



SisterSpace

JUNE 2017 UPDATE REPORT

The second report as part of a three-month developmental evaluation

Prepared by:

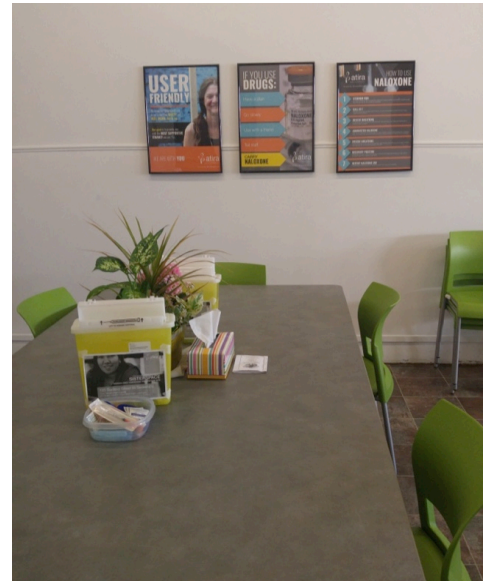
Madison Thulien MPH Practicum Student, University of British Columbia

Tasnim Nathoo MSc, MSW, Practicum Supervisor

INTRODUCTION

SisterSpace, the world's first women-only, community-accessible overdose prevention site, opened on May 16th, 2017 in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES). The program is run by Atira Women's Resource Society, in partnership with Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH), the City of Vancouver, B.C. Housing, B.C. Women's Hospital, and the Provincial Health Services Authority.

To describe early program activities, outcomes, and lessons learned, a three-month developmental evaluation is being conducted. As the second report of the evaluation, this update provides an update on program activities, a description of trends in the use of SisterSpace services, and a discussion of how SisterSpace fits into the greater public health response to the overdose crisis.



UPDATE ON PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

- **Housing outreach:** An outreach worker from Atira has begun regularly visiting SisterSpace to answer women's questions about accessing housing as well as government services for people with disabilities. The peer support workers and the program manager have also helped several women find housing and fill out application forms.
- **Responding to overdoses:** Two overdoses occurred in June on Sunday June 4th and Saturday June 10th. Both overdoses occurred at around 7:00am, and the women reported using "down"¹. Paramedics were called and one woman went to the hospital, while the other declined. Neither situation required naloxone to be administered as their breathing remained normal.
- **Safety:** There have been a couple violent and/or threatening incidents with men who have partners that access services in SisterSpace. On one occasion, a man broke the glass front door but did not come inside. The peer support workers called police, and the man was arrested. A camera has been installed to get a better view of people approaching SisterSpace from the street.
- **Outreach:** The program manager and peer support workers have been visiting other overdose prevention sites (OPS), women-only services, and single room occupancy hotels in the neighborhood to increase awareness of SisterSpace. They have put particular focus on WISH Drop-in Centre Society, which provides services to women involved in street-based sex work and is located around the corner from SisterSpace. WISH staff requested this outreach because they have observed that many women use substances while at WISH. This puts women at risk of overdose, because WISH is not able to observe substance use and respond to overdoses like SisterSpace does. By increasing women's awareness of SisterSpace, staff of both programs hope to encourage more women to access SisterSpace.
- **Weekly meetings with peer support workers:** The program manager has decided to hold meetings weekly, instead of every other week as was originally the case. These meetings are an opportunity for the peer support workers to discuss questions, challenges, and suggestions as a group, and get insight and guidance both from the program manager as well as from their fellow peer support workers.
- **The open house:** An open house was held on June 15th. Women and men from various programs in the DTES stopped by, as did women from the community and several peer support workers. Food was served, and the Wildflower Woman of Turtle Island drumming group performed songs and did a smudging.
- **Media Interview:** An interview with News 1130 was published on June 27. The interview describes how SisterSpace has been developing, with a focus on the safety issues that have emerged. The online article can be accessed at: <http://www.news1130.com/2017/06/26/violence-men-women-supervised-injection-site-get-busier/>

¹ "Down" is a street term for an opiate. Some women use it to refer to heroin specifically, while other women use it for an unknown opiate.

Comments and feedback

A comment box was added in June so that women are able to leave feedback and suggestions. The researcher has also started conducting short surveys with the women who access SisterSpace services. Here is some of what they had to say:

“The staff are friendly and helpful. I find it nice here.”

“I’m very impressed and grateful for stopping by here.”

“It’s a calming environment.”

“As a transgendered woman safety is always my #1 concern in any space hence I feel respected and accepted here - THANK YOU.”

“I love the peacefulness and option of being able to come here and it’s a loving environment and its safe, the staff are amazing and like having tons of moms.”

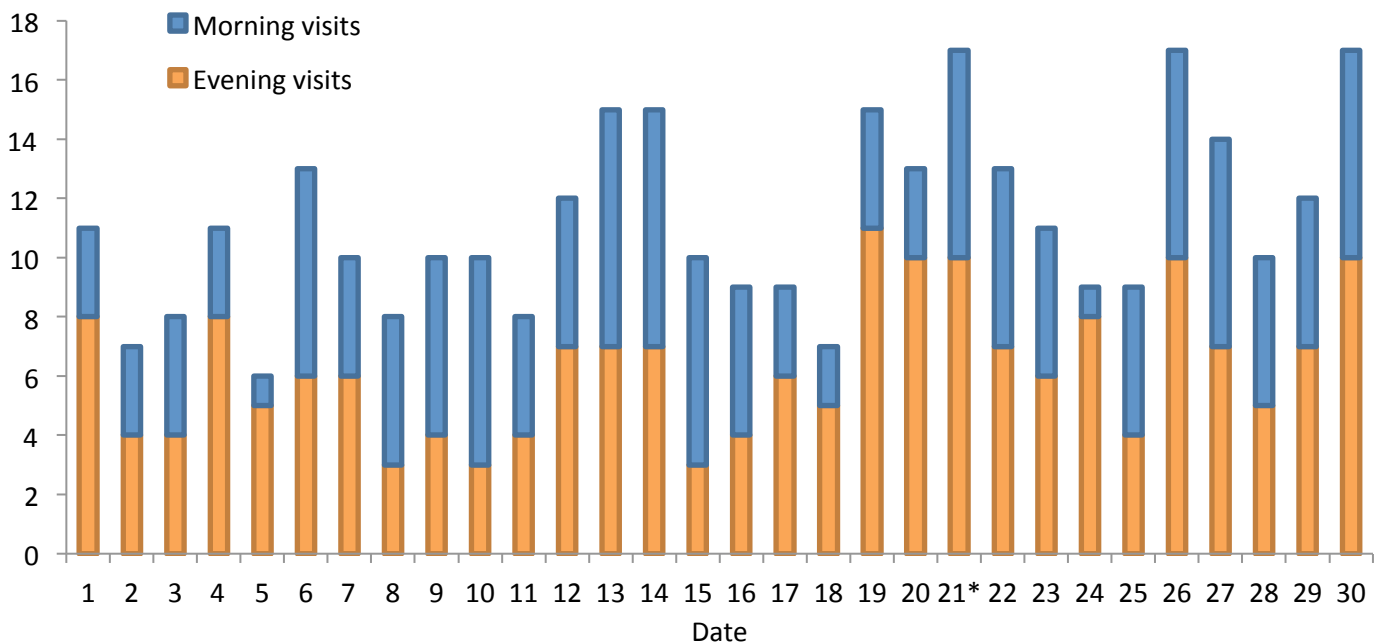
SISTERSPACE BY THE NUMBERS

How many women came to SisterSpace in June?

Figure 1 shows the distribution of visits per day in June. There were a total of 332 visits to SisterSpace, with around 11 visits per day on average. This is a 45% increase from the average number of visits per day in May. Evenings were generally busier than mornings, but not by as wide a margin as was the case in May.

Welfare and disability assistance cheques were distributed June 21st. There were 17 visits to SisterSpace on this day, which is 55% higher than the monthly average, and the average number of visits on the days surrounding June 21st was 25% higher than the monthly average. However, there were similar peaks in visits throughout the month, so it is unclear whether this increase in visits can be attributed to cheque distribution.

Figure 1: Number of visits to SisterSpace in June

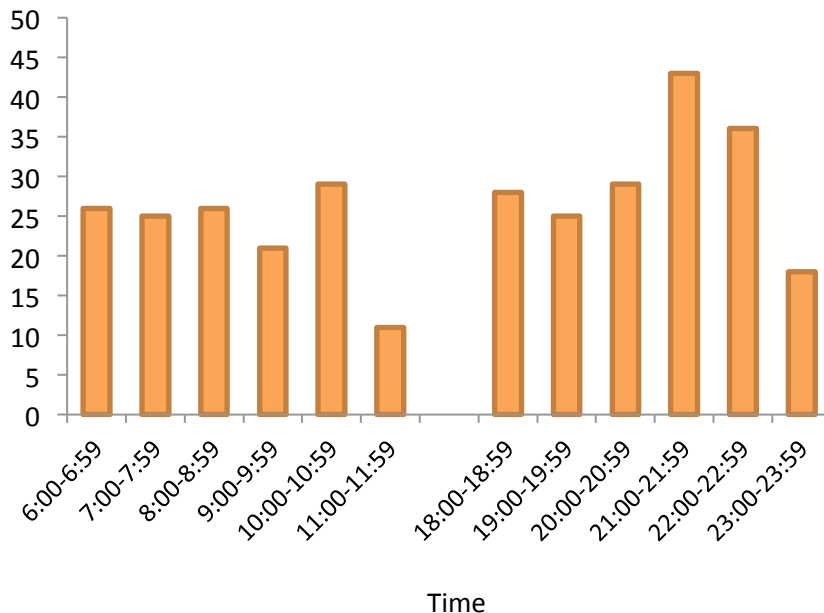


What hours do women come?

Figure 2 shows the distribution of visits to SisterSpace by time. There is a dip in the number of visits for the last hour of both the morning and evening shifts because peer support workers stop seating new women around a half hour before closing. This ensures that everyone has enough time to use before SisterSpace closes.

Women come fairly consistently throughout the morning hours. Some women who do sex work have told the peer support workers that they value how early SisterSpace is open because they like to use substances before going on dates with men who are on their way to work. SisterSpace is the only OPS that is regularly open before 7:00am.

Figure 2: Number of visits to SisterSpace by time in June



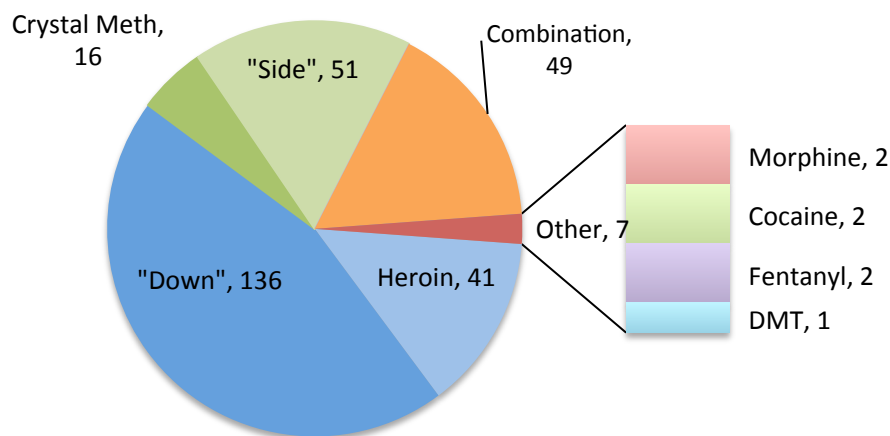
In the evening, there is a peak in visits from 21:00-22:59. It is unclear whether that peak would continue into the night if SisterSpace were open longer.

What substances do women use in SisterSpace?

In June, new data collection forms were developed that collect information about what substance(s) women are using during their visit to SisterSpace. This information was collected for 283 of the 332 visits to SisterSpace in June (85%), and is presented in Figure 3.

“Down” was the most frequently reported substance used in SisterSpace (48%). “Down” is a term that can be used when the substance is some unknown opiate. However, it can also be used as a street name for heroin. It is unclear how many women who reported using “down” meant it as a synonym for heroin, and how many meant it as a term for an unknown opiate. Similarly, “side” can be used to refer to an unknown stimulant, or as a synonym for crystal meth.

Figure 3: Substances used in June



Roughly 15% of injections in SisterSpace were a combination of substances. All of these combinations were a mixture of a stimulant and an opiate. The most frequently reported mixture was “down and side” (75%).

Two women reported using fentanyl. However, many more women likely used fentanyl unknowingly, since a large proportion of illicit substances in Vancouver are laced with some amount of the highly toxic opiate (1).

All substances used in SisterSpace were injected, although a few women have come into SisterSpace after smoking substances so that they can be monitored by the peer support workers for an adverse reaction.

SISTERSPACE IN CONTEXT: THE OVERDOSE CRISIS AND THE PUBLIC HEALTH RESPONSE

SisterSpace opened on May 16, 2017 in response to BC's ongoing overdose crisis. Since the overdose crisis was declared by public health officials in April 2016, overdose rates have remained high (2). The most recent statistics come from May 2017, when 129 people died from an overdose across BC, down slightly from 136 people the month before. This is more than 4 people per day on average (3). From January 1 to May 31 this year, 3,626 people presented to VCH emergency departments for an illicit or unknown drug overdose, the majority of whom were from Vancouver City Centre and the DTES (4).

OPS are one of the main strategies to address the overdose crisis. Their primary purpose is to provide a space where people can use substances in the presence of others who are trained in overdose intervention. As of March 2017, there were 20 OPS in BC, and none of them have ever had an overdose death (5). There are five OPS in Vancouver, of which SisterSpace is the newest (4). SisterSpace is also the only women-only site in Canada.

Researchers and public health officials have been monitoring how overdose rates are affected by the distribution of welfare and disability cheques. Cheques are distributed on the last Wednesday of the month, known as "Welfare Wednesday". A 2016 study by the BC Centre for Disease Control found that overdose deaths were 40% higher in the days following the distribution of cheques (6). In April, emergency calls for an overdose in Vancouver were 29% higher during cheque week than they had been the week before (7). In light of these results, researchers have suggested that provinces adjust the way they distribute these cheques (6). In June 2017, cheque distribution had no clear effect on the number of women accessing SisterSpace services.



What is the difference between safe injection sites (SIS), overdose prevention sites (OPS), and consumption rooms (CR)?

All three are spaces that allow people to use substances with the goal of reducing the risk of overdose death.

- SIS are permanent services that have been approved by Health Canada and are exempted from Section 56 of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, which is why it is not illegal to possess illicit substances in the site (8). Insite, which opened in 2003, is the only SIS in the DTES. Recently, a new SIS was approved for the neighbourhood, and two were approved in Surrey (4).
- OPS are temporary services meant to support other services during the overdose crisis (8). Their structure and function vary depending on local needs and resources, and they often have a less medicalized environment than SIS, which may increase their accessibility for many groups affected by the overdose crisis (9). Since December 2016, six OPS have opened in Vancouver, and five of them are still operating (4). SisterSpace is the newest of these sites.
- A CR is a designated space for substance use, often in a shelter, hotel, or other residential building. These rooms are not operated in partnership with a regional health authority, and therefore do not have as many resources as an OPS or SIS (8).

NEXT STEPS FOR THE EVALUATION

- The results of a focus group that was conducted with the peer support workers in June will be analysed
- Surveys will continue to be conducted with women accessing SisterSpace services to learn more about their perceptions of the program
- The researcher will continue to observe program development and activities
- A final report will be written and released at the end of August 2017

To learn more...

To learn more about SisterSpace, please visit the Atira website at <http://www.atira.bc.ca/sisterspace-overdose-prevention-site>

For further information about the evaluation, please contact Madison Thulien at madison.thulien71@gmail.com

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