
NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions

B.C. secures measures to ensure families feel safe accessing public spaces

VICTORIA – To help ensure kids and families feel safe in their communities, the Province has received approval from the federal government to prohibit the possession of illegal drugs at playgrounds, spray pools, wading pools and skate parks.

Effective Monday, Sept. 18, 2023, possession of illicit drugs within 15 metres of any play structure in a playground, a spray or wading pool, or a skate park will be prohibited. B.C. had made a request to Health Canada for an amendment to the decriminalization policy to add these spaces to existing exclusions on possession, including on the premises of K-12 schools and licensed child care facilities. The federal minister of mental health and addictions and associate minister of health has approved B.C.'s request.

“Our government is committed to breaking down barriers and connecting people to the supports they need,” said Jennifer Whiteside, B.C.’s Minister of Mental Health and Addictions. “We requested this amendment from Health Canada to ensure that families feel safe in their community while continuing to use every tool available to fight the toxic-drug crisis and save lives.”

With this amendment, police officers may enforce the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act when individuals are found to be in possession of illegal drugs in these child-focused spaces. Intoxication remains illegal in all public places.

“Everyone, especially children, should feel safe in their communities,” said Minister Ya’ara Saks, federal Minister of Mental Health and Addictions and Associate Minister of Health. “This cannot be forgotten as we continue to work relentlessly to reduce substance use related harms. This amendment ensures that law enforcement has the tools needed to address public drug-use concerns, while continuing to provide support for some of the most vulnerable people in our community who use drugs. Our government recognizes the tremendous work B.C. has been doing across the full continuum of care to address the overdose crisis and we will continue to work with them to save lives.”

The Province has also recently completed consultations on public drug use with key stakeholders, and is planning to introduce provincial legislation to further regulate public drug use this fall.

The B.C. government is also releasing data on mental-health and substance-use services in the province. This new data snapshot will show how the ministry is expanding mental-health and addictions care to help people connect services, including early intervention, harm reduction, treatment and recovery, and after-care supports.

The data snapshot includes information about the impacts of decriminalization, including law-

enforcement data, research on the emotional well-being of people living with addiction, and connecting people to services, including treatment. It also reflects the work accomplished to date as part of A Pathway to Hope, issued in 2019, a strategy that lays out government's 10-year vision for mental-health and substance-use care. The Province has released a report to highlight progress to date on key priorities and action areas.

Since decriminalization came into effect, the provincial and federal governments have continued to work closely to monitor this exemption to ensure it is meeting the desired outcomes and that any potential unintended consequences are promptly addressed.

Decriminalization is just one tool in the Province's toolbox in the fight against the toxic drug crisis.

The B.C. government is working to build an integrated system of mental-health and addictions care that works for everyone. This includes adding hundreds of new treatment beds, expanding services for youth, and increasing access to programs that reduce harm and help keep people safe, such as drug-checking measures.

Quotes:

Marianne Alto, mayor of Victoria –

"Decriminalization is one part of a complex response to the toxic-drug crisis. As the longer-term effects of decriminalization are assessed, and more addictions and mental-health services are established, it's important to consider and take steps that specifically protect children. Prohibiting possession of illegal substances at child-focused areas is one such step."

Ken Sim, mayor of Vancouver –

"We are pleased to see Health Canada is responding to the hard work done by the Province in taking action by amending the B.C. personal drug possession exemption. By making these spaces – playgrounds, splash parks, and skate parks – exceptions to the decriminalization pilot, Health Canada is helping to ensure those sites remain places where families, and especially children, will be able to safely enjoy our communities. This is a positive step forward, helping to find balance for our communities, including families, seniors, children, and the needs of our most vulnerable residents. The City of Vancouver will continue to work with our senior government partners to ensure those who suffer from substance-use disorder have the services they need. We thank both the Province and the BC Association of Chiefs of Police for joint advocacy with the City of Vancouver to address this important issue."

Bob Wells, mayor of Courtenay –

"Playgrounds, spray parks, wading pools, and skate parks should be safe spaces for kids and families. While the City of Courtenay supports decriminalization to address the heartbreaking and preventable deaths caused by the toxic-drug crisis, there also needs to be protections in place for children and youth. This is a public health emergency which is harming people from all walks of life. In addition to these important measures to help keep substances away from kids, we urgently need multi-layered solutions, including expanding treatment, safer supply, supervised consumption, and supports for people affected by substance use who desperately need help."

Deputy Chief Fiona Wilson, vice-president, BC Association of Chiefs of Police –

“Senior police leaders from across British Columbia are grateful to Health Canada and the Province of British Columbia for hearing our concerns with respect to public consumption. Although police leaders support decriminalization, we heard feedback from our communities about the need to ensure police have appropriate tools to address areas of concern, which prompted the BC Association of Chiefs of Police to advocate Health Canada to add additional exceptions to the exemption. There is a clear need to ensure everyone feels safe in public places, while also ensuring people who use drugs are provided with alternate pathways of care.”

Quick Facts:

- In May 2022, the federal government approved B.C.’s exemption request under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act so that adults (18 and older) are not subject to criminal penalties if found in possession of up to 2.5 grams of certain illegal drugs for personal use from Jan. 31, 2023 to Jan. 30, 2026.
- Instead, they are offered information about local health and social services, as well as local treatment and recovery options, if requested.

Learn More:

The data snapshot can be found here: <https://MentalHealthAndAddictionsCare.gov.bc.ca>

Read the full exemption: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/health-concerns/controlled-substances-precursor-chemicals/policy-regulations/policy-documents/exemption-personal-possession-small-amounts-certain-illegal-drugs-british-columbia.html>

Learn more about A Pathway to Hope:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/about-the-bc-government/mental-health-and-addictions-strategy>

Learn about mental-health and substance-use supports in B.C.: <https://wellbeing.gov.bc.ca>

Contact:

Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions
Communications
250 880-7117

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