborhood.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Willson'.

Mark Willson, Director of Programs

Empathy * compassion * education * peer support * harm reduction * acceptance