
NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions

B.C. moves forward on drug decriminalization, new overdose emergency response funding

VICTORIA – As British Columbia marks five years since declaring the overdose crisis a public health emergency, its unprecedented toll continues to affect people in every part of the province.

Taking action that is aligned with calls from police chiefs and public health officials, the Province is moving forward with vital measures to combat stigma and turn the tide on this crisis.

To address stigma, B.C. will officially request a federal exemption from Health Canada to decriminalize personal possession of drugs in the province to remove the shame that often prevents people from reaching out for life-saving help.

“Stigma drives people to hide their drug use, avoid health care and use alone,” said Sheila Malcolmson, Minister of Mental Health and Addictions. “Through provincewide decriminalization, we can reduce the fear and shame that keep people silent about their drug use, and support people to reach out for help, life-saving supports and treatment.”

Officials with the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions and Health Canada have been working on an agreement that outlines how the Province of B.C. will work with Health Canada to apply for a provincewide exemption to the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, which governs simple drug possession.

The overdose crisis has impacted every community in B.C., and a provincewide exemption must consider the circumstances unique to urban, rural and remote communities. Key issues for consideration are defining simple possession, determining allowable drug amounts and ensuring the readiness of law enforcement, health and social services to support decriminalization.

Consultation with Indigenous partners, peers, law enforcement, municipalities and public health officials is being planned.

Decriminalization is one additional tool in B.C.’s accelerated overdose response plan that also includes harm reduction, prevention, treatment and recovery, while building a system of mental health and substance use care.

As a signal of its commitment to the overdose response and what is to come in B.C.’s Budget 2021 and beyond, the Province is also boosting funds to secure recently expanded overdose prevention services for people at high risk of overdose provincewide.

A new \$45-million investment over the next three years will extend and enhance the funding

announced in August 2020 to support those services to save more lives.

“The COVID-19 pandemic is having devastating effects on people who use drugs – illicit substances are more toxic and people are struggling with increased isolation,” Malcolmson said. “Today, our government is committing to sustain and enhance services in every health authority to prevent overdose deaths and connect people to supports. There’s more to come as we continue building the comprehensive system of mental health and addictions care that British Columbians deserve.”

This investment will support people who use drugs by enabling health authorities to continue scaling up their regional overdose responses through new and expanded overdose prevention services, including inhalation sites to meet the growing need for this mode of consumption. Health authorities are hiring new registered nurses who can prescribe addictions treatment medications, in addition to social workers and peer support workers for new and existing interdisciplinary outreach teams.

The Province will continue to allocate funds to health authorities, which have the operational responsibility for planning and delivering services to meet the unique needs of the communities they serve.

There is much more to do to stem the tide of the overdose crisis; however, many people are getting the help they need now. Last year, nearly 3,000 overdoses were survived at overdose prevention services, with zero deaths recorded.

Expanding overdose prevention services and connecting people to treatment and supports is an integral part of A Pathway to Hope, B.C.’s roadmap for making mental health and addictions care better for people in British Columbia.

The funding is part of B.C.’s Budget 2021, which will work to continue to keep people safe and healthy now, while making investments in the critical services people rely on to support a strong recovery that includes all British Columbians.

Quick Facts:

- Since 2018, more than 6,000 deaths have been averted because of the life-saving interventions government has implemented, such as expanded access to overdose prevention services including wide availability to naloxone.
- Currently, more than 23,000 people are receiving some form of opioid agonist treatment in B.C. – more than at any other time.
- To date, 82 registered nurses and registered psychiatric nurses have enrolled to complete their training to prescribe medications for opioid use disorder.
- According to the BC Coroners Service, using drugs by inhalation has become the most common mode of consumption implicated in illicit drug toxicity deaths in B.C.
- The Province is expanding access to addiction treatment and recovery services, including \$36 million to double youth treatment beds and \$13.5 million to increase adult beds throughout B.C. – with more to come.

Learn More:

A Pathway to Hope: https://news.gov.bc.ca/files/BCMentalHealthRoadmap_2019.pdf

Stop Overdose BC: <https://www.stopoverdose.gov.bc.ca/>

Contact:

Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions
Communications
250 213-7049 (media line)

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