

Safe injection sites for drug addicts 'a form of euthanasia,' priest says

PHILADELPHIA (CNS) – Safe injection sites are “a form of euthanasia,” according to a Philadelphia priest who has spent almost 50 years ministering to those suffering from addiction.

Officials are seeking to make Philadelphia the first U.S. city to open a safe injection site, modeled after a facility that has operated in Vancouver, British Columbia, since 2003.

But Father Douglas McKay, founder and chaplain of Our House Ministries, said that plan is “a way of killing those with addiction, a way of doping them up and ‘protecting’ ourselves from them.”

Located in Philadelphia’s Grays Ferry section – a neighborhood long ravaged by drug and alcohol addiction – Our House Ministries provides recovery homes, conducts numerous group recovery meetings each week and offers intensive spiritual support for those seeking sobriety.

Our House also hosts a chapter of the Calix Society, an international organization for Catholics in recovery that stresses the power of sacramental grace in overcoming addiction.

Father McKay, who began working with those in addiction even before his seminary studies, said he has known thousands who have died from substance abuse. He currently presides at an average of two funerals a week due to drug overdoses, “not counting the ones” he turns down.

Addiction has hit home for the archdiocesan priest, who grew up just a few blocks from where he now ministers. In 1995, his

brother Anthony died at age 30 “in a crack house, with a needle in his arm,” said Father McKay. Another brother, Harry, also struggled with addiction after serving in Vietnam, but remained sober for the last 25 years of his life.

Reflecting on an Oct. 2 federal court decision that has cleared the legal hurdles for Philadelphia’s proposed safe injection site, Father McKay said such a facility would not have prevented Anthony’s overdose. Instead, he noted, safe injection sites only “provide a slower death to people who are already dying.”

“These people don’t need more drugs; that’s the cause of their sickness,” he told CatholicPhilly.com, the digital newspaper of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. “You’re poisoning their brains and making them sicker, when they need to be made well.”

Father McKay sees the sites as the product of “a drug culture that’s part of the culture of death.” He likened the impact of such facilities to the “zombie effect” of extended methadone use in combating heroin addiction.

A synthetic opioid, methadone works to eliminate withdrawal symptoms, but long-term reliance on the prescription “burns out the brains” without healing addiction, said Father McKay.

“The whole approach here reminds me of lobotomizing violent criminals and mentally ill people,” said Father McKay.

Lobotomy, or removal of the brain’s frontal lobe, was widely practiced on tens of thousands in the mid-20th century to treat severe mental illness while reducing institutional overcrowding. Patients were generally left incapacitated and cognitively unresponsive after the procedure.

While acknowledging “there are good people on both sides” of the safe injection site debate, Father McKay said supporters of such sites fail to understand the real nature of addiction

and the most effective ways to address it.

“They point to one feature, that they won’t be alone when they inject themselves,” he said, “but they need to look at the whole picture.”

Recovery from addiction requires “a moment of truth” that enables the individual to grasp the impact of his or her self-destructive behavior, said Father McKay. Such awareness is central to the 12-step approach employed by Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and similar groups.

Safe injection sites “steal that moment away from them,” he said, since facilitating the use of harmful drugs, even with compassionate motives, “takes away the opportunity for sufficient reflection” and keeps the affected person mired in addiction.

“Sobriety is the first step, and that’s what we’re stopping these people from taking in these safe injection sites,” he said. “Without that step, there is no second step.”

A number of studies have shown that sustained participation in 12-step groups, which are free and widely available, correlates with recovery rates as high as 70%.

The number is significantly lower for Insite, the Canadian safe injection site that has served as a model for Philadelphia’s proposed facility. According to Insite’s data, 48,798 – or 1.35% – of the 3.6 million users who have self-injected since 2003 there have accessed some form of clinical treatment for substance abuse disorder.

Father McKay also noted that Philadelphia’s plan to offer fentanyl screening at its proposed site isn’t viable. A synthetic opioid, fentanyl – which is 50 to 100 times stronger than morphine – has driven the increase in the nation’s overdose deaths.

“Fentanyl is actually a good deterrent, because they’re scared to pick up (relapse) again,” he said. “But these sites will take that fear away and keep them enslaved, since they’ll think they can keep using.”

For some users, fentanyl is actually desirable, he added, since it provides a high they can no longer attain after repeated heroin use.

He also noted that those in active addiction would be unlikely to travel from other sections of the city to the proposed Kensington location for Philadelphia’s planned site. Many individuals already rely on a kind of “street buddy system,” he said, and “watch out for each other when they’re nodding off” prior to overdosing.

Clean needles, which safe injection sites typically provide, aren’t a draw either, said Father McKay.

“They couldn’t care less about clean needles when they have a death wish,” he said. “That’s how sick they are. They’re on the brink of death.”

Safe injection sites, like the addiction they seek to treat, ultimately work to harm everyone, said Father McKay.

“You’re watching them inject themselves with poison, and they come out demoralized and dehumanized, as do the people who watch them and promote the sites,” he said. “Are we really caring about them, watching them shoot up?”

Those suffering from addiction “are our brothers and sisters” who reflect the suffering Christ, the priest said, and they are inextricably connected with the larger community.

“You put that needle in your arm, and it goes into the arm of the Lord, and into everyone else’s arm as well,” said Father McKay, stressing that addiction simultaneously affects individuals, families and society.

Instead of supporting safe injection sites, he and the Our House team are working to create “spiritual sites” where the root causes of addiction – such as isolation and hopelessness – can be countered with God’s grace and the fellowship of others.

“We offer healing from the shame and guilt of their past sins,” said Father McKay, adding that those who struggle with addiction can become models of holiness through God’s intervention in their lives.

Noting that “we underestimate grace and the power of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist,” Father McKay said he persists in his work because “there’s always an answer, and that is Jesus Christ.”

“It’s not a belief, it’s an experience,” he said. “I’ve seen so many people get better.”