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Developing a Safer Drug Use Space in a Low-Barrier Drop-in Program for Women, Trans Women, and Non-Binary People at YWCA Hamilton

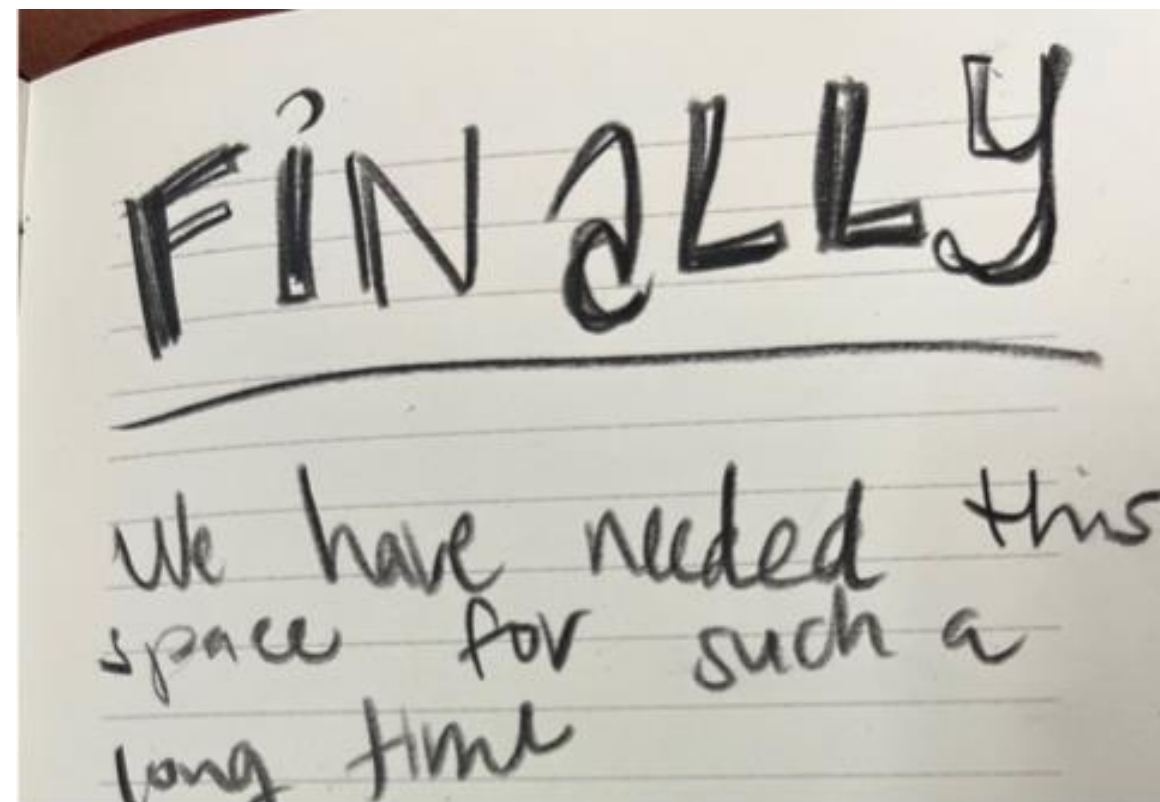
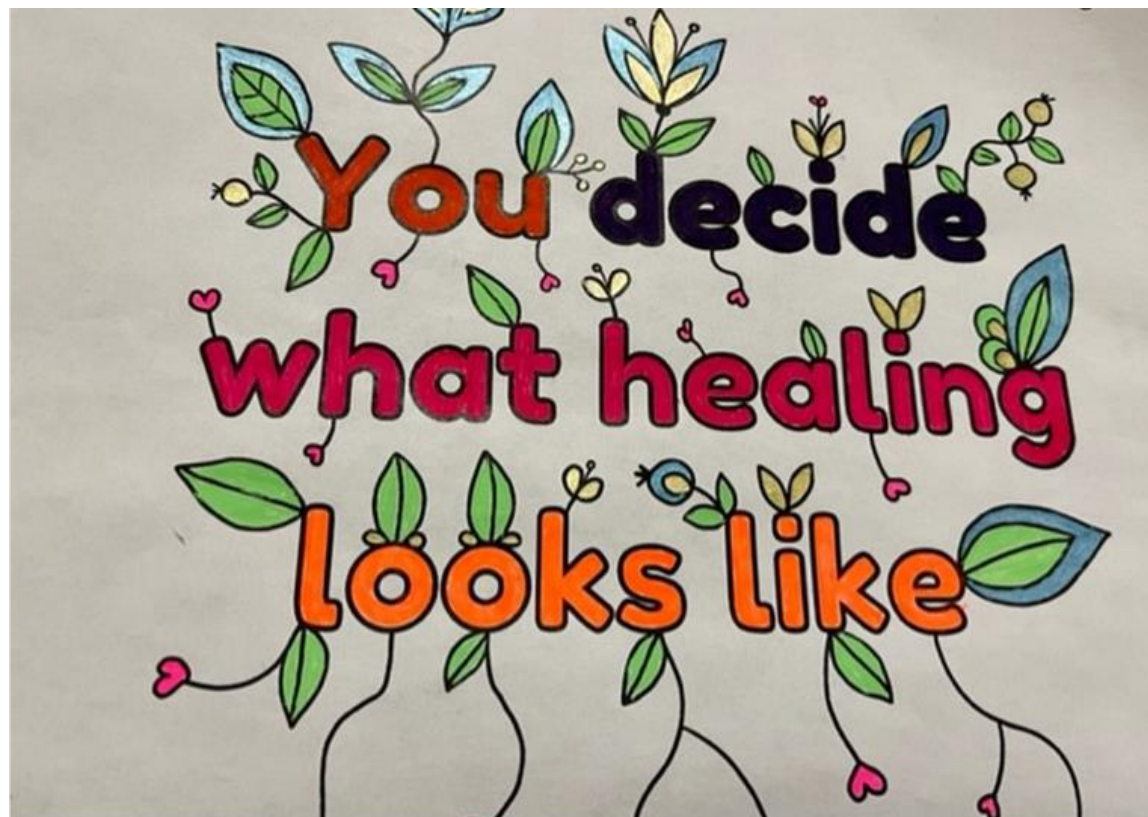
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Objectives:

- Overview of our understanding of developing an intervention at the intersection of substance use, gender, homelessness & gender-based violence
- Learn more about our model of operating a Safer Drug Use Space in a low-barrier overnight and day-time drop-in program
- Share about the transformative ways incorporating this service into our space has shifted the ways we support women (inclusive of cis and trans), 2-spirited and non-binary people who use drugs
- Learn how and why to action a similar model to this in your own organization

Developing an Intervention: Harm Reduction, Gender, Homelessness and GBV





Toxic Drug Poisonings @ YWCA Hamilton

YWCA Hamilton is located in the downtown core of Hamilton, Ontario:

- Multi-service building including;
- 68 transitional housing beds
- Gender-specific low barrier drop-in program

Prior to applying for the exemption, we were calling EMS for drug poisonings/overdoses 5-7 times per week.

Staff were responding to drug poisonings happening in hidden spaces both inside and outside of our building.



Intervening at Intersection of Homelessness, Substance Use, GBV

- People who use drugs and experience homelessness will use in public or hidden spaces
 - Increases risk of infection, drug poisoning, legal issues (Guthrie et al., 2021)
- Women are often erased from public narratives of who uses drugs and who experiences homelessness (“hidden homelessness”) (Xavier et al., 2021)
- When supports for people experiencing homelessness don’t operate under a harm reduction framework, folks’ ability to use life-saving interventions (ex: Naloxone) is limited, and risk of equipment sharing, infection, and death increase (Wallace et al., 2017)

Harm Reduction and Gender



- Women who use drugs (WWUD) access supervised consumption spaces less frequently than men - why?
 - Involvement with CAS/CCAS
 - Judgment towards pregnant WWUD
 - For sex workers - discomfort/fear of having to use drugs close to clients (Xavier et al., 2021)

Harm Reduction and Gender

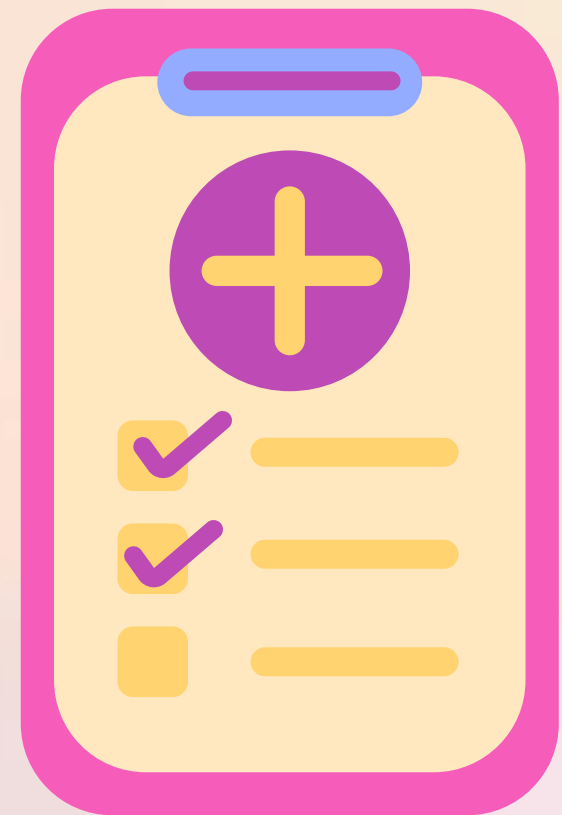


- Higher risk of violence, coercion (Xavier et al., 2021)
- Removing self from male gaze to increase feelings of safety when injecting (ex: femoral vein, jug shot)
- Hamilton Urban Core - all-gender CTS September stats:

of Individual Clients by Gender



Harm Reduction and Gender



“Like, there was one girl who came in whose boyfriend had pitched a tent right across the street on the sidewalk and was waiting for her...it is like a safe haven for them to go to, to get away.” - Kristy

Our Approach to a Safer Drug Use Space



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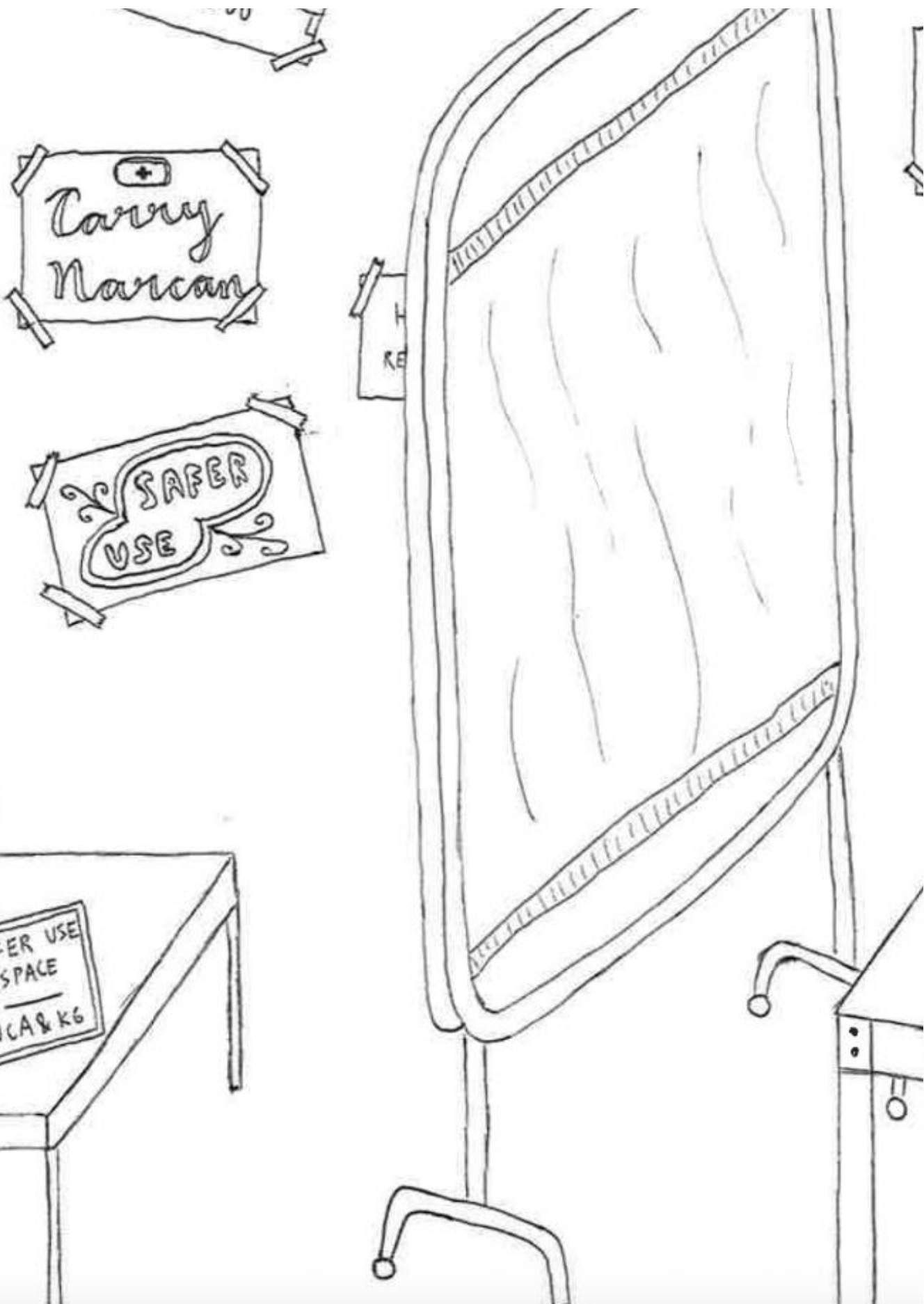
**The Hamilton
Social Medicine
Response Team**

An 'Urgent Public Health Need Site'

- Intended to be a short-term intervention during COVID-19 to help communities reduce harms associated with substance use and respect public health guidance
- 56.1 exemption under Canada's "Controlled Drugs and Substances Act"
- Exemption allows shelters and similar sites in communities to quickly establish temporary overdose prevention sites if they demonstrate there is an urgent public health need




The Safer Use Space at YWCA Hamilton



- Integrated model of safe consumption in a space already responding to multiple overdoses/drug poisonings.
- Operating overnight - when all other spaces/programs that support people who use drugs are closed.
- Gender-specific space offering trauma informed supports recognizing the link between gender-based violence and substance use.

YWCA Hamilton's Safer Drug Use Space

- Coordinated care pathways to support access to detox, treatment, opioid agonist therapies (OAT), and safe supply
 - Partnership with St Joseph's Healthcare Womankind withdrawal management services - onsite support every night
 - Mental health support, gender-based violence safety planning
 - Supports for pregnant people who use drugs
 - Space to do art, make connections with community, decrease isolation
 - Connect with healthcare and social services, wound care, referrals, advocacy
- 

Involving People with Lived/Living Experience

- In partnership with Keeping Six:
 - Peer training for service users
 - Peer-led groups every week
 - Peer workers every shift!

“I want to work here someday soon if I can. It would make me feel good to do the things you guys do.” - Claudia





“There’s too many people overdosing. They need to come here to be close to somebody who’s going to be able to help them.” - Mary-Anne

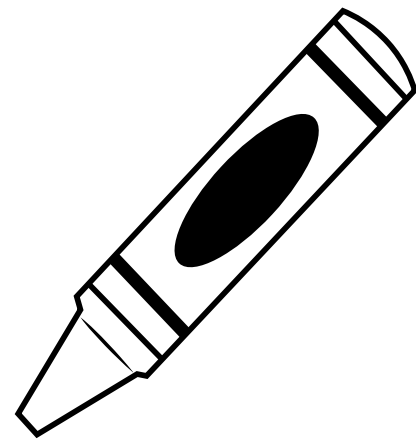
“You guys have supported me through all of my apartment hunting and helped me hold onto hope.” - Dawn



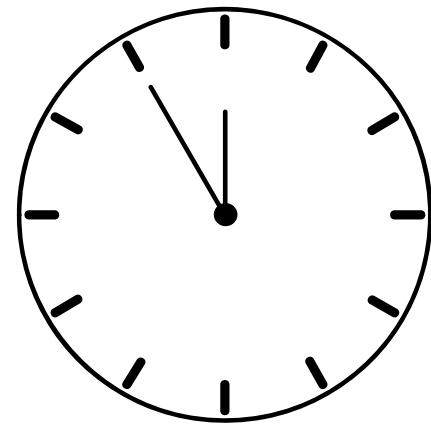
Safer Use Space Program Statistics

- Approx. 242 unique guests since April (2022)
- Average of 16 guests per night
- Over the past year, we have had a total of 4,895 visits to our site. Of these visits 2,987 have been for the purposes of consuming on site and 1,910 visits have been to access harm reduction supplies and/or other related supports.
- We have saved the lives of 62 women and non-binary people within our space - 4 calls to EMS and 1 person transported to hospital - 0 deaths

Areas for Improvement?



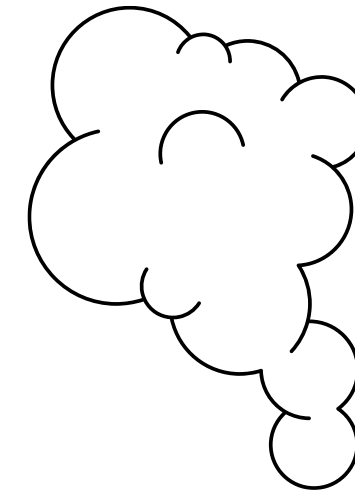
More
activities!



Timing and
Hours of
Operation



Enhanced
support for
peer staff



Supervised
inhalation



GBV supports

Actioning This in Your Own Work



YWCA Hamilton Before the Safer Drug Use Space



- Drug use prohibited inside the building - service restrictions issued
- Staff at the MacNab St S location called paramedic services for suspected drug poisonings 5-7 times per week
- Low trust between staff and service users
- Service users and staff experiencing trauma and burn out

A Community-Based Response to the Toxic Drug Crisis

- Before opening the Safer Drug Use Space:
 - Suspected drug poisoning
 - Frontline staff respond and call 911
 - Person taken to emergency room by EMS to be monitored
- After opening the Safer Drug Use Space:
 - Suspected drug poisoning
 - Staff respond using O2, SAT monitor, and Naloxone when necessary
 - Person is monitored in the Safer Drug Use Space

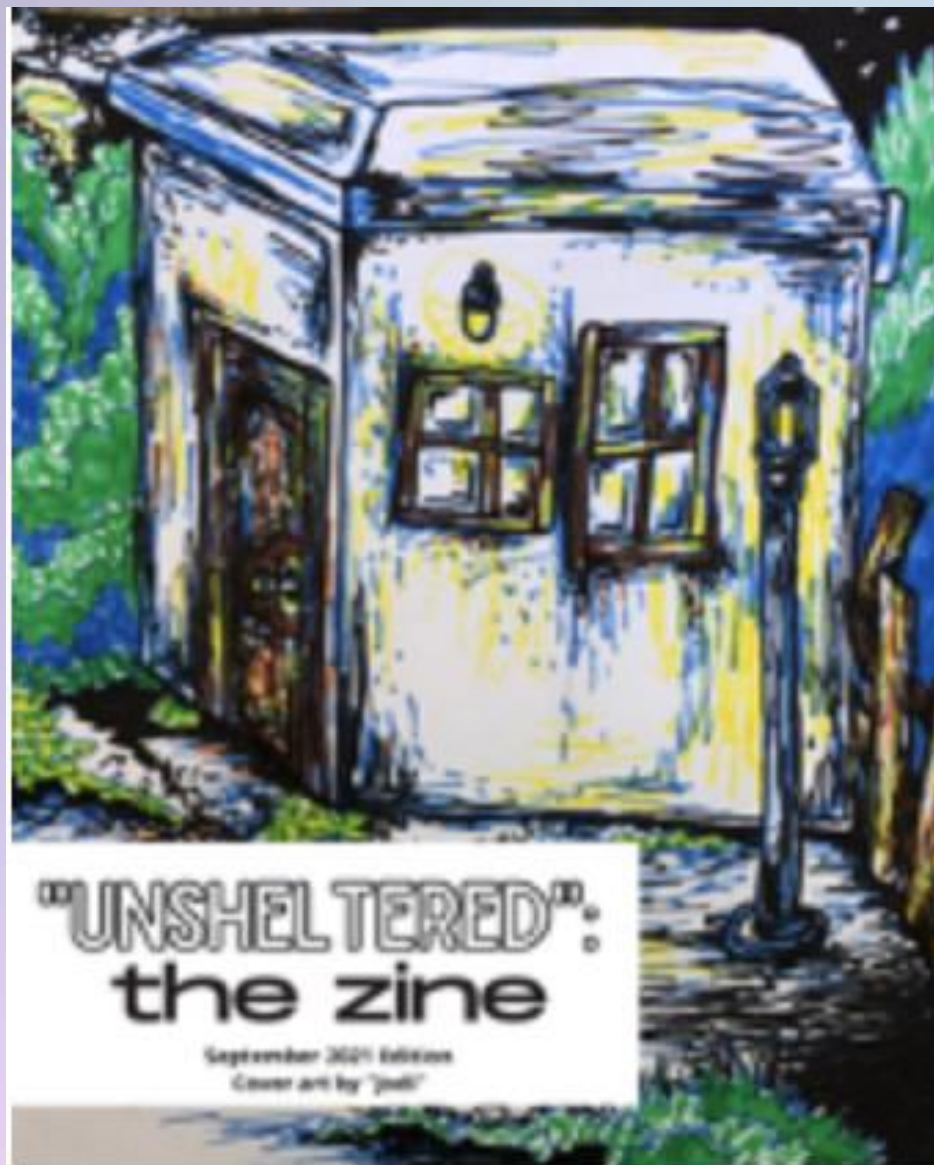
Actioning This in Your Own Work:

- Demonstrate this is an urgent public health need: Collect and organize data relating to drug poisonings in/around your space.
- Develop a team: including a medical director and people with lived experience.
- Seek funding: this needs to be in place prior to applying for the exemption!
- Apply for an exemption as an “urgent public health need site.”

Canadian Drug Policy Coalition x Safer Drug Use Space



Final Thoughts



“...it’s actually I think, a support, and I think it does save people’s lives. And I think it empowers them to just kind of be able to do it without like, without, without feeling judged without feeling any type of like negative consequence.

And I think that’s really important. Whereas there’s other spaces that like, you just feel like...you feel like somebody’s getting an idea about about you, but like, here, I feel completely whole” - Stacey

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