

# Responding to B.C.'s Illegal Drug Overdose Epidemic

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Progress Update  
**June/July 2018**



Ministry of  
Mental Health  
and Addictions

## BACKGROUND

Despite escalated efforts across the province, B.C. continues to see record numbers of illegal drug overdose deaths. Data from the BC Coroners Service reports 1,451 people died from a preventable overdose death in 2017 and a further 878 people have died in 2018 between January 1 and July 31, 2018. Synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl, are increasingly being detected by drug checking services and in toxicology reports, demonstrating the issue of a contaminated, poisonous illegal drug supply. The overdose crisis reaches every corner of the province and has a disproportionate impact on males and First Nations people in British Columbia.

### Overdose Statistics in June and July 2018

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In June 2018, 107 people died from an illegal drug overdose. Deaths in June represent a 15% decrease from June 2017 (123) and an 8% decrease from May 2018 (114).

In July 2018, there were 134 illegal drug overdose deaths. This is a 12% increase from July 2017 (120) and a 25% increase from June 2018 (107)

The majority (72%) of people who have died in 2018 were between the ages of 30 and 59; the vast majority (90%) of overdose deaths overall occurred among those aged 19 to 59. Males continued to be disproportionately represented, with 80% of all overdose deaths in 2018 occurring in men. The majority (88%) of overdose deaths in 2018 occurred indoors. This suggests the trend of people using drugs alone or in the presence of someone who is unwilling or unable to call 9-1-1 is continuing. For more information, please see [the BC Coroner's illicit drug overdose death report](#).

## KEY AREAS OF FOCUS AND SUMMARY OF PROGRESS SINCE LAST REPORT

- 1. Saving lives:** Services for people who use drugs that help reduce the risk of overdose, reduce the severity of overdose, or provide immediate lifesaving interventions when an overdose has happened.  
**Progress since last report:**
  - Island Health's largest supervised consumption services site opened. The Pandora Supervised Consumption Centre in Victoria allows people to safely use drugs, while staff offer on-site supports, as well as referrals and access to treatment and recovery services.
  - A new overdose prevention service location was opened at St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver.
  - Drug checking services are now available at a community-based location in Vancouver.
  - The First Nations Health Authority Indigenous Wellness team began offering "Not Just Naloxone" training to increase community capacity to slow and stop the rate of accidental overdose.

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- The BC Centre for Disease Control welcomed over 150 people to participate in the third annual Overdose Action Exchange, to discuss strategies and to prioritize initiatives to save more lives from overdose.
  - As of July 15: 109,594 Take Home Naloxone kits were distributed free of charge from 1,425 registered sites in locations across B.C.
  - Island Health issued a public service announcement to remind people who use drugs to follow precautions for safer use.
  - The BC Centre on Substance Use has partnered with music and other festival organizers and regional health authorities across the province to offer drug checking services. Festivals include Shambhala Music Festival, Electric Love Music Festival, Bass Coast and Vancouver Pride Festival.
- 2. Ending the stigma around addictions and mental illness:** Activities that reduce negative attitudes about people who use drugs that may keep people from seeking and receiving help for problematic substance use.
- Progress since last report:**
- The Province’s public awareness campaign continues to encourage the public to consider that people who use drugs are their family, friends, coworkers and neighbours.
- 3. Building a network of mental health and addiction treatment services:** Services that support treatment of and recovery from addiction.
- Progress since last report:**
- The Government of B.C. provided \$225,000 to expand classroom-to-community mental health and addictions connections in the North Vancouver School District.
  - A Foundry Centre opened its doors in Abbotsford, providing a one-stop shop for mental health and addictions services for youth living in that municipality.
  - St. Paul's Hospital HUB, a first-of-its-kind health-care model in Canada, opened in July 2018. The HUB provides a protective umbrella of wraparound services designed to support patients, no matter where they are on their journey to wellness.
  - The Provincial Health Services Authority announced that more than 80 youth and young adults with substance-use and mental-health challenges have benefited from the natural-healing environment of Ashnola at The Crossing since the facility opened last year.
  - The BC Centre on Substance Use released new guidelines for supporting youth and pregnant women living with opioid-use disorder.
  - Fraser Health is creating a new Substance Use Services Access Team that allows health care providers to call one number to speak to a team of substance use professionals, make referrals, or ask questions around services.

- Fraser Health is bolstering its 24/7 Crisis Line (604-951-8855 or toll-free 1-877-820-7444) to create an immediate access point for people who are in urgent need of support related to their substance use.
- Fraser Health opened an injectable opioid agonist treatment clinic in Surrey.
- The BC Centre on Substance Use, and Canopy Growth, announced funding to establish Professorship of Cannabis Science at the University of British Columbia to research the role of cannabis in addressing overdoses.
- Island Health opened 11 intensive treatment beds for clients needing longer term residentially-based addiction treatment services at the Comox Valley Recovery Centre.

**4. Addressing the full range of supports and social factors:** Activities and services that address social factors related to substance use such as housing, income, employment, intergenerational trauma and community development.

**Progress since last report:**

- To ensure that more at-risk youth in Metro Vancouver have access to the mental health and addictions services they need, the Province is working with the Dan's Legacy Foundation to add four new therapists, and expand their successful therapeutic programs.
- Funding from the Community Crisis Innovation Fund was provided to 20 communities to support Community Action Teams to escalate action on the ground.
- A second stream of funding through the Community Crisis Innovation Fund was open for applications in July 2018; over 80 applications were received. Grants up to \$75,000 will be awarded to eligible applicants in September 2018.
- People who are living in supportive housing in the Capital Regional District will have opportunities to become healthier and learn new skills, following the BC Government's purchase of Woodwynn Farms for use as a therapeutic-recovery community.
- The Province and the Provincial Health Services Authority honoured the overdose Mobile Response Team, which has provided critical-incident support and training to more than 6,000 people who work on the front lines of British Columbia's overdose crisis, in its first year of operation.
- The Province and the City of Surrey announced a new partnership to provide more than 160 people, who are experiencing homelessness, with accommodations and wraparound support services.

## 1. SAVING LIVES

### *Island Health Opens its Largest Supervised Consumption Services Site in Victoria*

On June 18, 2018, Island Health opened its largest supervised consumption service site in Victoria. The Harbour will allow people to safely use drugs while offering on-site supports and services as well as referrals and access to treatment whenever clients are ready to begin a recovery journey. Island Health is partnering with The Lookout Housing and Health Society whose harm reduction staff will provide

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supervision and education to ensure safer drug consumption, deliver crisis intervention and manage harm reduction supplies. SOLID Outreach Society's team of peer harm reduction workers will provide supervision and education as well as support and advocacy. In addition to Island Health clinical staff, paramedics from BC Emergency Health Services will be on site, providing clinical expertise in support of the supervised consumptions teams.

Operating hours at The Harbour are 6:30 am to 8 pm, seven days a week including statutory holidays. The total cost to renovate the facility was \$1.8 million.

### ***Not Just Naloxone Training by the First Nations Health Authority***

In June 2018, the Indigenous Wellness Team hosted a three-day Not Just Naloxone training session on Snuneymuxw territory in Nanaimo. Over 20 participants were on hand to build on their skills and knowledge around substance use and overdose prevention, as well as share their wisdom with attendees and staff in the room for the benefit of their communities.

"Not Just Naloxone: Talking about Substance Use in Indigenous Communities" is a train-the-trainer workshop that arose from the reality that, while Naloxone is an essential part of the current response, there is a greater need to expand on a holistic response to the crisis. This response uncovers and addresses the roots of addiction, acknowledges the roots of community connection, and empowers First Nations communities to design their own response to the issue—all while celebrating community and individual resilience.

The three-day workshop supports participants to develop practical, community-based strategies and services that engage people who use substances, and how to recognize and respond to an overdose—all through the lens of cultural sensitivity and trauma-informed care. Other topics covered include background on the overdose emergency, how to implement peer engagement, low-barrier cultural techniques as protective factors, and more. After two days of trainings, attendees are given tools to facilitate their own engagement through group work.

### ***Overdose Prevention Services at St. Paul's Hospital***

An Overdose Prevention Site was opened on the grounds of St. Paul's Hospital on May 6th. The site is staffed by health workers and peers from RainCity Housing and provides service to those in inpatient care as well as community members.

### ***Drug Checking Services in Community***

The first community drug checking site (e.g. not at an overdose prevention site) – Granville Inner City Youth Clinic – was opened on May 29, 2018. Drug checking is available at this site for participants under 24 years of age from 1pm-5pm, Monday-Friday.

### ***Third Annual BC Centre for Disease Control Overdose Action Exchange***

In June 2018, the BC Centre for Disease Control held the third annual Overdose Action Exchange. The meeting aimed to develop a new set of innovative strategies to help combat the drug overdose emergency in BC. Over 150 people participated—more than in previous years—including law

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enforcement, community and non-profit representatives, physicians and other public health officials, elected officials, volunteers, and people who use drugs.

Topics included the following:

- Providing people with a safer drug supply
- What can be learned from low-barrier overdose prevention sites
- How to treat addiction in BC
- The role of law enforcement in the overdose crisis
- Drug policy
- Stigma
- Discrimination
- Structural barriers that affect people who use drugs

A report on the Overdose Action Exchange will come out this fall.

### ***Public Service Announcement for Safer Drug Use***

Island Health released a public service announcement, urging everyone to be vigilant if they choose to consume substances at festivals this summer. Many substances (e.g., cocaine, heroin, ecstasy, and meth) have been contaminated by fentanyl or other toxic additives, increasing the possibility of a serious overdose. To read the announcement, please visit:

[http://www.viha.ca/about\\_viha/news/news\\_releases/psa-5-tips-safer-drug-use-festivals-5july2018.html](http://www.viha.ca/about_viha/news/news_releases/psa-5-tips-safer-drug-use-festivals-5july2018.html)

### ***Drug Checking Services at Music and Other Festivals***

To provide potentially life-saving information, drug checking is being made widely available this summer for festival-goers in British Columbia. Drug checking is a free service that allows people to anonymously submit samples of street drugs to be analyzed for their chemical makeup. Using a Fourier Transform Infrared spectrometer and fentanyl test strips, a range of substances can be tested — including opioids, stimulants, and other psychoactive drugs such as MDMA. Results are provided in a matter of minutes.

The service will allow those using substances to make informed decisions and take necessary precautions to avoid harms that may include accidental overdose. Festival organizers will also be able to alert guests of unexpected and potentially dangerous contaminants in the drug supply.

### ***Broader Access to Take Home Naloxone***

As of July 15, 2018, 109,594 Take Home Naloxone kits have been distributed free of charge. More than 22,000 kits have been reported as used to reverse an overdose since the inception of the program.

## **2. ENDING THE STIGMA AROUND ADDICTIONS AND MENTAL ILLNESS**

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There is no one type of person who uses drugs, yet many people consider addiction and drug use as a solely street entrenched issue. However, the data tell us otherwise: overdose is a far reaching and escalating problem in B.C., with a wide range of people who are dying or experiencing non-fatal overdose events. In fact, the sheer number of people who are dying indoors alone suggests that a person is more likely to survive an overdose in areas such as the Downtown East Side of Vancouver than in a suburban dwelling.

People who do not feel comfortable coming forward to get help – whether that is to access drug checking services, to be monitored for overdose at an overdose prevention or supervised consumption service location, or to access treatment services – are at risk of overdose and overdose death. The onus is on all British Columbians to have meaningful conversations about substance use, to shift perceptions of people who use drugs, and reduce the stigma that undermines efforts to save lives.

The Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions continues to expand content on StopOverdoseBC.ca, including a section called The Weekly. The Weekly provides a platform for people to hear from everyday change-makers who are working to stop overdose and to learn from those who are helping to put a human face on the overdose crisis in our province. Powerful stories can help others heal, provide hope and remind us of our humanity. Read more here: <https://www.stopoverdose.gov.bc.ca/theweekly>.

### 3. BUILDING A NETWORK OF MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION TREATMENT SERVICES

#### *Leading-edge Mental Health and Addictions Care Model Launches at St. Paul's Hospital*

In July 2018, the next step in innovative care for people living with mental health and/or addictions challenges was unveiled at St. Paul's Hospital in downtown Vancouver. St. Paul's Hospital HUB, a first-of-its-kind health-care model in Canada, provides a protective umbrella of wraparound services designed to support patients, no matter where they are on their journey to wellness and hope.

The HUB has up to 10 beds dedicated to rapid assessment, treatment and stabilization of mental health and/or substance use-related disorders. This will not only provide better care to people in need, it will also decrease emergency room congestion and wait times. Patients in the emergency department can then be connected by a referral to the Rapid Access Addiction Clinic, which provides outpatient medical support for people with substance-use disorder, or to the Overdose Outreach Team, an existing service that connects people who have recently experienced and/or are at high risk for overdose, to addictions care and support.

Patients may also be referred to the Vancouver Police Foundation Transitional Care Centre, a post-release, safe short-stay facility that connects people to community care and social supports, like housing and income support, before they return to the community. Just outside of the hospital is St. Paul's Overdose Prevention Service. In partnership with RainCity Housing, the Overdose Prevention Service provides access to trained staff and peer support workers who assist people with safe substance use in a judgment-free setting, and connect people with emergency care, if needed.

#### *Foundry Opens its Doors in Abbotsford*

On June 19, 2018 a Foundry Centre opened in Abbotsford, offering access to a new one-stop shop to support youth mental health and wellness needs. Foundry Abbotsford, as with all Foundry centres, provides young people, aged 12 to 24 years, who are living with mental health and substance use challenges with a safe and judgment-free environment, where they can feel comfortable asking for help and accessing the services they need.

Services are provided in an integrated manner, working to ensure each young person receives the help they need on their path to wellness. The team includes physicians, nurse practitioners, mental health and substance use clinicians, youth and family peer support and navigation workers, supported employment service workers, outreach workers, and other supports for the diverse needs of youth in the community.

Terrace and Richmond were announced as new locations to join nine other communities in the Foundry network: Kelowna, Vancouver (Granville and North Shore), Prince George, Campbell River, Victoria and Abbotsford. Penticton and Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows, have centres in development.

### ***Provider Education on Opioid Use Disorder and Addictions Training***

The required training, education and practical experience that physicians and nurse practitioners need to prescribe opioid agonist treatment is provided through the British Columbia Centre on Substance Use's no-cost Provincial Opioid Addiction Treatment Support Program.

- More than 180 practitioners have completed training to prescribe opioid agonist treatment since July 2017 – of these, 44 are Nurse Practitioners
- More than 1,600 providers have registered in the Provincial Opioid Addiction Treatment Support Program since July 2017
- More than 9,300 people have registered in the Online Addiction Medicine Diploma Program since May 2017

### ***Fraser Health Ramps up Action to Reach People Who Use Substances Alone***

Fraser Health recently conducted an anonymous survey on substance use that reached nearly 1,200 people. Most respondents were people who use substances and their support networks.

To make it easier for people to access the supports they need, Fraser Health is:

- creating a new Substance Use Services Access Team that allows family practitioners, emergency departments and hospital staff to call one number to speak to a team of substance use professionals, make referrals or ask questions around services. The team will provide confidential services including providing information, individual counselling, and family support, and will facilitate access to treatment.
- bolstering the 24/7 Fraser Health Crisis Line (604-951-8855 or toll-free 1-877-820-7444) to create an immediate access point for people who are in urgent need of support related to their substance use.
- expanding its regional and community-based mental health and substance use advisory committees by adding an additional two new spaces in each of the 11 committees across the region. These 22 new spaces will be dedicated to hearing from people who use substances and their families.

- integrating substance use services into existing mental health services to strengthen this connection. For example, Fraser Health will open new opioid agonist treatment clinics in White Rock and Langley at locations that deliver mental health services later this year.

### ***Injectable Opioid Agonist Treatment (iOAT) Opens in Surrey***

Fraser Health opened an iOAT Clinic on June 12, 2018 in Surrey. The Clinic is serving seven clients with a ramp up plan to 50 clients as part of the planned expansion of this treatment option across the province.

### ***Support for Mental Health and Addictions Services in North Vancouver***

The Government of B.C. and community partners are supporting a two-year project at Mountainside Secondary school, to expand classroom-to-community mental health and addictions connections in the North Vancouver School District. The project, supported by \$225,000 in provincial funding, will build on Mountainside Secondary school's mental health and addictions hub and community partnerships. It will do so by looking at the structural elements of the hub that could extend beyond Mountainside. This allows other schools in the district similar access to integrated mental health and addictions supports and services. The project is scheduled to run from September 2018 to September 2020. To learn more, visit: <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2018MMHA0033-001176>.

### ***Ashnola at the Crossing Provides a Natural-Healing Environment***

More than 80 youth and young adults with substance use and mental health challenges have benefited from the natural-healing environment of Ashnola at The Crossing since the facility opened last year. Ashnola at The Crossing is a 22-bed residential treatment program for youth and young adults from across BC with serious, chronic substance use issues. The program is located just outside of Keremeos and provides care in a therapeutic environment for people between the ages of 17 and 24 with substance use challenges that require specialized treatment and supports.

### ***New Clinical Guidelines for Supporting Youth and Pregnant Women with Opioid Use Disorder***

The BC Centre on Substance Use released new guidelines for treating young people with opioid use disorder, emphasizing a range of pharmaceutical and counselling options and cautioning against traditional approaches such as detox alone.

Guidelines for pregnant women recommend a comprehensive integrated care plan that goes beyond substance-focused approaches and includes collaboration with relevant supports and resources that address patients' social determinants of health, such as adequate nutrition, safe housing, and other psychosocial supports. The guidelines make eight recommendations and offer five care principles including: screening for substance use during prenatal assessment; offering the full scope of harm reduction supplies and services; making the full continuum of care of medications known as opioid agonist treatment (OAT) available; encouraging breastfeeding; and ending the practice of separating the mother from her newborn child immediately after birth.

### ***Funding to Explore How Cannabis Could Address Overdoses***

Preliminary research suggests that medical cannabis might have a beneficial role to play in the response to the overdose. However, the therapeutic promise of medical cannabis for substance use disorders has rarely been rigorously evaluated through controlled trials, the gold standard of medical research. A

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partnership between the BC Centre on Substance Use and University of British Columbia aims to define the potential benefits of cannabis as a legitimate therapeutic treatment. Canopy Growth Corporation will provide \$2.5 million in funding and the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions will contribute \$500,000 to support this research project.

### ***Additional Treatment Beds Opened in Island Health***

Clients needing longer term, residentially-based addictions treatment services can now access 11 intensive residential treatment beds at the Comox Valley Recovery Centre. The repurposed beds – which provide longer stays and more intensive treatment – serve men living with opioid use disorder and other addictions. Clients will receive a higher level of care to support significant addiction challenges than was previously available on Vancouver Island.

The beds at the Comox Valley Recovery Centre will provide intensive treatment services for up to 90 days. Services include a range of clinical and non-clinical counselling and supports, psycho-social recovery education, peer-supported recovery options and self-development opportunities. Treatments and supports are tailored to clients' individual requirements. The goal is to allow people to focus on recovery in a safe and secure environment so they can return to living a productive and rewarding life.

## **4. ADDRESSING THE FULL RANGE OF SUPPORTS AND SOCIAL FACTORS**

### ***Support for Youth Counselling through Dan's Legacy Foundation***

To ensure that more at-risk youth in Metro Vancouver have access to the mental health and addictions services they need, the Province is working with the Dan's Legacy Foundation to add four new therapists, and expand their successful therapeutic programs. These programs are for young people 15 to 25 years old who are at significant risk of overdose, self-harm, homelessness and suicide. Approximately 30% of the young adults that receive supports through the foundation identify as Indigenous. Dan's Legacy Foundation's therapists work with youth representing a wide range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The majority of its clients are youth who are aging out of care. The \$200,000 in funding is anticipated to help an additional 125 youth over the next 12 months, doubling the foundation's capacity to serve at-risk youth. To learn more about the Dan's Legacy Foundation, visit: <https://danslegacy.com/>.

### ***Funding for Community Overdose Response Efforts***

The province's Community Overdose Crisis Innovation program capitalizes on proven and effective strategies that form B.C.'s comprehensive response to the overdose emergency. In July 2018, 20 high need communities received \$100,000 to support Community Action Teams to escalate action on the ground.

Community Action Teams focus on strategies to prevent overdoses, save lives and support people with addictions on a pathway to treatment and recovery, including:

- Expanding community-level overdose prevention services.
- Ensuring the availability of naloxone wherever it is needed.
- Addressing the toxic drug supply through expanded drug-checking services.
- Increasing connections to addiction treatment medications.
- Proactively supporting people at risk of overdose by intervening early to provide services like treatment and housing.

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- Raising community awareness of overdose risk and strategies to increase safety.

A second stream of funding was made available to community agencies in July 2018. Applicants were eligible to receive up to \$75,000 (from a total available fund of \$1.65 million); more than 80 applications were received, and grants will be awarded in September. This funding will be used to support projects that build upon:

- stronger paths to treatment and care;
- innovative strategies to reach people who use alone;
- Indigenous approaches to healing and wellness; and/or
- initiatives to enhance engagement of people with lived experience.

The Community Crisis Innovation Fund has a budget of \$6 million each for fiscal years 2018/19 and 2019/20, and is part of the Province's three-year, \$322-million investment to address the overdose crisis.

### ***Therapeutic Recovery Community at Woodwynn Farms Location***

People who are living in supportive housing in the Capital Regional District (CRD) will have opportunities to become healthier and learn new skills, following the purchase of Woodwynn Farms by the Province, through BC Housing, for use as a therapeutic-recovery community. The purchase of Woodwynn Farms allows for the opportunity to provide more services for people living in supportive housing who will benefit from access to extended therapeutic care. This type of support is proven to increase people's ability to maintain their housing, and eventually move on to independent living.

BC Housing will work with the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions and the District of Central Saanich to develop a long-term plan for operating the property. This plan will identify future supports that are in line with, and respectful of, the agricultural and historical importance of the land.

### ***Mobile Response Team Honours One Year of Operation***

In its first year of operation, British Columbia's overdose Mobile Response Team (MRT) has provided critical incident support and training to more than 6,000 people who work on the front lines of British Columbia's overdose crisis.

The MRT provides immediate, short-term support to first responders, front-line workers, and people with lived experience as they work to respond and prevent drug overdoses and deaths. Workers who are exposed to frequent traumatic events may be susceptible to compassion fatigue, trauma, and other stress-related harm. The MRT helps people address the cumulative stress of their jobs during the overdose crisis. Support can take the shape of one-on-one defusing or debriefings following overdoses, overdose deaths or critical incidents or educational sessions.

The MRT has travelled to 57 communities throughout B.C., to assist more than 593 agencies and community groups with customized supports for their front-line staff, as well as development of overdose response protocols. The team is made up of 13 members with diverse backgrounds and skills, including counsellors, psychologists, traumatologists, and first responders.

### ***Wraparound Supports for People Experiencing Homelessness in Surrey***

As of June 19, 2018, approximately 160 individuals experiencing homelessness can be offered housing, as well as health and social supports. Based on assessed need, people living along 135A Street will either be

offered supportive housing at the temporary buildings that were announced in January, or shelter beds at one of several local shelters.

The supportive housing is located at:

- 10662 King George Blvd.
- 13550 105 Ave.
- 13425 107A Ave.

The housing offered takes those currently living on the street into a proper shelter or supportive living environment. Staff are available, if needed, to help in the packing and transporting of belongings, and transportation of individuals, to the new housing.

The 160 units of temporary housing include secure, individual rooms, with private bathrooms. Residents have access to meal programs, counselling and medical offices, 24/7 staffing, and life and employment skills programming. Lookout Housing and Health Society operate all three buildings.

Fraser Health and Lookout Society will also operate an intensive case management team at the temporary housing, to assist those facing significant challenges with health, mental health, substance use, poverty, education and housing, by connecting them to support services and treatment.

## CONCLUSION

B.C. continues to grapple with an overdose epidemic that has complex and dynamic underpinnings, with the rapid introduction of new substances and consistently high rates of unintentional illegal drug overdose deaths affecting all parts of the province. With significant new investments in accelerated cross-sector actions, the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions is working closely with the federal government, local governments, the Provincial Health Officer, other provincial government ministries, health authorities, the First Nations Health Council, First Nations Health Authority and other Indigenous organizations such as Métis Nation BC, and community partners in taking action to ensure a comprehensive and robust response to B.C.'s overdose emergency.