

Harm Reduction Commission

Meeting Minutes
October 24, 2018
3:00-5:00 pm

Date of meeting: Wednesday, October 24, 2018

Start time: 3:05 pm

End time: 5:05 pm

Location: McCormack Building, Ashburton Café Conference Room, One Ashburton Place, Boston, MA 02108

Members present:

- Marylou Sudders – Executive Office of Health and Human Services (Chair)
- Monica Bharel, MD, MPH – Department of Public Health
- Jeffrey N. Roy – State Representative
- Cindy Friedman – State Senator
- Martin J. Walsh – Mayor of Boston
- Marc McGovern – Mayor of Cambridge
- Jessie M. Gaeta, MD – Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program
- Matilde Castiel, MD – Worcester Health and Human Services
- Robert Roose, MD – Mercy Medical Center
- Armando Gonzalez – Massachusetts resident
- Aubri Esters – Massachusetts resident
- Deirdre Calvert, LICSW – Column Health
- Gary Langis – Education Development Center
- Frederick Ryan – Arlington Police Department
- Leo Beletsky, JD, MPH – Northeastern University

Members absent:

- None

Proceedings

Secretary Sudders called the meeting to order at 3:05 pm. Ed Palleschi, Deputy Chief Secretary for Boards and Commissions from the Governor's office swore in members with the oath.

Secretary Sudders opened the discussion. Members briefly introduced themselves, noting relevant affiliations and the name of the commission seat for those members who were attending as designees. Afterwards, Secretary Sudders gave a brief summary of the commission's charges (see attached powerpoint).

Secretary Sudders explained that all materials for discussion or dissemination to the commission should be forwarded to Gabriel Cohen with the Executive Office of Health and Human Services. Secretary Sudders invited commission members to speak openly about harm reduction and the commission's charge.

Mayor Walsh noted that in his absence, Marty Martinez, Chief of the City of Boston's Health and Human Services cabinet, will be his designee. He noted the importance of viewing the topic of opioid use and harm reduction through a lens of equity, including racial equity.

Mayor McGovern emphasized the importance of cities acting together to advance policies that can be considered controversial by the public.

Chief Ryan questioned whether under current law, sites can operate through the existing Good Samaritan Law, which provides a certain amount of legal protection for those witnessing an overdose so long as they call 911.

Professor Beletsky proposed that the commission define terminology and discuss existing knowledge on harm reduction strategies, as well as legal issues. He agreed with Chief Ryan that there is an element of discretion, citing the state's enforcement discretion with regard to cannabis, which is illegal under federal law. Professor Beletsky noted that SIF are illegal under federal law, but the Angel Program in Gloucester and the Police Assisted Addiction and Recovery Initiative (PAARI) serve as good examples of programs bridging the gap. He noted that on a regulatory level, there are a lot of gray areas based on enforcement discretion.

Mayor Walsh drew a distinction between the nature of SIF versus for-profit consumption sites for cannabis and stressed the importance of knowing more specifics about what a SIF would consist of in practice.

Senator Friedman noted the importance of visiting a site to assess what aspects are working and to decide what a facility in Massachusetts might look like. Within the group, Toronto and Montreal were suggested as potentially good locations for a visit to observe SIF operations first-hand.

Mr. Langis explained that one of the key benefits of SIF is to reduce public consumption of drugs, which could result in positive impacts for communities, businesses, and tourism. He drew a parallel with public drinking, which is illegal.

Professor Beletsky stated that the concept of safe consumption has a social justice element and can be considered a class and equity issue, cutting across class and ethnic lines. He noted that people of means are able to use drugs in their homes and that, in public, law enforcement typically deals with marginalized and vulnerable populations who may not have similar private spaces.

Mayor McGovern noted that the commission is focused on harm reduction, which can carry a certain amount of stigma with it. He shared an anecdote from the introduction of condom distribution in high schools, which had faced initial opposition, but was more widely accepted once positive impacts were seen.

Mayor Walsh stated his preference for the term "overdose prevention site." Secretary Sudders noted that names of facilities and services can indeed impact public perception. Secretary Sudders cited Vancouver's use of the term "overdose prevention sites." Secretary Sudders shared her experience visiting a number of facilities in Vancouver in March 2018, noting that safe injection is viewed as part of a patient's pathway to treatment in some of the models of care. She provided an overview of three different models currently in operation: a community health center model exemplified by the Dr. Peter Centre that operates under a primary care nursing relationship; a model similar to Insite, in which clients can consume drugs, but have limited on-site medical care; and mobile or "pop-up" sites launched with little to no medical supervision for drug consumers.

Secretary Sudders noted that Gabriel Cohen will be compiling and sharing a summary of Health Canada's supervised injection facilities and services.

Mr. Gonzalez recounted a personal story of his work with juveniles, which led to a general discussion of the target populations for services. Ms. Esters stressed that increased attention is needed for the lowest levels of care, including peer-led facilities, and emphasized the value of peer support.

Dr. Gaeta commented that the increase in the prevalence of fentanyl has effects across all levels and not just on those who inject substances, and that a variety of harm reduction approaches is needed. She added that siting of facilities remains a challenge and that those patients at the highest risk might benefit from the lowest threshold, non-medical models. Dr. Gaeta stressed the importance of programs targeting young adults, which would be structured differently than those for adult populations.

Commissioner Castiel noted her preference for the term “overdose prevention sites” and emphasized the importance of wraparound services to provide a continuum of treatment and provide other social supports for patients accessing treatment.

Mr. Langis stated that tiered models should be considered, based on the culture of the community, and emphasized avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to harm reduction.

Chief Ryan and Senator Friedman noted their preference against using the term “overdose prevention site” for SIFs in the Commonwealth.

Mayor McGovern stated that in locating SIFs, certain neighborhoods often carry the social responsibility for the entire city to care for residents, and offered the concentration of harm reduction services in Central Square as an example.

Mayor Walsh stated that substance users may come from neighborhoods outside the city, but end up in areas with a high prevalence of drug use like Melnea Cass Boulevard. He noted that adequate treatment and recovery services may not be available outside the city of Boston.

Senator Friedman noted that social stigma related to opioid use remains a factor and emphasized the importance of crime data driving policy development.

Dr. Gaeta described the results of a recent survey of approximately 240 respondents, stating that respondents indicated that they would utilize SIFs and would be willing to travel up to two miles away for SIF services. Dr. Gaeta stated that one of the draws for a neighborhood opening a SIF might be improved public order, evidenced by reductions in drug paraphernalia and sedated people in public. Dr. Gaeta cited data from research conducted on the SIFs operating in Vancouver and Sydney. She described a bike patrol program (Spikes on Bikes) that patrols the neighborhoods in downtown Vancouver picking up drug paraphernalia.

Secretary Sudders noted that Insite offers take out bags for substance users and during her visit to Vancouver, she noted that individuals are able to utilize fentanyl strips to check the composition of their drugs for fentanyl. Secretary Sudders explained that first responders do not carry Narcan, because it is only available to them in an injectable form, which they are not authorized to carry.

Ms. Esters stated that that ability to test substances before consuming would be ideal. She noted that fentanyl checking has limitations and stated that infrared testing is safer.

Commissioner Bharel commented that Department of Public Health data on opioid use in Massachusetts is available and was shared with members of the commission in advance of the meeting.

Professor Beletsky commented that larger societal issues such as chronic homelessness and substance use are not easy to resolve. He noted that while not perfect, SIFs are a significant improvement.

Mayor Walsh stated that addiction services provide people with an opportunity for recovery. He described the Boston Engagement Center, which he noted has expanded its treatment services and is in the process of establishing a wraparound program. Mayor Walsh stated that this is a personal matter for him and is open to exploring longer term programs, with long-term recovery beds.

Senator Friedman noted her preference for calling a future facility in Massachusetts a “harm reduction site” to place emphasis on the ability of clients to receive treatment and not just visit to inject drugs.

In closing, Chief Ryan emphasized the need to expand access to medication-assisted treatment options. Mr. Langis stated the importance of a multi-pronged approach to addiction and harm reduction. Ms. Esters stated that labels can increase stigma for individuals within the community of drugs users.

Mayor Walsh reiterated that Marty Martinez will be his designee on occasions when he will be unable to attend, and said a description of the Boston Engagement Center will be provided to Gabe.

Mayor McGovern, Dr. Gaeta, Ms. Esters, and Mr. Gonzalez discussed the importance of locating SIFs close to those who would utilize their services. Mayor McGovern stated that he would anticipate a public response from the community of a proposed harm reduction site.

Professor Beletsky stated that mobile sites could be an option to address the public's opposition to locating SIFs in their communities. Dr. Gaeta noted that mobile programming can be successful, but challenging to establish given the inconsistent schedule.

David Giannotti, Public Education and Communications Division Chief of the State Ethics Commission, provided the commission with a brief overview of the State's conflict of interest and ethics regulations. He explained commission members' status as special state employees, and explained the considerations related to conflicts of interest and mandatory online ethics training they are required to complete within 30 days of their appointment.

Lauren Cleary, Associate General Counsel for the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, provided an overview of the Open Meeting Law. She emphasized the importance of transparency and reminded commission members that records, documents, and minutes from the commission's meetings are public records.

Secretary Sudders stressed to members the importance of routing all correspondence through Gabe to avoid unintentional violations of the Open Meeting Law when replying to emails.

In closing, Secretary Sudders thanked members for their participation in the commission's work and invited them to make closing remarks. Among the topics raised were the possibility of coordinating travel plans to visit supervised injection facilities in Canada. Mayor McGovern noted that he has begun planning a trip to Montreal with a small delegation, the timing of which has yet to be finalized. Secretary Sudders shared her experience visiting Vancouver, stressing the benefit of traveling in a small delegation, which may provide better access and interactions than traveling in a large group.

Senator Friedman noted that she would be reaching out to the Milbank Foundation about support for a potential trip and will provide an update at a future meeting.

Representative Roy recommended the book *Fighting for Space* by Travis Lupick as a useful resource on opioids and addiction.

Vote: Professor Beletsky introduced a motion to allow remote participation, which was seconded by Mr. Langis. The motion passed unanimously.

Vote: The Secretary introduced a motion for the meeting to adjourn, which was seconded and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:05 pm.