



News Release

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Toxic Drug Crisis Disproportionately Impacting Indigenous Peoples Calls for Emergency Joint Response

(xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səilwətał (Tseil-Waututh)/Vancouver, B.C.) Last week the Province of B.C. released an update on their 3-year decriminalization pilot project announcing intentions for increased tools for law enforcement, increased tools for health service providers, and increased services for people struggling with addiction. The First Nations Leadership Council and the BC First Nations Justice Council stand with all families and communities who have lost loved ones to the toxic drug crisis and call for an emergency cross-governmental and multilateral strategy to be co-developed that will ensure the safety of each and every member of the public, including people who use drugs.

Dr. Judith Sayers, BCFNJC Council Member, stated, “The BC First Nations Justice Council (BCFNJC) appreciates the efforts made by BC to address the toxic drug crisis. We want to work with the province in tackling the crisis and be part of a collaborative strategy. In this regard, we feel we need to move away from criminalizing behaviors that are the direct result of the harms of colonialism. The BCFNJC stands with our partners in healthcare and asserts that the toxic drug crisis needs to be treated and addressed as a public health issue, not a criminal justice issue. The criminal justice system is not the solution to a problem that, instead, needs to be addressed through healing.”

“The emphasis on law enforcement and policing in the new measure to ban drug use in public spaces raises concerns about the approach to addressing addiction within First Nations communities,” stated Regional Chief Terry Teegee, B.C. Assembly of First Nations. Significant and sustained efforts must be made to ensure individuals struggling with addictions are not further marginalized and harmed. The province must engage with First Nations communities, leaders and organizations to develop respectful and holistic solutions. By prioritizing First Nations perspectives, knowledge and values and by working collaboratively, effective and culturally safe strategies can be implemented to support individuals living with addictions that honour their identities, cultures and inherent strengths.”

Hugh Braker from the First Nations Summit political executive added, “The toxic drug overdose emergency has affected every community in B.C. It is one of the worst emergencies the province has faced. The FNLC supports the Province’s efforts to provide more resources to all communities in B.C. as ultimately they are the ones dealing with the devastating results of the emergency. The FNLC reminds the government that drug addiction is a medical problem and not a criminal matter. Creating policies and laws that result in criminal charges will not solve the problem.”

Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, UBCIC President, concluded, “The drug and overdose crisis has escalated in every province and territory due to the toxic supply and a lack of fulsome support services for all people who use drugs such as sufficient and culturally appropriate treatment and recovery services, housing, and tools to address a range of intersecting trauma that for Indigenous peoples, is very much wrapped up in the destructive impacts of colonialism. We applauded the Province of B.C for beginning a pilot project on decriminalization as one of the tools needed in a multi-pronged approach to support people to remain as healthy and safe as possible so they are able to make it to recovery. B.C.’s own public drug use legislation was paused due to a successful injunction by the Harm Reduction Nurses Association, confirming that the human rights of people who use drugs are not secondary to people who do not use drugs. All people need to feel safe in their communities. Any changes to decriminalization policy must save lives rather than putting anyone at risk.”

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The First Nations Leadership Council is comprised of the political executives of the BC Assembly of First Nations (BCAFN), First Nations Summit (FNS), and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs (UBCIC).

The BC First Nations Justice Council has been entrusted with the mandate to transform the justice system and create better outcomes for Indigenous people through implementation of the BC First Nations Justice Strategy. More information available at www.bcfnjc.com

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