

Public Drug Use and Homelessness Require Solutions That Work, Not Syringe Restrictions that Endanger Us All

In reaction to mounting concerns about public drug use and the congregation of unhoused people in Boston, Mayor Wu has [mandated that the City services dramatically reduce the number of syringes it can distribute](#) —a shortsighted strategy that will only further endanger the health and wellbeing of all Bostonians.

We are front-line health care workers in Boston who directly treat and support people living with the complications of injection drug use, including HIV and hepatitis C, serious injection-related infections, and overdose. We know that when people cannot access new syringes, they will not stop using drugs. Instead, they will re-use and share syringes, which will lead to surges in infections and disengagement from services that keep people safer from overdose and give them access to substance use treatment. We also know, through both our daily work and decades of research evaluating syringe service programs, that harm reduction programs provide key entry points to the very services that could profoundly mitigate the challenges of homelessness and addiction we face as a city.

High quality research has shown that syringe access [promotes the health of whole communities](#) by preventing [HIV and hepatitis C](#), without increasing [discarded syringes](#) or [neighborhood crime](#). In fact, syringe service programs have been consistently found to help people who use drugs [successfully access addiction treatment and other health services](#), broadly improving individual and public health.

Across the City's harm reduction programs, [the mobile sharps team, and disposal kiosks, the Boston Public Health Commission plays a crucial role in reducing the number of syringes discarded in the community](#), as they retrieve more syringes than they distribute. Limiting the number of syringes they provide will result in [more](#) discarded syringes on our streets, [more](#) people struggling with untreated addiction, and [more](#) HIV and hepatitis C circulating in our community.

Living on the street and using drugs outside is unsafe and undignified for anyone—unsafe for those trying to survive on the street amid shrinking services and rising public animus, and unsafe for South End and Roxbury residents who are genuinely impacted by increasing proximity to deep suffering, publicly discarded syringes, and the harmful behaviors borne of deprivation. But the Mayor's choice to pursue high-visibility enforcement initiatives, rather than effective policy, is intensifying harm for all of us.

Punishing homeless people who use drugs by withholding services and limiting their access to syringes will backfire. We must be clear that [Boston has an affordable housing crisis](#) that drives homelessness. To address homelessness and public drug use we must start by expanding services that successfully provide unhoused people with safe and dignified places to exist and thrive.

Mayor Wu has identified herself as a champion for wellness and equity, stating, “Boston is the safest major city in the United States because we are safe for everyone.” She previously supported public health-centered programs that work—like an engagement center, harm reduction shelters, supportive housing programs, and a syringe redemption program. Rather than expanding on these successful programs throughout the city, however, the Mayor has shuttered many of them and is now imposing severe limits on even the most basic life-saving services. A housing and addiction crisis coupled with a counterproductive policy response is not safe for anyone and threatens us all. Every Boston resident deserves more than a default to failed War on Drugs policies of punishment and scapegoating. We need sound, proven solutions in the face of the mounting social and economic problems we face.

“As Mayor of Boston, my job is to make our city a home for everyone,” Wu asserted at a recent congressional hearing. To live up to this pledge, Wu must recommit to making Boston a dignified home for all its inhabitants. Expanding programs that work to solve real problems—adequate syringe access, engagement centers, supportive housing programs, and more affordable housing for all—is the only way forward.

The views expressed are our own and do not necessarily reflect the views of any institution.