



Substance use treatment referrals

RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICE POLICIES to increase access to substance use treatment for people who use drugs:

- Educate clients about substance use treatment options (e.g., detoxification, drug substitution programs, and psychotherapy)
- Refer clients to substance use treatment programs in the community
- Establish and maintain relationships with a variety of agencies providing substance use treatment services, including services for illicit drug use as well as alcohol and/or tobacco use
- Educate program staff on how to properly assess and respond to client motivation and readiness for substance use treatment
- Assess feasibility of co-locating low-threshold substance use treatment programs within needle and syringe programs (NSPs)/harm reduction programs and vice versa
- Evaluate and publish any referral initiatives (e.g., brief interventions or formal referrals) undertaken

Key messages

By offering referrals, harm reduction programs can be a bridge to client enrollment in substance use treatment and another avenue to reducing drug-related harm. There are many substance use treatment modalities including inpatient and outpatient programs, detoxification and withdrawal management, drug substitution programs (e.g., methadone maintenance treatment), psychotherapy, group counselling, and more. Harm reduction programs can investigate local client needs and tailor referral services to meet treatment needs. Most of what is available in the literature regarding referral from NSPs to substance use treatment programs focuses on treatment for people who inject opiates.

Harm reduction program referrals to substance use treatment may take different forms. Some programs may approach referrals like brief interventions, where typically a discussion takes place between program staff and a client, and the client is provided with additional resources or a number to call for more information about services. Sometimes the referral process is more formal and involves a healthcare provider referral and follow-up. Many NSPs already provide some form of referrals to substance use treatment. Nonetheless, NSPs and other harm reduction programs should also be cautious about overemphasizing substance use treatment. Some clients may be unsure or not ready to discuss substance use treatment options.

Studies demonstrate the important role that harm reduction programs can play in helping clients identify available resources and referring them to substance use treatment. Some people who use drugs may not have their service needs met due to lack of knowledge about how to access community resources or perceptions of ineligibility. Many people who use drugs also feel marginalized and fear stigmatization by service providers, making them reluctant to seek services. NSPs and other harm reduction programs may want to consider the desirability and feasibility of providing substance use counselling and treatment services on site. This would give interested clients a chance to receive multiple services in one place. While many NSP clients express interest in substance use treatment, interest does not always mean the same thing as motivation to enroll in treatment. Understanding potential barriers, including motivational and social-structural ones, to substance use treatment entry is important. Retention of clients referred from NSPs in substance use treatment is also a challenge. Lastly, some clients may benefit from information and referrals to treatment for alcohol and tobacco use as both types of substance use contribute to health-related harms.