



FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

**Indigenous Child and Family Services Directors
Our Children Our Way Society**

News Release

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FNLN and Our Children Our Way Society Alarmed Over Toxic Drug Deaths

(xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh)/Vancouver, B.C.) – On the heels of Bell’s Let’s Talk Day—a day to promote action regarding mental health—British Columbians were confronted with the reality that 2023 was the worst year for toxic drug deaths in BC history. There were 2,511 toxic drug deaths over the course of 2023—nearly seven deaths every single day. First Nations are disproportionately represented in the number of people dying by toxic drug poisoning.

The relentless pace of toxic drug poisonings has proceeded unabated since BC declared a Public Health Emergency in 2016. More than 14,000 British Columbians have died by toxic drug poisoning since that time. This is equivalent to the entire population of cities like Comox, Terrace or Williams Lake. Toxic drug poisoning is now the leading cause of death among British Columbians between the ages of 10 and 59. Among youth victims of toxic drug deaths, most (73%) had been involved with the child welfare system and 67% were living with mental health challenges.

"Toxic drugs are devastating our families and communities. This crisis has become a catastrophe and is only getting worse," said Mary Teegee, Chair of the Our Children Our Way Society.

Too often bias and stigma—rather than meaningful action—drive the response to individuals grappling with addiction. We raise our hands to the dedication of outgoing Chief Coroner, Lisa Lapointe, who has repeatedly called for evidence-based action to end the epidemic of toxic drug deaths. And yet, our government has categorically rejected the Chief Coroner’s recommendations, without advancing any meaningful alternatives. In her retirement announcement, Ms. Lapointe noted that: “It deeply saddens me that we have been unable to influence the essential change necessary to reduce the tragic impacts of toxic drugs on so many thousands of our family members, friends and colleagues across the province.” We share her sorrow.

Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, UBCIC President, stated “The problem to solve goes beyond substance misuse—it is an issue that must be understood in a context of intergenerational trauma, the impact of residential schools, displacement from community and insufficient action by governments to respond to the highly challenging and rapidly escalating crisis. Every lost person is someone’s family member- we must find ways to save the lives that are unnecessarily being taken.”

The Our Children Our Way Society recognizes the urgency of this crisis and that an immediate and dedicated response is needed now. In *Culture is Healing: An Indigenous Child & Youth Mental Wellness Framework* we share ways that the mental wellness system can change to shift the trajectory of this crisis. *Culture is Healing* calls for government, Indigenous leadership, service providers and youth to come together to develop a comprehensive plan to make those changes.

BC Assembly of First Nations Regional Chief Terry Teegee stated, “We need to be supported in our priorities of healing and wellness, and we need to build understanding of the solutions that are grounded in culture as healing.”

“It is unacceptable that the number of deaths from the ongoing opioid crisis continues to rise year over year. With more than 2,500 British Columbians losing their lives in 2023, it is clear that we need governments at all levels to show bold leadership and take decisive action to address the crisis that is unfortunately disproportionately affecting First Nations peoples in British Columbia,” said Cheryl Casimer of the First Nations Summit Political Executive. “Far too many families have lost loved ones to overdoses and the time for action to curtail this public health crisis is now. We must have appropriate funding for evidence-based harm reduction and recovery programs, as well as real systemic change to the current policies, to stop this tragedy and bring reform to a system that is clearly not working for First Nations peoples”.

Addiction knows no bias. It touches every region, every community and nearly every home across this province. It is our human responsibility to see the individuals—brother, daughters, husbands, mothers, grandfathers, aunts, cousins and loved ones—living with addiction. None of them are disposable. They deserve love, care, connection and action.

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