



## 'USER-RUN' ORGANIZATION VANDU PROVIDES A SUPPORT NETWORK FOR PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS

### BACKGROUND & METHOD

- The Downtown Eastside (DTES) has suffered from the ongoing epidemics of HIV infection and illicit drug overdoses that began in the mid-1990s.
- In 1997, individuals gathered to form a drug "user-run" organization that eventually became known as the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU) in order to counter this health crisis and government inaction.
- In this study, we document the formation, structure, and activities of VANDU.
- Interviews were conducted to find a range of perspectives on VANDU.
- Historical documentation including photographs, program evaluations, procedural manuals, meeting minutes, educational materials, and other written documentation was used for information.
- We observed those involved with VANDU by attending board meetings, local meetings, and care and support initiatives.

### FINDINGS

- Drug users can organize themselves and become valuable members of their community.
- VANDU has become a positive force in the DTES community by voicing the concerns of drug users, gaining political support, educating both insiders and outsiders, and making sure that drug users are more involved in making the decisions that affect them.
- VANDU has addressed the gaps in local public health efforts and extended the reach of traditional health services to those who are not traditionally well-served in this area.
- VANDU appears to be providing support that is more easily accessible for and acceptable to their peers.
- By participating in the organization, individuals may gain skills as well as a sense of self-respect and purpose.
- Local culture has been positively affected through this sense of responsibility and caring among people who use drugs.

### QUICK FACT

*VANDU HAS GIVEN A STRONG VOICE TO PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS AND HAS ALLOWED THEM TO DEVELOP A SENSE OF BELONGING IN THEIR COMMUNITY.*

### IMPLICATIONS

- The experiences of VANDU show that efforts should be directed toward promoting the formation of drug user organizations.
- Health authorities and policy makers should explore new methods of including people who use drugs and drug user organizations in developing existing public health, education, and policy making approaches.

Kerr T, Small W, Peeace W, Douglas D, Pierre A, Wood E. Harm reduction by a "user-run" organization: A case study of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU). *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 2006; 17(2): 61-69.

