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For immediate release

BC SOCIAL WORKERS SAY GOVERNMENT DECRIMINALIZATION ROLLBACK IS WRONGHEADED

(Vancouver) BC's professional association for social workers is disappointed that eight years into the public health emergency and one year into the decriminalization pilot project, the BC government has decided to walk back decriminalization and weakening their argument that addiction is a health not criminal justice issue.

Recently, the BC government announced it would be working with the federal government to end illicit drug use in public spaces. Previously, the BC Supreme Court placed an injunction on Bill 34, BC's legislative attempt to end public use of drugs, and the BC Court of Appeal denied a bid from the provincial government to appeal the injunction. Last week, the federal government agreed to British Columbia request.

"Looking for a way around the injunction is wrong and BC should instead be fully implementing a workable plan that addresses all aspects of the problem of unregulated drug deaths," said BCASW President Michael Crawford. "Combatting the skyrocketing number of deaths requires the expansion of safer supply, increased injection and inhalation sites, and easy access to public, evidence-based withdrawal management, treatment, and recovery services."

According to the BC Coroner's office, almost half of all unregulated drug deaths occurred in private residences, and another one-third occurred inside other residences, including social and supportive housing, shelters, and hotels. In 2023, less than 20% of unregulated drug deaths occurred outside.

"Walking back decriminalization in this fashion will push vulnerable people who use drugs into the back alleys and inside and will do nothing to stem the terrible tide of deaths due to the toxic unregulated drug supply," said Crawford. "The provision of a safe supply of drugs must be significantly increased and the number of drugs provided expanded so that the program better meets the needs of those who use it."

Slightly more than 4,000 people are registered for the safe supply program: a fraction of the more than 115,000 people with opioid use disorder in BC according to BC's Public Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry.

The BC Association of Social Workers has asked the BC government to stop ignoring the homelessness and poverty crisis that continues to prevent people from securing safe, affordable, and accessible housing. The BCASW also notes that deaths due to the unregulated drug supply are disproportionate for Indigenous people and criminalization too will be experienced disproportionately by Indigenous people.

“Collectively, social workers have a moral responsibility to act expeditiously to save lives and to counter the disinformation that creates and support roadblocks to implementing a full and workable response to the unregulated drug supply and associated deaths,” said Crawford. “The public is not well-informed by those who politicize decriminalization for their own benefit, by wrongly attributing overdose deaths to this policy, rather than the unregulated drug supply.”

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BC Association of Social Workers

BCASW is a voluntary, not-for-profit membership association that supports and promotes the profession of social work and advocates for social justice. BCASW is one of the provincial/territorial social work associations in partnership with the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW). Through CASW we support the work of the International Federation of Social Workers. BCASW was incorporated in 1956 and has branches and members (including students) throughout BC.

BCASW acknowledges that our office is in the unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations and that our members live and work in unceded territories across British Columbia. We also express appreciation to Métis and Inuit peoples across British Columbia.