

A COMMUNITY REPORT

UNDERSTANDING THE NEED

FOR GENDER-RESPONSIVE HARM REDUCTION SERVICES FOR
WOMEN, TRANS AND NON-BINARY PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS (WTNB-PWUD)



UNDERSTANDING THE NEED FOR GENDER-RESPONSIVE HARM REDUCTION SERVICES FOR WOMEN, TRANS AND NON-BINARY PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS (WTNB-PWUD): A COMMUNITY REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Women, trans, and non-binary people who use drugs (WTNB-PWUD) experience considerable barriers to accessing and using harm reduction and HIV services. (1-5) Some of these gendered barriers include fear of child apprehension, instances of sexual harassment, exploitation, and other forms of gender-based violence (which include any harmful threats, actions, or policies directed toward someone based on their gender identity and/or expression; (6, 7)), and the ways that harm reduction services are often designed for, and dominated by, cis-men.(8-12) Indeed, WTNB-PWUD experience marginalization due to criminalization of drugs and a contaminated drug supply; high rates of overdose; housing, income and food insecurity; social isolation and family rupture; incarceration; and poor access to health and social services.(1, 12-24) Women, trans and non-binary people who are additionally affected by intersecting poverty, racism, colonization, mental health and/or substance use challenges are among the *most marginalized*.

There have been calls both from community and scholarly literature for the development of *gender-responsive* harm reduction services to address barriers facing WTNB-PWUD and better meet the needs of these commun-

ities.(1-5) Gender-responsive programming has been defined as programming that implements targeted strategies to address and minimize gender disparities within community settings (12, 25). For this project we view gender-responsive harm reduction services as services responsive to both gender diversity and the intersection between gender and other social and structural factors which impact woman, trans and non-binary people's ability to attain health, wellness, and social inclusion (26, 27). We recognise that WTNB-PWUD are not a single community and include a range of experiences in relation to patriarchy, the social determinants of health, and gender-based violence. We use community in this sense to recognize shared experiences related to gender, substance use, and service use. Gender-responsive services recognize that people's experiences of drug use, drug policy, and harm reduction services differ according to intersections of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class, and are shaped by broader structural factors such as poverty and colonization. Consequently, these services attend to how gender intersects with these other social and structural factors in shaping WTNB-PWUD's health outcomes, wellness, and social inclusion in the design and delivery of harm reduction programs.



Gender-responsive services should provide a safer space for WTNB-PWUD to use drugs – where they can find community connection, comfortability, and reprieve from forms of gendered violence.

This project arose from a community-identified need to create programming for WTNB-PWUD that addresses their need for supervised injection sites (SIS) and other harm reduction services in a setting that is free of stigma, gendered violence, and discrimination. SIS are spaces where people can use illicit drugs under the supervision of staff who are trained to effectively respond to overdoses and other drug-related complications. SIS also offer sterile injection equipment and access to wraparound health and social services. SIS are a necessary and life-saving part of the healthcare system, however, they are typically designed as “gender-neutral”.(1) While WTNB-PWUD utilize SIS for their life-saving services, these spaces often do not take the gendered nature of drug use into consideration when designing or providing services. Women, transgender, and non-binary people who use drugs often find that harm reduction services may not fully accommodate their unique needs. Additionally, these individuals sometimes experience uncomfortable or unsafe situations at these sites, including unwanted attention or mistreatment based on their gender. Increasing SIS access for WTNB-PWUD is particularly important at this time, given that Canada is in the midst of a nation-wide opioid drug toxicity crisis, in which nearly 50,000 people have died between Jan 2016 and June 2024.(28) Many people who use drugs, are left at the mercy of the toxic illegal drug market to access their drugs, often lacking access to sterile drug-using equipment and safe places to consume drugs, are subject to violence/harassment, feel pressure to rush injections to

avoid detection and apprehension by the criminal legal system, and lack assistance in case of overdose or other adverse reactions.(29-34)

Gender-responsive services should provide a safer space for WTNB-PWUD to use drugs – where they can find community connection, comfortability, and reprieve from forms of gendered violence. This can promote increased access to additional HIV, hepatitis C virus (HCV) and other sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections (STBBI) prevention and care, health, and social services, and thereby positions SIS as central within the healthcare continuum. While there is a growing body of literature that highlights the importance of developing WTNB-focused harm reduction services to increase access and inclusivity, to reduce overdose, HIV/HCV risk, and other drug-related harms, increase HIV/HCV testing, and expand access to HIV treatment and care, there is limited scholarly literature that explicitly addresses barriers and facilitators to SIS for WTNB-PWUD (1, 35, 36). This project begins to address this crucial knowledge gap. The overall objective of this project was to understand what key features enhance access to harm reduction services for WTNB-PWUD to promote better health outcomes and address their harm reduction, HIV prevention, and treatment cascade needs. Specifically, we wanted to examine the distinctive service needs of WTNB-PWUD and to better understand what a gender-responsive SIS model might look like based on their prior experiences of accessing SIS.



CONTEXT: WOMEN, TRANS AND NON-BINARY (WTNB) DAY AT REGENT PARK CHC

To meet our project objective, we had an opportunity to engage with service users of a unique Toronto-based gender-responsive harm reduction program. This type of gender-responsive harm reduction programming is only being offered in select locations (e.g., Vancouver, Hamilton)(37, 38). The Women, Trans and Non-binary day (WTNB Day) was a day of service held at the Regent Park Community Health Centre (RPCHC) SIS in downtown Toronto. WTNB Day was held every Thursday, wherein the SIS operated all day as a dedicated space for WTNB people. Thursday mornings also included a low barrier drop-in component with dedicated shower and laundry access from 9am-12pm. In addition to providing supervised injection services for WTNB-PWUD, additional services offered on this day included:

- **Harm reduction supplies:** Access to harm reduction resources, including drug use equipment, Naloxone, condoms, hygiene products.
- **Drop-in shower and laundry services:** staffed by women and available only to women, trans and non-binary people during these dedicated hours (9am-12pm).
- **Sex worker drop-in:** Thursday morning program which formed part of WTNB Day and offered programming and supports for women, trans and non-binary people who engage in sex work.
- **Healthcare and social work services:** a Nurse Practitioner (NP) and Social Worker provided dedicated support during WTNB Day to anyone seeking to connect.
- **Access to a drop-in chill out space:** a warm and welcoming space with food and drinks, where people could access clothing, computers, rest, connect with staff and clients, as well as a variety of activities (e.g., arts and crafts, cooking, overdose response training, workshops, and cultural programming).

There was little to no wait time to accessing WTNB Day. Additionally, no appointment was required, service users did not need a Health Card or ID, nor were there any intake or catchment requirements. A person could access these supports once or connect as many times as needed.

This service was unique in Toronto and outside of Hamilton and Vancouver, lacking in most other places in Canada. The program ran from May 2018 to March 2020. Although this program was paused due to COVID-19, this presented a key opportunity to connect with WTNB-PWUD who had used the program and those who had used other SIS in Toronto to learn more about how gender impacts access to and use of these spaces and what makes a gender-responsive harm reduction program work well for service users.





METHODS

Thirty-five semi-structured interviews with WTNB-PWUD were conducted between January 2023 and February 2024. Recruitment occurred via posters at RPCHC and several other SIS in Toronto. SIS staff let potential participants know that the study was occurring, and snowball sampling was also used to assist with recruitment. Eligibility criteria included:

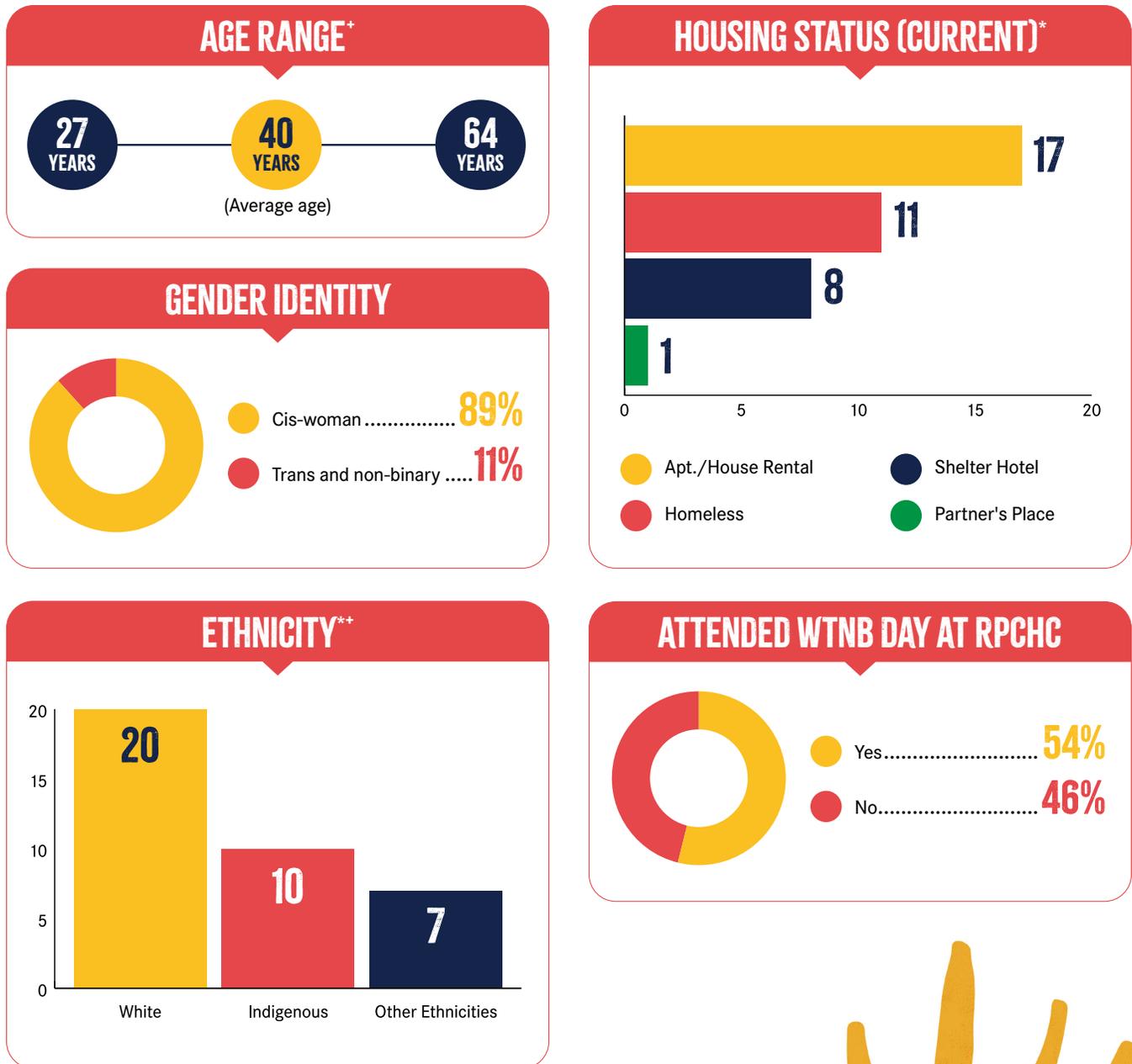
- 1) identifying as a woman, trans, or non-binary person;
- 2) being 16 years old or older;
- 3) having used WTNB Day at RPCHC SIS or any other SIS in Toronto (including at a shelter hotel) in the last two years.

Interviews were conducted by one of two research assistants with lived experience. Verbal consent was obtained and documented prior to each interview. Interviews primarily occurred in-person, unless a virtual interview was requested by the participant, and participants received \$60 honoraria.

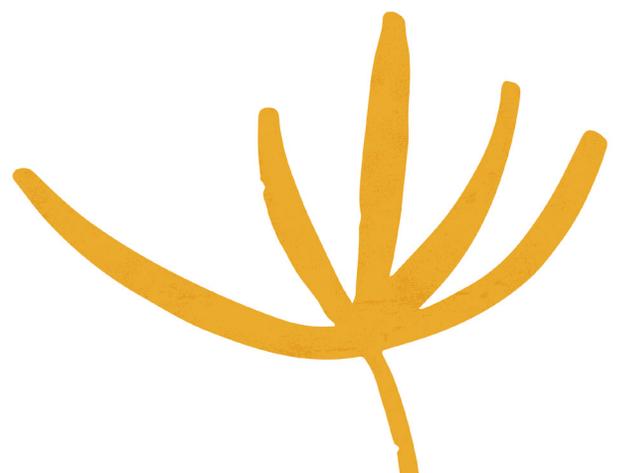
Interviews focused on participant's experiences using WTNB Day at RPCHC and/or other non-gender specific SIS. Participants were asked about how well these different services worked for them, any problems or concerns they had accessing these services, and any perceived benefits or potential challenges associated with gender-responsive services. Our goal was to explore what aspects of these services had positive impacts for WTNB-PWUD, and what could be improved to address their harm reduction, HIV prevention, and treatment needs. Overall, we wanted to better understand the key features that make a gender-responsive SIS work well, the qualities that enhance access to SIS for WTNB-PWUD, and the implications of a setting that is free of stigma and discrimination for people's health and well-being. Each participant filled out a short socio-demographic questionnaire. Participant characteristics are reported in Figure 1. We also interviewed 10 service providers; however, this report focuses on what we heard from service users.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. We employed collaborative data analysis techniques (39, 40), engaging research team members, including those with lived experience of substance use throughout the process. We used a thematic analysis approach (41, 42). Qualitative data was coded and analyzed using NVivo 14 analysis software. The core team met to develop a codebook and to jointly code several transcripts. We then reviewed all coded excerpts and developed the four key themes presented starting on page 9.

FIGURE 1: PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS (N=35)



*Participants could report multiple ethnicities and housing arrangements
 + Some participants did not provide an answer





RESULTS

Most participants saw the value in having a space that addressed the specific needs of WTNB-PWUD and created a social, welcoming, and safe environment for these groups. Specifically, four main features of what a gender-responsive SIS should include stood out based on the experiences of the service users we spoke to:

GENDER-RESPONSIVE SIS SHOULD:

1. Provide social and community connection with other women, trans and non-binary people;
2. Create a calm, caring, comfortable, and welcoming space;
3. Offer connection to services and supports that respond to gendered needs;
4. Establish a safer space for WTNB-PWUD that reduces exposure to gender-based violence.

We will describe each of these features in turn and provide some example quotations from service users to illustrate why these features are particularly crucial for a gender-responsive SIS.

1. PROVIDE SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY CONNECTION WITH OTHER WOMEN, TRANS AND NON-BINARY PEOPLE

People who use drugs have long relied on discreetly sharing their experiences to support each other in avoiding danger and seeking safety. Many study participants described initially discovering WTNB Day through word of mouth from trusted peers, who had vetted the program for themselves. One participant disclosed the following about her first time accessing WTNB Day:

“One of... my friends... brought me here the very first time... ‘Cause I was overdosing in stairwells, quite on the regular. And I was scared for my life.”

[SERVICE USER 17]

Another participant had a similar experience first accessing SIS:

“I was introduced to every separate place [SIS] by a friend. And then, if I went back to a certain place, it was because I felt safe there. I liked the type of people that showed up there. And, yeah... that’s pretty much how simple it gets for me.”

[SERVICE USER 34]

Social belonging is a key determinant of health and is well-known to have a significant impact on individuals’ health outcomes. Many participants described WTNB Day as a space that felt like home. The words “home” and “family” were used by a majority of participants to describe the sense of belonging that was felt in this space. This language is especially poignant when used by individuals who disproportionately face social isolation, familial rupture and have lived or living experience of homelessness. When discussing the benefits of WTNB Day, one participant stated that one of the main benefits was:

“Definitely, like, a sense of community. Just an anchor, like a place to go so that you’re not just kind of like, aimless, when you’re homeless in the city. Like just having an anchor is a big thing.”

[SERVICE USER 13]

The supportive relationships that service users built with SIS staff were repeatedly identified as deeply significant in creating a sense of belonging. A participant, when speaking about trusted SIS staff, stated that: “They give a shit. They’re like your mum and dad. You know? They care” [service user 12]. Another participant who described WTNB Day as feeling “like a little family”, specifically outlined that it was deeply significant to her that staff with lived experience who had formerly used substances with her went on to work at the program and described them as ‘mentors’ [service user 22]. Staff with lived or living experience who were open about their own stories of drug use, sex work, and homelessness helped to foster a sense of social belonging for participants, as they felt they could relate to and connect with these staff in a more genuine manner. This was a common sentiment shared among many of the participants, such as one individual who stated that:

“For me, it’s more of - like a community. A community that you understand and they understand you. And... having more peer support workers.... Lived experience. Because if you don’t have somebody who... [has] lived experience, they don’t know what you’ve been through. So, you don’t have that... connection, right? You don’t want to talk about things, like, that they may think is like ‘Oh my god. She did that for that?’.”

[SERVICE USER 7]



WTNB Day was often described as a space where the service users developed a sense of community and rapport with each other, as well as with the staff. Having somewhere to go to meet one's social needs was one of the most common reasons provided for why participants frequented SIS in general, secondary to life-saving protection from overdose. WTNB Day helped some service users to develop their social skills. For example, one participant who spoke of how they were “a very quiet person” and that they learned how to be “more outgoing” by accessing the program [service user 3].

Service users reported that WTNB Day allowed for bonds to be built between the ‘regulars’, and that these bonds contributed to their sense of increased safety and social connection:

“Honestly to connect with more women. Women don't seem to connect with each other much anymore and they need to bond and make connections and friendships cause women need that.” [SERVICE USER 35]

“The social aspect was one of the biggest things. Like, you know, hearing people's stories, talking to different people, yeah, there was, everybody there was completely different from one another, but we all had some common ground. We all had, we all could relate in some way to each other, so.” [SERVICE USER 34]

A common theme of seeking community resonated throughout the interviews. WTNB participants all expressed difficulty in finding opportunities to build friendships and a lack of supportive relationships in their lives. While searching for friendship and social connection, participants found that cis-men often sought sexual intimacy or emotional support from them, and this impacted the depth and nature of their relationships with them. The desire for more social support and connection with their peers was common across these gender identities. One participant who engaged in sex work specifically made reference to preferring to be around women and struggling to build the sense of community that she desired to have with other sex workers. Another participant remarked:

“I'd want to go there, just to make female friends. Just cause, I like women... Cause right now I'm not hanging out with any of my real friends. Cause I'm embarrassed that, like, oh, that I relapsed and stuff. But usually, I'm always surrounded by women. All my friends are women.” [SERVICE USER 15]

A third participant said that:

“When I went to those days where it was only women, and like, trans women, there was no fighting. There was no cat fighting. There was no, there was no tension. It was just, you do your drugs. You're calm. You talk. You chitchat, and that's that.” [SERVICE USER 7]

Being reunited with many of the same community members on a weekly basis at WTNB Day meant that many service users looked forward to seeing each other regularly and reported that they used it as an opportunity to engage in ongoing check-ins with each other about relationships with men, pregnancy, abuse, violence, and similar topics that were difficult to discuss in other spaces. It also allowed for the sharing of information about what resources in the community were trustworthy. This information-sharing carries tremendous weight in communities that have experienced significant marginalization, and is a very important mechanism in how service users make choices about who to trust with vulnerable aspects of their health and their lives:

“It was great. You know, it was so nice that people began to really trust each other, open up... Great resources were, you know, spread around. We could talk, ‘Oh, don’t go to that place. That person’s great. That bathroom’s nice.’ da, da, da. Yeah. ‘This hospital’s no good.’ Right? So, it was pretty much word of mouth there, right?” [SERVICE USER 18]

When WTNB Day closed, the impact many participants identified was that of increased social isolation. Many mentioned that the loss of a welcoming space to be social with other WTNB people led to feelings of loneliness, fear, greater depression, and an increase in using substances alone. When describing her experience of the end of WTNB Day program, one participant stated that:

“[When WTNB Day closed], it was shitty, ‘cause I felt alone... And I didn’t feel like I had the same, that I could just walk up to people and talk. I wasn’t as social anymore as... when I started. Yeah. And then I started isolating myself.” [SERVICE USER 17]

The sense of community and belonging that WTNB Day had fostered among service users resonated with many participants when they described the aftermath of losing this resource. While most did still access other SIS programs (most often the SIS program at RPCHC) after the closure, they frequently mentioned missing the supportive social connections that they had developed with other women, trans, and non-binary people at WTNB Day

Those who did not have trusting relationships with other SIS programs felt this impact the most. However, participants spoke about how some of the social bonds formed directly as a result of sharing space during WTNB Day’s operation created lasting relationships of support that continued to be important in their lives. One participant outlined her experience as follows:

“You’re so used to that, every week, and then, all of a sudden, it’s taken away, right?... You miss the communication, miss that bond with people, right? It’s like, you know how it is when you have close friends at school, you’re so tight, and then, all of a sudden you go your own way. It’s the end of school, and wow, you don’t see them. It’s a big change, isn’t it? ...at the beginning, you miss them a lot and as time goes, each one takes their own direction. Right? And you happen to bump into them again – it’s kind of cool, eh? It is. And then, you know what I found? When you bump into them, it could be five, ten years, whatever, and you see them, it’s like you never were separated, eh?” [SERVICE USER 18]

2. CREATE A CALM, CARING, COMFORTABLE, AND WELCOMING SPACE

Participants shared with us how important it was to create a space that was calm, caring, comfortable and welcoming in order to effectively support WTNB-PWUD and provide services in a manner which was helpful for these communities. Creating such a suitable space entailed a variety of design, personnel, policy and practice features all working simultaneously. Some participants discussed how design elements like dim lighting, soft music, and comfortable furniture were used to create a calm and easy atmosphere for service users attending WTNB Day. As one participant stated *“the space is cozy and darkened and nice”* [service user 28]. Another participant concurred explaining that WTNB Day was *“very welcoming, relaxed. Sometimes, there'd be music playing. There's no drama... I actually feel like, really safe here”* and went on to say that *“It's just, it's great, all those little things, and very comfortable chairs and couches, and even in the injection room, like, it's very comfortable”* [service user 23]. This was contrasted with the atmosphere at other SIS where *“[they're] gonna blare, fucking loud ass metal music, whether you like it or not”* [service user 1]. Taking these careful considerations to designing the space was appreciated by those who used WTNB Day.

Another aspect of creating a calm and welcoming space was ensuring the service users did not feel rushed or overly surveilled. When participants described their experiences at other SIS there was an element of haste:

“And then, you get in, all of a sudden, they're rushing you, rushing you, rushing you. [...] And it's like, I'm trying to go as quick as I can. But I can't go any faster and you can't expect for me to go at your pace.” [SERVICE USER 20]

“Some of them, they rush you in the routine; they make you feel like you're walking on pins and needles.” [SERVICE USER 25]

Feeling rushed heightened anxiety for participants and has been previously linked to risky injection practices. Moreover, in our discussions, participants shared that this rushed environment created stress and made them feel unwelcome in a space. WTNB Day participants expressed appreciation for the relaxed atmosphere that allowed them to engage with activities and programming at their own pace. Importantly, WTNB Day was set up as a drop-in where service users could stay and use as many or as few services as they wanted. In fact, the atmosphere was so relaxed that some participants described being able to sleep in the space during WTNB Day and find respite from the outdoors [please see a more full discussion of this in theme #4]. Participants also felt like they had enough privacy during WTNB Day, with one service user saying *“And, it doesn't feel like anybody's watching us, or you know, taking a peek at what we're doing. They're just doing their own thing, and just, that's it, you know?”* [service user 23].

Providing food and drinks was another crucial way that WTNB Day created a warm, caring and inviting environment for service users. As will be discussed further in theme #3, WTNB Day provided service users with a wide variety of fresh fruit, hot meals, snacks, and beverages:

“And they always have really good food; they have, like, they bring in, like, a lot of food. Like, delicious, home cooked style food. And they always have like, you know, a hot beverage, like coffee, tea, and an actual fridge with real milk. (laugh) You know?”

[SERVICE USER 23]

Participants view SIS as an important source of food, especially for those dealing with homelessness and food insecurity. However, it was the level of choice offered at WTNB Day that truly made participants feel seen and cared for:

“There was coffee for folks. I understand that coffee costs money but it's not that expensive... just having something for folks that's warm and then also having juice and snacks is like, it's pretty incredible cause the site where I work, we don't necessarily have it. We almost never have any kind of drinkable liquid aside from water. And it's like, yeah. It's, I think it's important because lots of people haven't eaten in a long time.”

[SERVICE USER 28]

Clients of WTNB discussed that sharing a warm beverage with another service user, a staff member or even a clinician was important for creating social connection and allowed the space to feel less clinical.

Activities provided as part of WTNB Day were also a significant reason for the environment feeling warm, fun, and engaging rather than clinical. Participants, shared memories of Indigenous programming at WTNB Day fondly, and remembered the importance of coming together with other WTNB people who use drugs to do beading, make drums, and engage in other cultural programming in the spirit of cultural safety. This was especially true for the Indigenous participants, but also for settlers, who appreciated being able to learn about Indigenous cultures. Participants also shared memories of learning to cook meals from various cultures together, creating art and coloring together, and learning to make tie-dye clothing. All these activities were described as something that created a sense of community for the people who use drugs who participated adding to the development of kinship described in theme #1.

Being attuned to the fact that when it comes to “the gender and sexuality thing... certain people can be very judgemental” [service user 34] it was critical to ensure that WTNB Day felt inviting and welcoming to all women and no matter what state they came in. As one participant stated: “It doesn't matter what colour you are, what sexuality or where you come from; we all have our vices.” [service user 19]. Another participant expanded on this saying: “[Thursday] would be women's day in the SIS. So only women could come through, do their shots, have some space. Like, only women would be around, so battered women, traumatized women, hungry women, would come in” [service user 6]. This participant went on to explain that some of these women would come in just to go to sleep on a mat on the floor because that was where they were at, and that was ok. Other participants mentioned that pregnant or parenting women would come into the space and staff would approach them in a non-judgmental and caring manner. Indeed, staff played a huge role in helping WTNB service users feel welcome and cared for:

“Just, the people. The people made me feel comfortable. And I can't think of one reason why I would have felt unsafe or uncomfortable there. They were very welcoming. You know, they tended to every need that I had. And yeah, everyone there was very nice, and very reassuring.” [SERVICE USER 34]

The staff at WTNB Day also made a significant difference in creating a comfortable and welcoming environment. For some this occurred due to long-standing familiarity with staff, while for others it was because staff were particularly well-suited and/or selected to providing support in this environment. For instance, one participant explained “Whoever did the hiring process, chose the right people for this setting [WTNB Day], because, no matter what, no matter what the person looks like or what they, how they decide to live, people, the staff are always welcoming everybody, like, and treat everybody equally. And it's like, it seems like a family. That's what I like about that.” [service user 23]

Participants discussed the connection between feeling welcome and a lack of judgment and discrimination. For instance, one participant explained: *“Because here, it’s more open. And then, when I came in here for the first time, I was like, ‘Oh my god. They’re more welcoming here. And they’re not like, they just, they looked at us like we’re human, and we’re not just addicts”* [service user 7]. The environment fostered by staff and service users at WTNB Day served as a very welcome respite from the difficulties of trying to form supportive relationships while street-involved and fighting for survival. It allowed for breathing room away from the negativity that many WTNB people who use drugs experienced from their peers outside of the space. One participant described WTNB Day as a welcoming program specifically because:

“There’s no judgement and yeah, everybody was on the same page. You know? We’re all friends; we all loved each other, and it was great. It was very warm, trusting. You know that what says, what happens here, stays there, right? Yeah. Privacy, it doesn’t get, you know, no gossip. No, you know, no bullshit to it, right? It was great, yeah.”

[SERVICE USER 18]

Clients’ connection to WTNB Day also was connected to the representation of staff. WTNB Day staff included individuals who identified across the gender spectrum and many had lived/living experience of substance use. As one participant explained the importance of having representation among staff at SIS: *“The staff are all mixed... Some are white; some are Black. Some are like, Asian; some are Native. Some are straight; some are openly, like, lesbians; some are openly gay. Some are, some just say ‘Oh, my partner - ’ for like, non-binary”* [service user 22]. Indeed, representation in staff was an important part of what made WTNB Day feel like a safe and comfortable space for service users, as another participant explained: *“I don’t know if it’s because it’s women that are working there that I feel comfortable. I think that’s going to be it. That’s gonna be my answer is just that they were all women working there”* [service user 27]. Some WTNB Day staff would share their stories of lived experience, which helped to build rapport with clients: *“So, the fact that people were sharing their stories, really opened everybody up, right, to a non judgement zone, cause I mean we all sin, just differently”* [service user 31].



3. OFFER CONNECTION TO SERVICES AND SUPPORTS THAT RESPOND TO GENDERED NEEDS

The WTNB Day provided supervised injection services specifically for WTNB-PWUD. Members from these communities attended the program as it provided them with a space where they could use their drugs without the risks they faced when using drugs alone or in public spaces (e.g., risk of overdose, risk of HIV and other STB-BIs from using shared equipment, risk of violence, risk of harassment or apprehension by police). It also provided them refuge from the stresses many felt in using a 'gender neutral' SIS (e.g., various forms of gender-based violence). Moreover, as described earlier, WTNB Day at the Regent Park SIS incorporated several accessible, low barrier wraparound services and supports that aimed to respond to the gendered needs of women, trans and non-binary community members who use drugs. Participants confirmed that wraparound supports made the space more desirable to access, with particular mention of the importance of practical supports, such as shower and laundry services, warm drinks, food, hygiene products, harm reduction supplies, Naloxone, clothing and toiletries. These supplies and supports encouraged people to attend, made them feel welcome, and were seen as essential resources:

“... there used to always be like, fresh fruit and cereal and stuff like that, that, we would be able to eat. You know, so, I mean, the fresh fruit and stuff, that was always nice. Yeah. And just like, food to eat.” [SERVICE USER 2]

“The fact that you guys have snacks and other supplies in stock. You know, especially like tampons and pads and stuff like that, and like, that can be really useful if you're on a surprise period week, which is generally how they come. 'Surprise'.” [SERVICE USER 28]

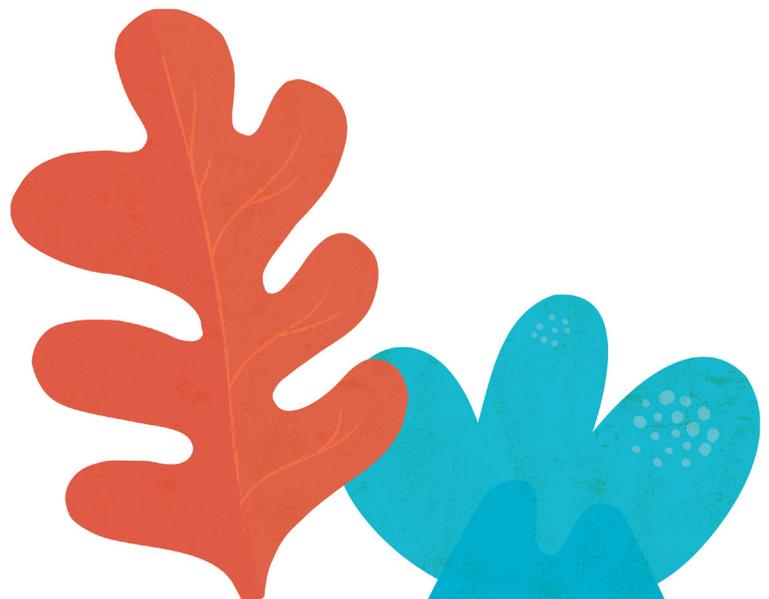
Participants spoke of the importance of having access to various supports at one time and in one place, and the integration of these supports with the supervised injection site:

“Wonderful. The foot doctor, the dentists, the normal healthcare provider, the housing worker, right? Harm reduction supplies, everything. Any questions about harm reduction. Ah, let's see: shower, laundry. It was wonderful. People would put in their laundry, and then, come in our place, have breakfast, chat, right? See the doctor, come back down – yeah. It was, everything was all so convenient, all in one, right? That's amazing, because you know how a lot of people do not like, ah, especially drug users, right? They don't, then you're not comfortable going to a doctor, right?”

[SERVICE USER 18]

“Everything I've ever needed was always in this building. And that's why I didn't leave it. Like, the nurses have been to hell and back with me, upstairs... And the workers here, at the injection site, like, I've gotten to know all them. Like, they're like family to me. You know what I mean? And it's like, I've, I don't know, ever time I've come here, it was always, like, I've never felt unwanted.”

[SERVICE USER 3]



Participants also shared that access to stigma free, low barrier healthcare was a tremendous benefit on WTNB Day. For WTNB-PWUD, accessing healthcare can be stressful and difficult, often due to multiple barriers and negative experiences in other healthcare and social service environments that have included instances of discrimination and stigma. During WTNB Day, community members could access healthcare on their terms, without an appointment. In addition, participants felt more comfortable with the NP as she interacted with them over coffee or in the drop-in space. Some also highlighted that this informal, less clinical approach made participants feel more comfortable to access care, as discussed in theme #2. The lack of catchment and intake requirement was also seen as a benefit, particularly as people experiencing homelessness and other barriers may be moving around. In some cases, this more accessible healthcare option made it possible for community members to avoid accessing healthcare in a hospital, an experience that was described as negative.

Several participants reported that they also made a connection to additional services, such as safer supply, dental care, social work, chiropody and Hepatitis C programs, through WTNB Day:

“Yeah, they just have, like, they have, some medical, ah, assistance upstairs, meetings, like for Hep C, they've had meetings here before, which I've attended when I had Hep C. I caught it early, so and then I was given the opportunity to take the medication which I did avidly, every day, three times a day. Um, um, and sometimes, I'd meet... nurse practitioner, who helped me, and..., it was a great, like, group. There would be vegetables, and... of course, you need chocolate.” [SERVICE USER 23]

“I was here for the doctors. That's my nurse. And then, I was here for a social worker. I've spoken with a social worker, which I want to get in contact with again.” [SERVICE USER 3]

Participants also reported that they had the opportunity to engage with specific health information that was relevant to them in a safe and comfortable space:

“And then, certain days, we would have, if anybody wanted information on you know, anything about HIV, anything like that, pregnancies, information about naloxone – we'd have specific speakers, but very private.” [SERVICE USER 18]

The sense of social belonging that participants felt translated to feeling more comfortable in engaging with these workshops, getting out of their comfort zones and asking more vulnerable questions about HIV and Hepatitis C prevention and care. This space allowed for women, trans and non-binary people to connect with one another and to ask questions and seek support about health issues and topics that mattered to them and that they otherwise struggled to discuss. *“And the fact that it's on a regular day is good too, so people don't get confused what day it is. I mean... like it makes it more comfortable to ask for other services, during that period, cause you might not, like, if something is going on anywhere underneath your clothing, is like, it just, like, that's kind of your shot, that's kind of the time to talk about it, kind of thing”* [service user 28].

The intersections of pregnancy, parenting, and drug use are particularly fraught, with stigma and shame serving to isolate pregnant and parenting people from support and community. Unsurprisingly, participants in the study expressed strong opinions around sheltering children from substance use, and these opinions shape the experiences of their peers who continue to use drugs when pregnancy or parenting becomes an aspect of their lives. There was a general sense of welcoming pregnant people and wanting to contribute to a sense of safety for them. WTNB Day also aimed to provide accessible health care and access to appropriate resources, health information and supports for WTNB-PWUD who were pregnant and or parenting. When asked if WTNB Day felt like a safe place for community members who are pregnant and or parenting many participants agreed that this was the case, often citing that *“they have resources for that as well. And upstairs they have the nurse, and stuff like that”* [service user 33]. Several of the participants who accessed WTNB Day experienced pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting at the time when they used this program. Participants stated that they felt safe and supported by the service and found the non-judgemental care which they received helpful in avoiding isolation. Some participants expressed that they felt *“very safe”* to be pregnant and using the space on WTNB Day, and saw an additional benefit of having medical providers checking in weekly:

▼▼ *Cause the doctors would come down and go 'Oh, you're doing so great.' Yeah. You know?... 'How do you feel? Do you still have your morning sickness? You know what? Are you still on those vitamins?' Yeah. 'No, I've been vomiting.' blah, blah, blah. 'Well, you know what? Maybe let's change it to this.' Just amazing, yeah.* ▼▼ [SERVICE USER 18]

Participants also reported feeling free and safe to access the SIS and were provided with support from staff on this day without fear of judgment.

Ultimately, community members who engaged in the study shared that WTNB Day provided a space to gain connection to various supports and resources that responded to gendered needs. We heard from participants that having accessible, low barrier and high-quality services available all in one place dedicated to the specific needs of women, trans and non-binary people encouraged participants to return frequently and to utilize services more often.



4. ESTABLISH A SAFER SPACE FOR WTNB-PWUD THAT REDUCES EXPOSURE TO GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Another important feature of a gender-responsive SIS that was key in our discussions with individuals who had previously accessed WTNB Day was that the space provided safety distinct from their experiences in other SIS. WTNB Day offered reprieve from forms of gendered violence pervasive in the daily lives of WTNB-PWUD. WTNB Day was experienced as a safer space in that people could have separation from cis-men, particularly important for people in abusive relationships; however, as we discuss below the space did not offer reprieve from abusive relationships with other WTNB people. The gender-responsive SIS also had important implications for WTNB-PWUD's safety, as they could share information about how to be safer without men listening, consistent with other studies on gender-specific drug consumption sites. (11) In many of our conversations, WTNB-PWUD reported feeling safe and relaxed at WTNB Day allowing them to let their guard down and even sleep, things that were often not possible in other SIS.

Participants reported that an SIS environment without cis-men made them feel safer, more secure, and more comfortable. Many participants expressed that the absence of cis-men was a crucial component to their safety, and distinctly different from their experiences in other settings. The majority of people we spoke to reported feeling safe at WTNB Day because they did not have to worry about unwanted male advances, harassment, and violence. A gender-responsive service meant that WTNB people were able to use drugs and have access to overdose response in an environment where risk of sexual harassment and assault was significantly reduced. This was most simply put by one participant, who stated: *"I'm not worried about anyone"* [service user 3]. Another participant reflected on why accessing the space on WTNB Day felt safe for them *"because then people weren't following me around... watching me. And, it just made me feel safe mostly"* [service user 35]. A subsequent participant expressed a similar sentiment, noting that the violence and harassment they were accustomed to from cis-men was absent in the space, which meant that they could express themselves freely and without worry:

▼ I felt safe at that, that place. Like, I knew that, you know, no one was going to, number one, for a female to be able to go around, and to be on a substance and not be, have to worry about any man sexually harassing you or abusing you or pushing up on you – you felt safe, right? You knew that nothing, you could be yourself, and nothing was gonna happen. Didn't matter what you wore, or anything like that, cause you were around all females, right? So, it was nice... Even here [at RPCHC], like a sixty-four-year-old trying to rub up on me yesterday, in the elevator. Like, 'Go away'.▼

[SERVICE USER 11]

As the above quote demonstrates, the absence of cis-men in the space both increased WTNB's sense of safety and reduced exposure to gender-based violence. WTNB Day also offered a space where WTNB-PWUD could have separation from abusive male partners, and from other men they did not want to engage with (e.g., pimps, johns, dealers). As one woman shared, *"maybe you don't want to meet up with a man that you've seen, and then, you have, like, this big fight or something"* [service user 7]. In terms of safety, WTNB Day was seen as important for women engaged in sex work, especially those involved in survival sex work as, one participant explained, *"You know, sometimes you want to get away from people who are clients"* [service user 28]. Another participant discussed how WTNB Day was important for her safety in her experience as a sex worker, as she did not have to worry about being solicited while accessing SIS or worry about someone taking advantage of her:

▼▼ I work, right? I do like, street work. A lot of the times, you come in these sites, and guys are like, talking to you, asking you, like, trying to hit you up. And it's like, I just did that. I was just out on the street, working, to make this, to get my stuff. And now you're trying to come in here and ask me to do something like that again? I'm here to forget about that, and you're pushing it on me, trying to say 'Hey, I can, I'll give you this if you wanna come meet me in the back.' And it's like 'No.' ... And without that protection, you feel like you're getting taken advantage of. ... So, I like that in the sites, especially like I said, this site, other sites, when they have the days where it's just you, like, just women or like, trans people, and they don't have to worry about someone coming and taking advantage of them.▼▼

[SERVICE USER 20]

Many individuals spoke about the importance of a gender-responsive SIS for women who were in abusive relationships: *"You know, a lot of women don't feel safe with men around. I know I was in an abusive relationship so you can like, use without your abuser around. You know? And stuff like that"* [service user 29]. WTNB Day offered support for individuals navigating trauma from past or present abusive relationships. The day created an opportunity for WTNB-PWUD to both have some separation from their abuser, but also to seek support around these relationships, which can be extremely difficult to get out of when there is a lack of reprieve. One woman shared how attending WTNB Day gave her time away from her abusive boyfriend and ultimately played a vital role in helping her leave the abusive relationship:

▼▼ I was with my ex. And we were together for years, and he used to get a little pissed off he couldn't come in [to the SIS on WTNB Day]. But it didn't matter, because once I had done... one of the [WTNB programming] groups, like, without him, I found a sense of, I didn't have to have just take [it]- cause it was abusive, right? So, I didn't, it helped me, because everyone knew my situation eventually.... they helped me kind of, with different thoughts of like, helped me with learning what kind of relationship I was really in. So, I'm not even going to lie - like, just that whole centre, I guess, helped me actually get out of a really bad relationship.▼▼

[SERVICE USER 3]

However, this space and time away from abusive partners was not possible for those whose partners identified as WTNB persons. Alternative safety plans are needed in these cases to fully support WTNB.

Many WTNB-PWUD described how WTNB Day offered reprieve from a sense of hypervigilance present in their daily lives due to experiences of gender-based violence in a variety of spaces. Safety was experienced by some through the ability to rest or sleep comfortably, as one participant noted, "they'd put mats out, so if you wanted to take a nap, you could do so very safely" [service user 2] while another woman expressed feeling safe at WTNB Day because "we were able to sleep on the floor" [service user 8] reflecting a sense of security in the environment. This ability to sleep safely was crucial as many participants revealed that they often skipped sleep due to safety concerns in other spaces. This was especially true for the participants who were experiencing homelessness. One woman explained the dangers women face when falling asleep in spaces without protection:

▼▼ ...outside, by myself... Like, and then, there's obviously, the, the worries, I guess, of like, falling asleep; someone taking your things or even worse, someone coming up and doing [something to you], while you're sleeping. Which has happened to me – when I was pregnant and not pregnant.▼▼

[SERVICE USER 4]



The feeling that it was safe enough to sleep in the space or doze off when needed was described as distinct from other SIS where you needed to "have that guard up":

▼▼ Just like, knowing there aren't males present, just like you're less likely, way less likely to be assaulted. It doesn't go down to nothing, but it's like, you know, way less likely and just like, sort of as a female presenting folk, person, you know you have to have that guard up first and then decide whether or not to let your guard down. And it's pretty like, it's, just kind of easier just to have your guard go down sooner, kind of right away, knowing that this is what's happening in the space right now. And it's just like ... yeah, you're high and maybe you want to doze off, but you don't feel a hundred percent comfortable doing that [in gender-neutral SIS]. And it was just like, you know, just definitely more comfortable of a space. Like, I didn't fall asleep or doze off but I felt like I could have, if that's what I needed to do... Just less worrisome that your stuff's gonna get lost, and stuff like that.▼▼ [SERVICE USER 28]

WTNB Day was understood as a safer space by participants due to not only the absence of cis-men, but the presence of other WTNB persons. People felt it was a safer space to express themselves and that they could be more open about their gender identity and sexuality without facing stigma and discrimination:

▼▼ It's just the fact that there was other women there that I can speak to. And not have the feeling that there are men there, just honing in on conversations or anything. I felt like I could be a little more [open] about just, like, my sexuality and my own gender.▼▼ [SERVICE USERS 34]

Dedicated time to spend with other WTNB-PWUD meant that people accessing the site could, on a regular basis, share information that was important for their safety. WTNB could share information with one another about bad dates, sexual assaults, and different locations in the city that were safe for them. This sense of safety impacted clients' willingness to engage in conversations that they might not feel comfortable having in other SIS. While explaining why one participant said that she would prefer to access a gender-responsive SIS, like WTNB Day, over a SIS that is also open to cis-men, she stated that:

▼▼ *With the women, it's just easier, because then you guys can talk about, you know, like, what's been going around, who to stay away from, how to be safer, without men listening. And to me, that's just, it's a safety issue.* ▼▼ [SERVICE USER 7]

Many participants expressed that the very nature of being in a space devoid of cis-men opened up the possibility of different types of conversations, and directly contributed to being able to let one's defenses down enough to be more vulnerable. For instance, one participant reported that:

▼▼ *I'd be more comfortable just talking to, not only the staff but other people, like other clients there, if there were no men, because I wouldn't be as guarded about what topics I could bring up.* ▼▼ [SERVICE USER 13]

The same practices of word-of-mouth knowledge-sharing among WTNB-PWUD that brought many service users to WTNB Day in the first place were also practiced to help their peers protect themselves from violence.

Overall, there was a consensus that having access to a gender-responsive SIS, like WTNB Day, meant that WTNB-PWUD could find reprieve from types of gendered violence, harassment, and abuse that are often pervasive in their day-to-day lives. Participants generally felt safe at WTNB Day. This sense of safety was expressed by participants in their ability to relax and ease up in the space.

When asked why they felt safe at WTNB Day, another participant responded: *"I don't know. Maybe just because it was just all women. Sometimes men really creep me out. I don't know. Not all men, just some men"* [service user 27]. While many participants described having care and positive regard for cis-men in their lives, there was a general sense of tension and friction that it was necessary to find some respite from. One participant alluded to this tension by stating: *"When it comes to this environment, I just, I find [men] just... there's always still like, bravado. It's like, 'God, drop it.'... Our generation is almost gone, like, (laugh) you know? Can we just be friends?"* [service user 14]. Overall, there was a general sense that the reprieve from male-dominated spaces created a felt sense of safety shared by many participants.





DISCUSSION

The research study helps to elucidate the ways in which one program model worked to deliver a gender responsive approach to SIS in the downtown east end of Toronto. Overall, we heard from study participants that spaces such as WTNB Day can foster a unique sense of social connection, comfort, access to care and safety. The care includes the many benefits of access to SIS but extends to the cultivation of community, belonging and to building meaningful rapport with staff and service users. In addition, participants confirmed the importance of WTNB Day as a reprieve from the various forms of gender-based violence often experienced by this community.

Study participants who used WTNB Day highlighted that it was *all* of the elements outlined in the report, in combination, that led to the space feeling safe for them. Many PWUD, especially WTNB-PWUD, are accustomed to engaging in substance use in secrecy. As such, any harm reduction service must feel more comfortable and safer than continuing to use substances alone in order for it to be more desirable and worth the effort and the vulnerability involved in accessing it. We heard that relationships in gender-responsive service provision are crucial. It was relationships with other service users and staff that made

people feel safe and comfortable, and helped to facilitate access to other services at WTNB Day. Building these relationships takes time, and service design, as well as staff composition, must account for this in any model. The study also confirms the importance of low-barrier approaches. This accessible model, with various services available in one place at one time, and paired with SIS dedicated to WTNB people, allowed for people to engage on their terms with supports that met their unique needs. It should also be noted that while programs may be designed to be low-barrier, one of the most significant indicators of accessibility is the fostering of the intuitive sense of safety for WTNB-PWUD during their first interaction with the program - and in every interaction after that. The factors that help to create this sense of safety are sometimes minimized in program delivery, but the importance of this cannot be overstated. In addition, practical supports are often undervalued or overlooked in program design and delivery but were highlighted as very important to service users engaged in this research. Practical supports will vary depending on the needs of a specific community and context but can include support with transportation and food insecurity issues, access to clean clothes, winter supplies, hygiene products and snacks.



The creation of any new programming must be done collaboratively between WTNB-PWUD and staff to best meet the needs of each community in a given setting.

While the study did not include large numbers of pregnant and parenting PWUD, we heard about the importance of safety, community and low-barrier access for this population. The study also emphasizes the importance of engaging more with this community to better understand which models and approaches to harm reduction services, SIS and health care access are most effective. This includes the critical need to expand pregnancy and parenting resources within existing spaces.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of collaborative program development and design. WTNB Day offers valuable insights into components that may enhance safety and access for WTNB-PWUD in other settings. However, not all of the elements will be applicable in every context. The creation of any new programming must be done collaboratively between WTNB-PWUD and staff to best meet the needs of each community in a given setting. This collaboration must include meaningful, ongoing feedback from service users to create a space which produces the intuitive sense of safety highlighted by study participants.

As of the time of writing this community report, ten supervised injection sites across Ontario are set to close in March 2025. One of these sites, Regent Park CHC SIS, piloted the WTNB Day. Through this research project, service users have shared their stories, highlighting the profound impact that this and other SIS have had on their lives, as well as the lives of their friends and loved ones. The closure of these sites represents a tremendous loss to the community. We hope that the insights shared through this research will inform future service models and contribute to advocacy for the continuation of vital harm reduction and other programs and services that the community has called for.



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