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## NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release  
2020MMHA0032-001139  
June 23, 2020

Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions

### **Stabilization care proposed for youth following an overdose**

VICTORIA – Government has introduced amendments to the Mental Health Act to improve the care and safety of youth under the age of 19 who are experiencing severe problematic substance use by providing short-term involuntary emergency stabilization care following an overdose.

Based on the expert advice of the BC Children’s Hospital and other renowned child and youth advocates, the changes will enable hospitals to keep youth safe immediately following an overdose. The proposed changes are designed to prioritize the best interest of youth and facilitate better connections to voluntary culturally safe care.

“This is a new and much needed tool in our toolbox to help youth with severe substance use challenges and their families,” said Judy Darcy, Minister of Mental Health and Addictions. “Experts are telling us this emergency measure is vital to ensure the immediate safety of young people in crisis. We are taking that advice and we are enabling hospitals to extend the care they provide to help youth stabilize and leave the hospital with a clear plan to access voluntary services and supports in the community.”

Youth living with severe problematic substance use who are admitted to a hospital following a life-threatening overdose can be admitted for stabilization care for up to 48 hours or until their decision-making capacity is restored, for a maximum of seven days. This short-term emergency care will be provided at hospitals throughout the province where there is an existing designated psychiatric unit or observation unit.

The proposed changes to the Mental Health Act will support health-care providers and hospitals to provide medically necessary health care and observation for a youth to recover from an overdose, regain their decision-making capacity and create opportunities to engage with supports and services to treat the problematic substance use. Following the period of stabilization care, youth will be connected to supports and services in the community.

Quotes follow in a backgrounder.

#### **Contact:**

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Communications  
250 883-2941

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## BACKGROUND

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### **What people are saying about stabilization care**

**Dr. Jana Davidson, chief medical officer, BC Children's Hospital and BC Women's Hospital + Health Centre –**

“Ensuring cultural safety and high-quality care for young people following life-threatening overdose/poisoning with substances needs to be a priority. With trauma-informed care as a foundation, BC Children's Hospital is committed to supporting the continued development of a full continuum of care for adolescents with substance use challenges in B.C. in collaboration with the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions, the Ministry of Health and our community partners. The Mental Health Act amendments announced today will allow us to further this work, providing acute care for adolescents with serious substance use challenges at a time when they are most vulnerable and ensuring they are connected with community-based services so they can continue to receive support closer to home.”

**Dr. Dzung Vo, head, division of Adolescent Health and Medicine, Department of Pediatrics, BC Children's Hospital –**

“As health professionals, we have an urgent need to address life-threatening overdoses in adolescents and a duty to protect them in these moments of crisis when their capacity, insight, judgment and autonomy are impaired by intoxication, overdose, withdrawal, addiction, trauma, other mental health disorders, developmental disabilities and/or brain injuries. At BC Children's Hospital, we have been piloting a practice called stabilization care in which we admit adolescents on a short-term basis following life-threatening overdoses. While research is ongoing, stabilization care has allowed us to support adolescents with withdrawal symptoms while addressing other health problems and connecting them with social, mental health and family supports. Changes to the Mental Health Act will support providers and hospitals to provide this type of care to adolescents across B.C., providing crucial care when they need it the most.”

**Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Services Society –**

“The pilot program at BC Children's has shifted the life trajectory of several of our young people and we are pleased that this is being formalized in legislation. For us, the legislation represents an opportunity to fight back against the opioid crisis and its impact on the lives of vulnerable Indigenous youth. The legislation holds the capacity to say these young lives matter, and collectively, we are prepared to recognize these youth and fight for them. We look forward to seeing this legislation situated in a full continuum of culturally grounded health-care services.”

**Dr. Tom Warshawski, chair, BC Pediatric Society's secure care working group and medical**

**director for Child and Youth, Interior Health Authority –**

“This promises to be an extremely important piece of legislation that recognizes the profound vulnerability of youth who have suffered a drug overdose, and it will be life saving for some of them. Having a non-fatal overdose is a major risk factor for a subsequent fatal overdose. As many as 10% of adults who have a non-fatal opioid overdose die within one year. Now, with this legislation, clinicians have the legal tool, with safeguards, to help a youth take a pause in their drug use in order to have their medical and mental health needs addressed, reconnect with supports and possibly enter into treatment or, at the very least, be equipped to use drugs safely until such time as they are able to take positive steps toward recovery.”

**Steve Mathias, executive director, Foundry –**

"As a clinician, one of the heartbreaking realities of working with young people with substance use issues, especially following an overdose reversal, is that we often don't have enough time to support the young person to detoxify while gathering their loved ones to come together and create a plan that will support their recovery. Too often, the young person remains under the effects of harmful and toxic substances when leaving a hospital and, as a result, ends up back into chaos and, tragically, into environments that lead to more overdoses and possibly death. This amendment will buy clinicians and families time to attend to their loved one's mental health and ensure the right supports are in place. In a word, this legislation will be life saving."

**Kimberly Christianson, mother with lived experience –**

“In 2016 and 2017, my teenage daughter Chelsea had at least four overdoses where she was brought to the hospital and discharged without any notification to me or her other supports. Three weeks before her fatal overdose, she asked for help at the hospital and was sent away. I found out later that each time she was kept for only a short time and then released on her own with no further followup or interventions to prevent subsequent overdoses. This legislation is an encouraging development in increasing support for youth and families who are struggling with substance use issues. I am hopeful that this will be a positive step in ensuring that the tragedy that happened to my daughter may be prevented for another family.”

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