

Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission

POLICY ON HARM REDUCTION

September 2007

POLICY STATEMENT

The Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC) recognizes the value of harm reduction as one approach along a continuum of interventions that address substance use and gambling. Consistent with the commission's mandate, AADAC will provide information, prevention and treatment programs and services that reduce the risks and consequences of addiction or harmful involvement with alcohol, other drugs and gambling.

CONTEXT

1. AADAC accepts the following definition of harm reduction: *A policy or program directed toward reducing or containing the adverse health, social and economic consequences of alcohol, other drug use and gambling without necessarily requiring a reduction in consumption or abstinence from substance use or gambling.*ⁱ
2. The idea of reducing the harm associated with substance use and gambling is neither a new concept nor an alternative approach. It has emerged as an extension of existing and accepted public health practices (e.g., prevention with high-risk groups).
3. Harm reduction focuses on reducing or containing the negative consequences of substance use and gambling. The harm addressed can be related to health, social, economic or other factors that adversely affect the individual, family, community and society as a whole. Negative consequences can be the direct result of use, or may arise indirectly from efforts to deter substance use and gambling through the enforcement of laws or other efforts to regulate behaviour.
4. The first priority in taking a harm reduction approach is actively engaging individuals and target groups in identifying and addressing their most pressing health and safety needs. From this perspective, people with alcohol, other drug or gambling problems are treated respectfully as members of the community who need help, and who contribute in finding solutions to problems associated with substance use and gambling.
5. Harm reduction emphasizes a change to safer practices or patterns of use, but does not rule out a longer-term goal of abstinence, should the individual decide to pursue that goal.

ⁱ Adapted from Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA), National Working Group on Policy. (1997). *Harm reduction: Concepts and practice*. Ottawa, ON: CCSA. See also the CCSA series, *Harm Reduction for Special Populations*, available from www.ccsa.ca

6. Although many of its proponents advocate some type of drug policy reform, harm reduction is not the same as drug legalization or decriminalization.ⁱⁱ
7. Taking a harm reduction approach with youth is complex. A goal of abstinence is formally reflected in federal law and provincial regulation related to illicit and licit drugs, and is supported by universal prevention efforts. Application of harm reduction to youth programming can be difficult because (1) there are specific risks and types of harm associated with substance use and gambling by youth that are not necessarily present for adults, (2) limited autonomy in decision making is accorded to youth during this stage of life due to wide variability in emotional and social development, and (3) gaps exist in the evidence base to support the effectiveness of harm reduction programs and services for youth.

PRINCIPLES FOR ACTION

Harm reduction policies and programs are non-judgmental and pragmatic. They are part of a multi-dimensional response to substance use and gambling problems that also includes addiction information, prevention and treatment, enforcement, supportive public health and social policies, research and evaluation. Within AADAC, harm reduction is integrated across the service continuum, offering clients and communities an active role in making decisions about substance use and gambling that affect their well-being.

Information

AADAC will provide current and accurate information about harm reduction, especially when working to address the needs of particular groups such as youth, people who use drugs by injection, pregnant women or prison populations.

Prevention

AADAC will deliver quality prevention and education programs that (1) prevent the development of alcohol, other drug and gambling problems, and (2) increase protective factors and reduce risk factors associated with addiction.

The commission will support community harm reduction activities that are consistent with AADAC values and principles, or will undertake targeted interventions aimed at reducing the immediate health and safety risks associated with substance use and gambling. AADAC believes that harm reduction initiatives play an important role in offering substance users and gamblers access to primary health, mental health, social and community services, including addictions treatment.

ⁱⁱ Legalization refers to removing a particular drug from the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act so as to make it legitimate to produce, distribute or possess. Decriminalization refers to changing the way that penalties for production, distribution and possession of a particular drug, such as fines and jail sentences, are administered under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (i.e., the drug is still considered illegal and subject to sanctions).

Treatment

AADAC will deliver treatment programs and services that promote health recovery for people affected by substance use or gambling problems. AADAC takes a client-centred and strength-based approach to treatment, recognizing that not all clients will choose abstinence as a treatment goal. The commission will provide comprehensive assessment and offer services based on individual client need.

Joint Initiatives

The commission will work with individuals, families and communities to develop and provide addiction information, prevention and treatment services that minimize harm associated with substance use and gambling.

AADAC believes that collaborative harm reduction initiatives must be relevant to target groups, and should engage the support of key stakeholders including people who gamble or use alcohol and other drugs, community groups, policy makers, health professionals, social service providers, law enforcement agencies and the judicial system.

Research

Harm reduction policies and programs, like other AADAC services, will be based on sound research and current best practices in the addiction field. AADAC will support and incorporate systematic monitoring and evaluation of harm reduction initiatives, and dissemination of research results to advance professional knowledge and improve service delivery.

Adopted: January 23, 1998 (Position on Harm Reduction)
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