BC Association of Social Workers
#410 – 1755 West Broadway
Vancouver, BC V6J 4S5

E: bcasw@bcasw.org
T: 604.730.9111

September 17, 2024
For immediate release

SOCIAL WORK ASSOCIATION CONCERNED ABOUT INVOLUNTARY CARE

(Vancouver) BC's professional association for social workers is calling on the BC government to exercise caution as it creates a program of involuntary care under the Mental Health Act for individuals it describes as "people with addiction challenges, brain injuries, and mental-health issues".

"When the state implements programs of involuntary care, social workers and other health professionals become concerned about infringements on human rights," said Michael Crawford, President of the BC Association of Social Workers (BCASW). "Removing freedom and autonomy carries with it the responsibility to ensure that people's rights are recognized and that they are treated with dignity and respect."

The BCASW understands the horrific impact of the toxic unregulated drug supply, the associated overdose deaths, and the consequences for drug users, their families, and communities. BC has been wrestling with the public health emergency for more than eight years and has seen almost 15,000 drug overdose deaths.

"We have asked the BC government to take an evidence-based approach to this problem and the same holds true for the planned involuntary care program," said Crawford. "We are concerned about the lack of efficacy of coercive treatment and ask the government to consult widely with health professionals and drug user groups prior to the implementation of this program."

The number of opioid users in BC has been stable over the last decade however the number of annual overdose deaths, while down this year so far, continues to be significant due to the increasingly toxic nature of the unregulated drug supply. The poisoned drug supply has led to more people having severe mental and physical disabilities that limit their ability to care for themselves.

"Involuntary care is a poor substitute for accessible withdrawal management, treatment, and support services in adequate numbers to meet demand," said Crawford. "And, treatment is only one piece of a multifaceted response, that must include accessible, long-term, supportive housing and wrap-around health and social supports."

BC's prescribed alternatives (safer supply) program serves slightly more than 4,000 people in a province where, according to the Public Health Officer (PHO), more than 115,000 people have a diagnosis of Opioid Use Disorder. Both the PHO and the former BC Chief Coroner have called for an expansion of this program and noted the lack of overdose prevention and safe injection/inhalation sites as problematic.

"With a provincial election looming, our members are concerned that escalating political attacks on harm reduction services will result in fewer services for drug users," said Crawford. "We need a more fulsome response to this problem that includes both harm reduction and treatment before increasing the number of people detained under BC's Mental Health Act."

- 30 -

Contacts:

Michael Crawford, MSW, RSW | President (he/him)
BC Association of Social Workers
&
Dianne Heath, MSW, RSW | Executive Director (she/her)
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.*