



B-C45 CANNABIS

Presented by: Grace Costa, General Manager at Eva's Initiatives for Homeless Youth (Satellite location)

Hosted by: Senate Committee Meetings on April 25th, 2018 (5:15p to 6:15pm)

Goal: The objectives of the Act are to prevent young persons from accessing cannabis, to protect public health and public safety by establishing strict product safety and product quality requirements and to deter criminal activity by imposing serious criminal penalties for those operating outside the legal framework. The Act is also intended to reduce the burden on the criminal justice system in relation to cannabis.

Format: 7 minutes shared (Kristen 5, Grace 2) opening statement followed by open discussion and questions.

WHO WE ARE

- Evas Initiatives – 20+ years of providing services for homeless and at risk youth; 2 crisis emergency shelters (Place and Satellite) in North York and 1 transitional housing (Phoenix) in downtown TO; youth ages 16-24 coming from across Canada (urban and rural centers); nightly we house and support 123 youth
- Eva's Satellite is the Harm Reduction shelter in North York
we offer services in a non-judgmental environment
youth ages 16-25 struggling with substance use and mental health issues
services include one to one and group supports, workshops, information and training on Naloxone for opioids overdose and SPOT - Satellite Peer Outreach Training Program – established in 2011, this peer led educational program offers youth who actively use/used substances an opportunity to develop leadership skills, change behaviors associated with substance use, promote safer use/practices and reduce/stop the transmission of HIV and HepC and other sexually transmitted illnesses
- Based on our experiences working for and with young people, we disagree with the criminalization of Cannabis use for youth

Context:

- Canada has the highest rate of Cannabis use by youth 15-24 in the world
- Want to reduce negative impact on brain development in youth based on frequency, potency
- Fear that use is associated with Mental Health issues (family history, schizophrenia and psychotic symptoms)
- Reduce the development of addictions as a result of youth use while their brains are developing
- Our experience is that youth who are using at very young ages (12, 13, 14, 15) are not drawn to using because of curiosity or experimentation – use if often grounded in experiences of trauma, violence, neglect, sexual orientation and marginalization (poverty, discrimination, lack of access to services, family dysfunction)
- Use of Cannabis as a coping mechanism often increases their risk of becoming homeless – family's capacity to understand what is going on for the youth is low, issues related to sexual orientation or gender identity may be at play, families capacity to deal with behavior associated with using substances is low as well and this is further compounded by youth not going to school, hanging out with the "wrong crowd"/partying, or isolating in their rooms/home
- An increase in arguments/tensions will result in incidents of violence, couch surfing with friends or relatives and/or leaving permanently (result in living on the streets or in shelters)

- ◆ The trauma associated with being homelessness adds to stressors which may increase use; with a wider range of options, Cannabis becomes the less problematic option (cost, impact, danger to overdose, etc.)
- ◆ For youth who come to us experiencing mental health issues, Cannabis is often the less scary alternative to being diagnoses, labelled/stigmatized and rejected for their MH – approximately 80% of the youth accessing shelter services use Cannabis (reduce anxiety, mute the noises in their head, escape from reality)
- ◆ The young people most at risk for being criminalized under Bill C-45 are those who have low levels of social supports; live/lived in care, group homes or foster care; have substance and/or mental health issues; and have history of criminal justice system involvement
- ◆ We know that homeless youth are especially vulnerable to being charged (visible, use in public places, perceived to be dangerous or a problem, may have a history of criminal behaviour, etc.)

So the question for us is which young people are you trying to protect?

This bill falls short of protecting the most vulnerable and most at risk youth in our communities

This bill also fails to protect youth who are “main stream” because their use is often not as visible in the community (use in their homes, have the resources to fight a charge, have access to supports/services, not perceived as “dangerous” and may be accessing Cannabis that is poor quality/unsafe)

The most vulnerable youth are those struggling with issues far beyond their years and often alone

Investing in this bill means investing in the youth justice system – means having to boost YJS

What if we invested in improving education campaigns - invested in peer lead education that is grounded in harm reduction principles? Empowering young people to make informed decisions! They make great decision when given the information and opportunity!

What if we invest in improving and funding harm reduction programs/services?

- ◆ Child and Youth Trauma-Reduction Strategies to provide a lens for service/education that aims to reduce young people’s vulnerability to use of Cannabis
- ◆ Protection and non-criminalizing support for young people struggling with use of Cannabis
- ◆ Policies that encourage mainstream opportunities to benefit young people in low-income areas

Canada has an opportunity as it legalizes Cannabis to focus resources on empowering young people so they can make informed decisions and not engage in unsafe and harmful use of Cannabis. In our experiences, a criminal record has never opened up the path to healthier safer communities or individuals.

SOURCES

Bill O’Grady and Stephen Gaetz. 2009. “Street Survival: A Gendered Analysis of Youth Homelessness in Toronto”. In Finding Home: Policy Options for Addressing Homelessness in Canada. <http://homelesshub.ca/findinghome>

Bill C-45: An Act respecting cannabis and to amend the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, the Criminal Code and other Acts. Publication No. 42-1-C45-E, May 19, 2017, Robin MacKay, Karin Phillips, Marlisa Tiedemann.