

## Overwhelming support for Vancouver sobering centre

BY SUZANNE FOURNIER, THE PROVINCE DECEMBER 9, 2010



Clarence Dennis (R) with son David Dennis, president of Frank Paul Society stand outside SFU campus on Hastings street in Vancouver, B.C., December 9, 2010.

**Photograph by:** Arlen Redekop, PNG

A "sobering centre" that could save the lives of people arrested for being drunk is getting overwhelming support from police, health and native advocates.

A standing-room-only crowd Thursday, at a conference convened by the Frank Paul Society, the B.C. Civil Liberties Association and the Elizabeth Fry Society, heard top police officials say they fully back the concept.

All that's needed to start up a sobering centre is money and political will.

"We believe very much in having a sobering centre — we don't see a downside to anything we heard today, because if even one life is saved it's worth it," said RCMP Assistant Commissioner Al Macintyre in an interview.

Macintyre noted a sobering centre could save both lives and money, explaining that of the 182,000 people RCMP take into custody in B.C. each year, 19 per cent are arrested for being "drunk in a public place."

He noted that a "reallocation" of policing resources along with provincial and municipal money could start up an alternative to jail or the drunk tank.

Steve Mattsson from Portland's David Hooper Detox Centre, said his city's integrated sobering facilities, "a national model," helps 13,000 people a year.

A roving van staffed by emergency medical technicians takes drunks or drug addicts to a "spartan" but efficient sobering station, said Mattsson.

There is also a 54-bed, longer-term detox program and access to housing for those on measured alcohol doses and for those who finally kick addictions.

Vancouver Police Insp. Scott Thompson agreed that a similar system should be installed in Metro Vancouver, noting the VPD backs the sobering centre concept recommended by the Davies Inquiry into the death of Frank Paul, an alcoholic Mi'kmaq left to die by a rookie officer in Dec. 1998.

"Alcoholism is a health issue, not a criminal issue," said Thompson. "At 2 a.m. on a rainy evening we'd love to take people to a place where they can be looked after. Otherwise, we end up having the revolving-door system."

Shawn Bayes of the Elizabeth Fry Society said a review of B.C. coroners' statistics shows "at least 18 people between 2008 and 2010 likely would not have died if they received medical attention in a sobering centre."

[sfournier@theprovince.com](mailto:sfournier@theprovince.com)