



Harm Reduction in Social Venues

July 11, 2023

SESSION DESCRIPTION

It's no secret that drug use, legal and illegal, is part of daytime festivals and nighttime socializing. Although “zero tolerance” is still the default in many places, drug policy in the U.S. is shifting. What would it take for cities to adopt a harm-reduction approach in their nightlife venues? Can licensing officials recognize that the role of security and staff at venues is better spent on harm reduction than apprehension? Should training focus on medical intervention for opioid overdose rather than trying to catch patrons with cannabis, coke, and MDMA?

OVERVIEW

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

ZERO TOLERANCE VS. HARM REDUCTION IN THE SOCIAL ECONOMY

A zero tolerance approach is predicated on the lack of acknowledgment that illegal substances are being used, and that instead, abstention is the ideal course of action. If substance use is detected within a venue, that person may be removed without consideration of their welfare, which can create unintended harms to that person. A zero tolerance approach creates barriers for venue operators, who are not able to speak openly about challenges they are experiencing with drug use inside their premises. They may be concerned about license revocation; further, venue staff may hesitate to call for help when a patron has overdosed due to fear of reprisals from law enforcement. Patron behavior also differs in venues with a zero tolerance approach to substances. If a restroom is dark, they may not be able to properly measure their dosage or take an entire dose at once so they don't have to risk re-dosing.

A harm reduction approach accepts that drug use happens and recognizes that we don't live in a drug-free world. The focus is on providing educational and safety resources to make safer choices about substance use. Harm reduction is intended to be non-judgmental, human-centered and focused on public health. In social venues, instead of ejecting someone from the building, staff check on the person's welfare and well-being. Communities that embrace a harm reduction approach encourage venues to call for aid without fear of reprisal when someone has overdosed. Venues and events that have a harm reduction approach may have “decompression areas” where people can be taken care of when feeling the effects of substances. They may also provide testing strips to confirm the contents of a substance.

SUGGESTED LANGUAGE TO USE

- **“Problematic substance use”** instead of “substance misuse.” (All substances can be misused, but it doesn’t necessarily cause harm to health and well-being. Problematic substance use has impacts to public health.)
- **“Safer substance use”** instead of “safe substance use.” (There is no safe use of any substance).

HARM REDUCTION EXAMPLES IN THE SOCIAL ECONOMY

FESTIVALS

At an EDM event in Edmonton, a harm reduction team provides staff for the event. No drugs are allowed to be brought in except cannabis, where there are designated areas where people can smoke. However, some people do sneak in higher-end drugs past security.

A designated “chill out zone” is provided for people to relax, drink water and eat when they’re feeling the effects of drugs. Two triage doctors, four paramedics and other medical staff are on-site at the chill out zone to address potential overdose. No law enforcement staff are allowed in the chill out zone.

SOCIAL VENUES

In Edmonton, no criminal charges are issued when a bar calls for medical assistance when someone has overdosed.

In New York, venues that have partnered with Dance Safe NY institute a procedure of confiscating drugs but having people sit in a designated area to check on their welfare.

The NARCAN® Behind Every Bar campaign was created by the NYC Office of Nightlife at the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment in partnership with the NYC Department of Health. This campaign has spread to other communities nationwide, including Raleigh, NC, to encourage venues to have Narcan available and staff trained on how to administer it.

LINK BETWEEN HARM REDUCTION AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION

In New York, Dance Safe NY partners with Outsmart Collective to train social venues on providing a safe space not only for harm reduction but also prevention of sexual violence. When there is a dedicated space for harm reduction (a calm-down space), patrons may also use the space to discuss incidents of sexual violence they may have experienced.

TRENDS AND CHANGING ATTITUDES ABOUT SUBSTANCES

In the U.S., the opioid overdose crisis elevated recognition of the widespread use of drugs and the need for harm reduction. The invention of Narcan was a game-changer as it shifted the narrative away from penalizing someone for drug use to saving lives. This national public health conversation has filtered into the nightlife community so that it is now fairly normalized to discuss opioid overdose prevention training in social venues. In the future, there may be a more holistic approach to keeping people safe in venues and at events.

Decriminalization of substances in states and provinces in the U.S. and Canada have become more common. Several provinces in Canada are considering legalization of certain amounts of substances e.g. up to 3 grams of cocaine for personal use.

Legalization of cannabis for recreational purposes is a critical step in setting up systems for regulation of substances with safeguards for use such as dosing information and quality controls. Legalization has reduced illegal purchasing of

cannabis. However, when taxation of substances like cannabis makes the cost untenable, there may be an unintentional return of black-market products.

The next frontier for exploration is the legal and sanctioned coexistence of both alcohol and cannabis in the same social space. While this may be allowed (in Edmonton, Canada) at EDM festivals, bars are not yet officially permitted to do that.

RESOURCES

Bristol Nights Harm Reduction: <https://www.bristolnights.co.uk/projects/harm-reduction>

Dance Safe: <https://dancesafe.org/>

Drug Policy Alliance: <https://drugpolicy.org/>

NARCAN Behind Every Bar: <https://www.nyc.gov/site/mome/nightlife/narcn-behind-every-bar.page>

Outsmart Collective: <https://dancesafe.org/>