



Rendell says Philly group near deal on home for supervised injection site

Bobby Allyn

March 21, 2019

The Philadelphia nonprofit planning to open the country's first site where opioid users can use drugs under medical supervision has been offered a building in the Kensington area for \$1 by a prominent developer whose son recently died from an overdose, according to Ed Rendell, who is on the board of Safehouse, the group planning the so-called supervised injection facility.

Rendell revealed the new details Thursday in Washington, D.C., at a conference on the subject of addiction and harm-reduction research organized by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

When pressed for details, Rendell would not reveal the name of the developer, who he said is requesting anonymity, but he said the developer's son died of an overdose recently.

The building, Rendell said, is "beautiful," and "sort of on the border" of Kensington. The anonymous developer has practically donated the building to the nonprofit by offering it for \$1. Safehouse leaders have not finalized the deal and have not signed an agreement.

Rendell said the facility is the best option among about three others the nonprofit is considering. In recent months, the nonprofit has reportedly been looking at up to about two dozen potential sites. For the site Rendell mentioned, though he said it is now considered the favorite, an outlay of about \$600,000 would be required to outfit the building as a space advocates call an "overdose prevention site."

Philadelphia city leaders, including Mayor Jim Kenney and District Attorney Larry Krasner, have expressed support for Safehouse, but the city will not be devoting any public money to the effort.

Where the supervised injection site will be located has been among the key unanswered questions since backers of Safehouse announced the formation of a nonprofit to raise funds for and eventually open the facility, where people would bring their own drugs and inject them under the eye of trained medical staff who could avert fatal overdoses. Last year, about 1,100 people died of drug overdoses in Philadelphia, primarily driven by opioid use.

Last month, federal prosecutors in Philadelphia filed a civil suit against Safehouse. U.S. Attorney Bill McSwain called the proposal "in-your-face illegal activity" and asked a federal judge to determine whether the injection site would run afoul of drug laws intended to prohibit the opening of crackhouses during the 1980s.

Safehouse's legal response has not yet been filed with the court. But on Thursday, Rendell said he is confident the group's defense will overcome the federal government's intent to block the initiative before it starts.

"What would happen if we lose, I think the U.S. attorney would try to enjoin us. But if he does, we're going to go forward."

The visual of federal agents descending on an injection site's building and hauling off nurses and doctors in handcuffs may just force Congress to change the drug laws prosecutors are trying to use to defeat Safehouse, said Rendell, who formerly was mayor and district attorney in Philadelphia.

"If the U.S. attorney would be stupid enough to enforce this, then that's the best way to get the Congress to act," he said. "Because does anyone think the framers of this intended for this type of activity to be illegal? Nurses and doctors giving up their own time for no compensation, we're going to put them in jail? I mean, it's absolutely stunning."