



Eleventh Hour Veto Prevents Californians From Trying A New Solution To A Big Problem

By Josh Bloom

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Politics vs. public health. California Governor Gavin Newsom vetoed a bill that would have authorized safe consumption sites to help prevent drug overdoses, an example of harm reduction. Dr. Jeffrey Singer, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and member of the ACSH Scientific Advisory Board strenuously disagrees.

Roughly three weeks ago I sounded a hopeful note that California would be [the second state to defy federal law and authorize safe consumption sites](#). In early August the California legislature passed and sent to Governor Gavin Newsom's desk [SB 57](#). The bill, introduced by Senator Scott Weiner, would have authorized the County and City of San Francisco, the County and City of Los Angeles, and the City of Oakland to approve safe consumption sites, dubbed "Overdose Prevention Programs" (OPPs). The authorization would remain in effect until January 1, 2028. Any jurisdiction establishing an OPP must contract with an independent third party, using private funds, to conduct a peer-reviewed study on the impacts of the program and submit results to the Governor's office no later than January 15, 2027.

August 22 was the deadline for Governor Newsom to decide if he will veto the bill, sign the bill, or let the bill become law without his signature. Alas, at the eleventh hour, the Governor [vetoed](#) the bill.

In a signed [statement](#) accompanying his veto, the governor said he was concerned the OPPs "could induce a world of unintended consequences." The governor did not elaborate as to what any of those "unintended consequences" might be, other than to mention "worsening drug consumption challenges."

But with overdose deaths [surpassing](#) 100,000 per year, it is hard to imagine how creating centers that are [proven](#) to prevent overdose deaths for more than three decades in more than 100 locations in Europe, Canada, and Australia can "worsen" drug consumption challenges, when the greatest challenge drug users face is death from overdose.

Governor McKee of Rhode Island [signed](#) similar legislation in the summer of 2021 authorizing safe consumption sites and began [accepting applications](#) from privately-funded organizations

seeking to establish sites this past March. New York City opened two safe consumption sites in November 2021, and by April they had already [averted 230 overdose deaths](#).

California's political leaders, including Governor Newsom, often crow about California leading the rest of the nation in innovation. In this year's State of the State Address, Newsom boldly [claimed](#), "The California way means rejecting old binaries and finding new solutions to big problems."

Safe consumption sites will [continue to save lives](#) in most of the rest of the developed world. They have been so successful in Canada since [Insite](#), the first safe consumption site in North America, opened in Vancouver, BC in 2003, that Health Canada approved an [additional 37](#) sites by 2020.

Sadly, perhaps because he is contemplating a presidential run in 2024, the governor quashed a chance, provided by the state legislature, for California to show the nation a new way to address the overdose crisis, and reverted to the safe political strategy of "old binaries"—in this case, the binaries being abstinence or death.