

Commonwealth Forum: Should Pennsylvania Allow Safe Injection Sites?

YES

Addiction ruins individual lives and communities. Opioid addiction has undoubtedly reached epidemic status across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and around the country. But instead of treating drug use as a scourge, one solution proposes bringing addiction out of the shadows under the supervision of medical care professionals. That solution is the institution of safe injection sites.

More than twelve cities across the United States are proposing safe injection sites, including Philadelphia. Safe injection sites have staff on hand in case of an accidental overdose, and also provide addicts with access to clean needles to prevent the spread of disease. Too many addicts drift from society by having to hide their addictions, making treatment, if they want it, even less of an option as they continue to fall away from any potential entry to therapy for their disease. Opponents claim safe injection sites bring crime and disorder to the communities in which they are located. But this is simply not true. A 2014 review of over seventy-five studies regarding these sites shows no increase in crime. They also reduce deaths from overdoses and increase the availability of other health-care services, such as testing for sexually transmitted diseases and mental health care. Not a single death has occurred at any safe injection site. Studies also show the sites do not increase drug use.

The availability of a safe place to use drugs removes this behavior from the streets and public view. It also clearly saves lives. Opponents fear it normalizes a behavior that should be shameful, but drug use is as old as human nature itself. Instead of moralizing, those who oppose safe injection sites should exercise basic compassion and allow sites to be legally established in their cities and towns. Saving lives is worth it.

NO

The heroin epidemic in Pennsylvania and across the nation should be of concern to all policy makers. Addiction is widespread across geographic, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. It is a serious public health issue that urgently needs to be addressed. However, government-sanctioned safe injection sites are not the solution to the problem. Cities that are considering them, such as Philadelphia, will be in violation of federal law if they follow

through on their plans. Not only is it illegal to possess heroin, but it is also against the law to run a facility that allows the use of banned drugs. The U.S. Department of Justice has already warned that they will intervene to prevent the safe injection sites, and with legal justification. Additionally, city-sanctioned use of heroin, despite its good intentions, sends the wrong message that there is a safe way to use these devastating drugs.

Let's also be realistic about the practicality and usefulness of setting up safe injection sites. What neighborhood is going to want one of these facilities located in their community? Philadelphia has already broken up heroin camps in its Kensington neighborhood because of complaints by residents. Communities want to rid themselves of concentrations of addicts, not attract them. This Not in My Back Yard (NIMBY) syndrome means that if there are sites set up, they are most likely to be located in poorer, less educated neighborhoods that have less political power. These areas already suffer from underinvestment of resources—why should they bear this burden as well?

Safe injection sites are well intentioned, but they are not the solution to the heroin crisis. Governments at all levels should be dedicating more money to making addiction treatment more easily accessible. Let's use our scarce resources to make sure that everyone who wants to break free from the grip of heroin has a timely opportunity to do so.

For More Information

Commonwealth 20, no. 2–3 (2018), a special issue (<https://tupjournals.temple.edu/index.php/commonwealth/index>), was dedicated to the heroin and opioid crisis in Pennsylvania.

National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Drug Abuse (<https://www.drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/opioids>) provides detailed analysis of drug use statistics across the United States, with specific information on Pennsylvania as well.

TheWolf administration developed a website and task force to fight the opioid crisis in Pennsylvania (<https://www.pa.gov/guides/opioid-epidemic>). This site provides information on addiction, treatment, and county resources.

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