



MOTION REGARDING CONDEMNATION OF CHANGES TO HARM REDUCTION APPROACH WITHIN SHHS AND STUDENT SERVICES

2020-03-12

Submitted for: 2020-03-12

Submitted to: SSMU Legislative Council **Document no.:** LEG-PUB-MOT-2020-03-12-08
(to be assigned by Steering)

Moved by: Jonah Fried
*Inter-Residence Council
Representative* **Current Status:** FOR APPROVAL
 APPROVED
 POSTPONED
 COMMITTED
 NOT APPROVED

Seconded by: Madeline Wilson
Vice-President (University Affairs)

Issue

Although the principles of harm reduction have long been used in many areas of the University, including in Health Promotion and Residences, the actions of the University Administration suggest that they are shifting towards an abstinence only approach to drug and alcohol use. This is perhaps most evident in Residences, where there have been recent changes to the rules and messaging around drug and alcohol use, This is not only a departure from convention, but also a position that will foster an unsafe environment for students living in McGill Residences, and more broadly across campus. Substance use is an inevitable reality of University life, and without the implementation of harm reduction policies, students will not have the resources or support to use substances more safely. Specifically in Residences, Floor Fellows and other Student Housing and Hospitality Services employees are unable to effectively support students and facilitate the creation of safer spaces.



Background and Rationale

Often discussed in the context of global health policy¹, harm reduction is an approach to substance use intended to keep people safe by minimizing adverse health, social, and economic consequences of substance use. In previous years, McGill has promoted harm reduction in a various areas throughout the university. Within Student Services, Healthy McGill, their health promotion team, had a dedicated Safer Partying team which promoted safer alcohol and drug use, both through in person campaigns and online.

In the past, Student Housing and Hospitality Services' harm reduction approach rested on five principles: respect, collaboration, acceptance, empowerment, and compassion.² According to the 2018 Guide to Community Living, harm-reduction requires a non-judgemental and compassionate approach which accepts “that substance-use is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon” and meets each individual, “where they are at.” A page on the McGill website was also devoted to the policy³.

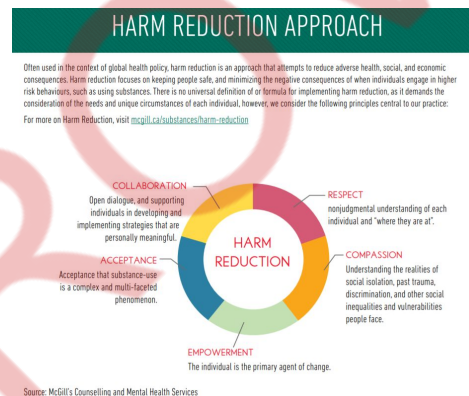


Figure 1. Harm Reduction Approach.
(June 2019 Community Living Guidelines)

As demonstrated by their previous policies (Figure 1)⁴, the University clearly recognizes the need for a harm reduction approach. Yet recent decisions by the administration run counter to the principles of harm reduction. The webpage on the Student Services website dedicated to harm reduction has been removed, and it is proven that current resources that take a harm-reduction approach to substance use are lacking.⁵

¹ [Harm Reduction International: About](#)

² [SHHS: June 2018 Community Living Guidelines](#)

³ [McGill: "Harm Reduction"](#)

⁴ [SHHS: June 2019 Community Living Guidelines](#)

⁵ [The McGill Tribune: Towards a Harm Reduction Approach to Drugs](#)



The shift in the University's approach is exemplified by changes to Student Housing's Winter 2020 Guide to Community Living. The page on Alcohol and Drugs includes a new section, "Controlled or Illegal Substances", with provisions such as: "Evidence which could lead to investigation by a Residence Life Manager, Protection Services or McGill Security, includes but is not limited to: drug traces, illicit drug paraphernalia, or the smell of controlled substances," and "As a member of the Residence community, it is your responsibility to report any instances of inappropriate behaviour related to illegal or controlled substances." These provisions, which also reference the McGill University Policy Concerning Alcohol, Cannabis, and Other Drugs⁶, go above and beyond provincial law (which does not prohibit the possession of cannabis in University-level student residences)⁷ and serve to cultivate an environment of secrecy, and therefore, danger.

As the students' representative body, it is incumbent upon the SSMU to safeguard student residents' wellbeing by taking measures to counteract these changes. Considering that floor fellows are also students, and that these new measures would place unnecessary levels of pressure upon them, the SSMU must act on their behalf as well. Although the SSMU cannot force the University to change its policy, we ask that the SSMU adopt this resolution to condemn changes to the University's approach towards harm reduction.

Alignment with Mission

Considering that the SSMU has a mandate to strengthen the "educational, cultural, environmental, political, and social conditions"⁸ of its members, changes to the University's approach toward harm reduction cannot go unanswered. The consequences of substance use pervade every aspect of University life, and those who live in Residence are not only the constituents of the Residences Representative, but also of every faculty representative.

Consultations Completed

Members of the Residences community were consulted by the Residences Representative. This motion was also written in collaboration with the VP-Floor Fellow of AMUSE in order to understand Floor Fellows' concerns regarding these changes.

⁶ https://mcgill.ca/secretariat/files/secretariat/policy_concerning_alcohol_cannabis_and_other_drugs.pdf

⁷ <http://www.legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/ShowDoc/cs/C-5.3> (8.2.1)

⁸ [SSMU Constitution: Preamble](#)



Risk Factors and Resource Implications

Because this is a sensitive issue concerning the way the University treats its tenants, there are political risks in adopting this motion. However, there is greater risk in allowing the University's changes toward harm reduction to proceed unaddressed. An abstinence-only approach disincentivizes students to seek help regarding substance use. Moreover, it fundamentally alters the role of floor fellows, turning them into agents of the administration with the power to punish students for substance use, rather than supportive figures intended to help students find help or otherwise stay as safe as possible even when using substances.

Sustainability Considerations

Harm reduction is a component of social sustainability.

Impact of Decision and Next Steps

By condemning changes to the University's approach to harm reduction, the SSMU would be supporting its constituents living in Residences as first year students and as floor fellows. Moreover, in passing this motion, the SSMU would also be demonstrating its commitment to promoting student welfare through sensible, science-based approaches to substance use on campus.

Motion or Resolution for Approval

BE IT RESOLVED THAT the SSMU Legislative Council hereby condemn the University's recent shift away from harm-reductive approaches towards substance use on campus, and specifically in Residences;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT the SSMU Legislative Council express its support for students living in Residences as first years and as floor fellows, and calls upon the University, particularly through Student Housing and Hospitality Services (SHHS) to consult with them before making such changes in the future;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT the SSMU Legislative Council mandate the Vice-President (University Affairs) and the Residences Representative to advocate for the reinstatement of meaningful harm-reductive approaches towards drug and alcohol use on campus, and the active promotion of necessary resources (such as fentanyl test strips, naloxone kits, and harm reduction training for Floor Fellows) in a timely manner;



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**Results of the
Vote**

In favour ()
Opposed ()
Abstain ()

APPROVED