

# Acceptability of a Safer Injection Facility in San Francisco: Community Stakeholder Perspectives

Lynn D. Wenger and Alex H. Kral  
Urban Health Program  
RTI International, San Francisco, CA

2009 International Drug Policy Reform Conference  
Funding Source: RTI-International Professional Development Award

# Overview

- Community context
- Injection Drug Users (IDUs) response to a Safer Injection Facility in San Francisco
- Study objectives and methods
- Study sample
- Emerging themes
- Summary

# Community Context

- 2006 – a group of advocates, service providers, community members and researchers formed the Alliance for Saving Lives (ASL)
  - Assess the of feasibility and need for a SIF
  - Develop a plan for a prototype SIF
- In 2007 ASL and the San Francisco Department of Public Health co-sponsored a symposium to explore opening a legal SIF
- Monthly meetings - develop program proposal and determine how to move forward to meet the needs of IDUs in SF.

# Prior Research on SIF Acceptability among IDUs in San Francisco

- Quantitative cross sectional study with 602 IDUs
  - assessed the willingness to use a SIF
  - correlates of willingness
- Results\*:
  - 85% of IDUs reported that they would use a SIF
  - 75% of whom would use it at least three days per week.
  - Injecting in public was associated with intent to use a SIF.
  - Most proposed rules and regulations acceptable to majority of study participants

\*Kral, A.H., Wenger, L.D., Carpenter, L., Wood, E., Kerr, T., Bourgois, P. *Acceptability of a Safer Injection Facility among Injection Drug Users in San Francisco*. Drug and Alcohol Dependence. Under Review

# Study Objective and Methods

- To assess community stakeholders' perspectives related to the development of a SIF in San Francisco.
- Key informant interviews to identify stake holders
- Neighborhood focus on the Tenderloin District
  - Dense population of IDUs in the Tenderloin
  - Tenderloin most likely place to establish a SIF
- 20 Qualitative in-depth interviews June-Oct 2009
- Notes and back up recordings
- Thematic analysis

# Study Sample (N=20)

- Stakeholder categories
  - Political leaders (4)
  - Law enforcement (2)
  - Community leaders (4)
  - Service providers (4)
  - Religious leaders (2)
  - School official (1)
  - Alliance for Saving Lives members (2)

# Emerging themes

- **Barriers**
  - Community concerns
  - Political
  - Ideological
  - Legal
- **Facilitators**
  - Education and information
  - Community
  - Political
- **Conditional Acceptability**

# Barriers: Community Concerns

## **Oversaturation with Services**

“My biggest problem will always be the concentration and saturation [of services] in one particular neighborhood. It's just not fair to that neighborhood because you are really saying that this is not a neighborhood. It's really just a containment zone for all these kinds of social programs.”  
[Tenderloin community member]

# Barriers: Other Community Concerns

- Neighborhood perceived as a containment zone
- Existing programs don't consider impact on neighborhood – lines and accompanying activities (drug dealing, public urination).
- Fear that IDUs will come from other neighborhoods
- Community working to undo perceptions Tenderloin is unsafe and unlivable.
- Working to improve safety and cleanliness for vulnerable citizens (elderly, children and disabled)
- Social programs perceived as a hindrance to community improvement and safety efforts.

# Barriers: Political

- At the time of data collection establishment of a SIF was **not** a priority in City Hall
  - Mayor was running for Governor
  - Budget crisis
    - Funding cuts
    - Job loss
  - Backlash to the illegal immigrant sanctuary policy

# Barriers: Political

“We've been in this -- more or less triage level of engagement just around annual budget problems. Our stance has been so defensive -- we haven't had the footing to push to expand service areas like this one -- especially when it is sensitive and there are legal issues and a lot of community concern and political issues”  
[Political official]

# Barriers: Ideological

- Would encourage drug use
- Allowing people to use could prevent them from seeking treatment
- Supervising injection equal to standing by and watching someone hurt themselves.
- Not a good fit in a community where abstinence model treatment provided
- Concern with condoning illegal behaviors

# Barriers: Ideological

“If they have a safe place for people to use drugs, what’s next? A safe place for people to mug people?” [Religious leader]

# Barriers: Legal

- Very few people mentioned legal issues
- A few participants made statements such as:
  - “I’m a law abiding citizen...I’m not for it if it’s illegal” [School Principal]
  - “It would be enabling drug use – an illegal activity” [Community Member]
- Political leaders were concerned about legal issues and compared development of a SIF to their experiences with Medicinal Cannabis Dispensaries.

# Barriers: Legal

“Need protection from the federal government – Medicinal Cannabis Dispensaries (MCDs) are legal in SF but, we have problems with the Feds going after them because they are violating federal law - the feds could crack down hard on a SIF... It raises questions -- will the City lose funding for other programs? Will City employees associated with a SIF face prosecution?...Even if it is a good idea from a public policy standpoint - is it too much of a risk?" [Political Leader]

# Facilitator – Community Dialogue

## **On-going Dialogue between advocates and the community**

“The Community would need assurances that they [SIF providers] would be mindful of the impact services have on the neighborhood. There would need to be a designated program person who would engage with community members to hear our concerns and interact with the community - be present at community events – become part of the community not just provide service from 9-5.” [Community Member]

# Facilitator: Community Dialogue

- Open dialogue with community members
  - Address concerns about bringing “new” IDUs into the community
  - Listen to community concerns
    - Community needs and possible solutions with an SIF as one possible solution
  - Provide information/education
    - Short and long term goals of SIF
    - Community and individual benefits of an SIF
    - Cost-benefits of an SIF

# Impact of information and education

- “My initial reaction was that I don't want this in our neighborhood - it will bring an increase in users into the neighborhood and I don't want to bring more IDUs into the neighborhood... *We are not just concerned about the salvation of people we are concerned with the salvation of people and place.* We want to see a peaceful neighborhood...I was against an injection center but, if it was caring for people and not just a place to shoot up...What I've read about InSite is that it has had a positive impact on the community - It's not nice for kids to see someone shooting up on the street. I'd rather see it out of view of kids”  
[Religious Leader]

# Facilitators: Political

## **Need for a political leader**

“I think if we had a mayor who was able to convince folks that it's a good idea and then put the resources in it and take the heat on it, I think that's what it would take...It's exciting and it makes so much sense and I really think there is a place for it; we just need the political will for it.”  
[Community Member]

# Facilitators - Political

- San Francisco has progressive policies related to drug use
  - Treatment on Demand
  - City wide Harm Reduction policy
- ASL dedicated to moving the policy agenda forward
  - Adaptation of Vancouver's Four Pillars drug policy
- Political will and a leader to champion the issue
  - Allies on the Board of Supervisors
  - Director of the Department of Public Health and the Mayor would be an important allies

# Conditional Acceptability

- Majority stated a SIF was acceptable, under certain conditions
  - No spill out on the streets
  - Additional SIF in a different community
  - Input from the community
  - Concerned and compassionate staff
  - Address long term substance abuse issues
  - Overtly protected – not an unsanctioned program

# Summary

- Whereas political leaders are concerned about legal issues, community members are not.
- Community leaders are concerned with public safety, hygiene, loitering and oversaturation of services
  - focus dialogue on how an SIF could address these concerns.
- Community process is very important
  - Vocal opposition IS willing to engage in dialogue
  - Discussion focus on needs and concerns of the community
  - Provide information and education – outcomes and cost-benefit data
- Need leadership from Mayor and Director of DPH
  - Now that the Mayor has dropped out of the Gubernatorial race...there may be a window of opportunity.

# Acknowledgements

- RTI International for funding this study
- Urban Health Program staff: Cindy Changar, Allison Futeral, Jennifer Lorvick and Alix Lutnick for their feedback during all stages of this study.
- The ASL for leading the charge in San Francisco
- The individuals who participated in this study, without whom this research could not be completed.
- And Laura Thomas, for inviting me to come share my work today.