



## Philadelphia agency planning first supervised drug injection site in U.S. is offered lease

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Philadelphia – Safehouse, the nonprofit founded to open a supervised injection site in Philadelphia, is in negotiations to sign a lease on a property in Kensington, representatives of the organization said Thursday.

Ronda Goldfein, vice president of Safehouse’s board, said the group is in talks to sign a lease on a property on Hilton Street near the Allegheny Avenue station on the Market-Frankford Line. The Robert Nicoletti Family Trust, which owns several properties in the block, plans to offer the space to Safehouse rent-free, said a source with knowledge of the negotiations. The Nicoletti family owns Philadelphia Suburban Development Corp., a major developer in the region. Former Gov. Ed Rendell, a Safehouse board member, said at a conference Thursday at the Cato Institute in Washington that Safehouse had been offered the Kensington property by an owner who wished to remain anonymous and who had lost a son to an overdose recently. He called the building “beautiful,” and said Safehouse had considered other locations but the Kensington property was his favorite.

A Nicoletti Family Trust spokesperson had no comment on the announcement.

Safehouse considered more than 25 locations around the city, Goldfein said, but the Hilton Street property was the front-runner because it is convenient to many people in addiction who use the El to get to Kensington, which long has been the center of Philadelphia’s opioid crisis. It also is in a commercial corridor, not a residential area. Safehouse ultimately intends to open more sites in the city, Goldfein said.

The move brings Safehouse a big step closer to opening what would be the first supervised injection facility in the nation. It comes just over a month after the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Philadelphia filed a lawsuit asking a judge to rule on the legality of Safehouse’s plans to open a site where people in addiction can use drugs, access medical care and drug treatment, and be revived by medical personnel if they overdose. The group still is raising money to operate a site, but hopes to open this year, Goldfein said.

McSwain said Thursday’s developments don’t affect his office’s plans to oppose the site.

“We’re going to go forward with the case,” he said. “Just because they have a potential lease doesn’t mean they’re going to open tomorrow. ... I would hope we get a ruling from the court before Safehouse were to open a site.” Were Safehouse in a position to open before a ruling, he said, his office would consider seeking a legal injunction to stop it.

Neighbors in the area have been notified of the lease negotiations, Safehouse officials said.

“The neighbors are a crucial player in this conversation,” said Goldfein, who is married to David Lee Preston, an editor at The Inquirer, and who serves as the executive director of the AIDS Law Project of Pennsylvania. “We’re not asking them to approve it — though that would be great — as much as we want to be able to give them all the information we have and have an ongoing

discussion with them, so they will be as comfortable as they can be with the facility.”

It appears that won't be an easy task. The site is in City Councilman Mark Squilla's district. Two weeks ago, Squilla visited a supervised injection site in Toronto with Goldfein, other Philadelphia elected officials, and community members. On Thursday, he said he wasn't convinced Philadelphia needs a site and did not have enough information on how opening one would affect overdose deaths, crime in the neighborhood, or treatment rates.

He said Toronto site operators told him 4 percent of their clients had entered treatment. Studies of the supervised injection site in Vancouver, British Columbia, which has been in operation for more than a decade, have shown reduced overdose death rates around the site, no impact on crime, and significantly increased treatment rates.

“How does it save people's lives?” Squilla asked. “All it says is that everyone who goes in there doesn't die. What if they overdose somewhere else at another time?” He added that Toronto's supervised injection site operators told the visitors that opening multiple sites across the city was the most effective way to save lives, and said he was “baffled” that Safehouse would move forward with only a single site.

Casey O'Donnell of IMPACT Services, a neighborhood business development corporation, said many people in the neighborhood support the idea of a site but want it in a hospital or medical center, not in a commercial area or near homes. He said neighbors were concerned about drug sales around the site and the possibility of further concentrating drug use in a community plagued with it.

“Institutions in Philadelphia get to say no to this kind of a thing, like Temple Episcopal Hospital — it's too much of a risk,” he said. “Instead, we'll risk a community, and that the people that are invested there don't get a say in this is absurd to me. Everyone recognizes that it's really hard to figure this out and how to sort out how to best care for people and address what is a health crisis.”

Rendell said he was prepared to go to prison to defend Safehouse in opening what he called a crucial, life-saving measure in a city that saw 1,217 overdose deaths in 2017 and an estimated 1,100 fatal overdoses last year. He added he described the site as much during a recent lunch with William McSwain, the U.S. attorney who filed the lawsuit against Safehouse and has decried the effort as illegal.

“We are bound and determined to go ahead,” Rendell said Thursday.