



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

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A MESSAGE FROM YOUR MP ON THE OPIOID CRISIS

Friends and fellow Yukoners, Canada is in the middle of a substance abuse crisis which has claimed over 27,000 lives since 2016. I was serving in my previous role as CMOH when the Yukon's first fentanyl overdose death was recorded. While we've introduced many measures to combat the crisis, clearly there is more to do. The Yukon has the highest per capita deaths caused by toxic drugs in Canada. There were 25 opioid related deaths in 2021, while as of writing there have been 12 to date this year. While CMOH, I worked with the Yukon Government to take steps to address the opioid crisis, including deployment of Take Home Naloxone kits, expanding clinical care for people with opioid use disorders, and promoting harm reduction measures such as safe supply and supervised consumption. I know this crisis has hit close to home for many Yukoners.

As your MP, and as a physician, I feel responsible to use my position to support measures that will accelerate our response to this crisis and prevent Canadians dying from overdose. It's because of this that I have decided to support Bill C-216, a private member's bill brought by my NDP colleague, Gord Johns. MP Johns' bill proposes 3 main measures to respond more effectively to this crisis: decriminalizing simple possession of controlled substances; removal of previous possession charges; and creating a national strategy on substance use. Regardless of whether this private member's bill passes, it is time to treat this opioid crisis as a public health and social issue, and not a criminal one.

Since taking office as MP, I've worked hard with colleagues across party lines to raise the issue of the toxic drug crisis and push for solutions from the federal government. Earlier this year, I worked with my colleagues to ensure the House of Commons held a "Take Note Debate" on the crisis. This was an opportunity for all MPs to share their own experiences with the crisis and openly discuss potential policy solutions. I have also continued to raise this issue directly with the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, and urge a more expedient response from the federal level on this issue.

Since 2017, our government has provided funding to support better access to overdose response training, as well as increasing the availability of Naloxone kits. In Budget 2022, we pledged to provide **\$100 million** over the next 3 years to support addictions treatment and prevention in Canada's communities through Health Canada's Substance Use and Addictions Program (SUAP). This builds on the **\$116 million** we invested in the Substance Use and Addictions program in 2021.

I am encouraged by the steps the federal government has also been taking to address the toxic drug crisis and look forward to continuing to work closely with colleagues to push hard for further action.

BILL C-216: WHAT WOULD IT DO? WHAT'S NEXT?

Bill C-216 is a private member's bill brought forward by my NDP colleague, Gord Johns. These bills rarely become law, and despite the fact it may not reach the next stage of the legislative process to be studied in committee, I believe MP Johns' Bill provides an valuable opportunity to consider and debate substantive policy solutions to the toxic drug crisis Canada is facing.

Like the debate held on the toxic drug crisis earlier this year, C-216 offers opportunities to discuss federal legislative steps like creating a National Strategy on Substance Use or introducing decriminalization, as well as a chance to review tools currently on the table for provinces and territories to tackle this crisis.

DECRIMINALIZING SUBSTANCE USE

Decriminalization is not the same as legalizing drug use. Use of illicit substances would remain illegal. Trafficking and manufacturing those substances will also remain illegal criminal activities. The difference is that with decriminalization, consumption and simple possession will be treated as a health issue instead of a criminal offence, in order to help save lives. This will help remove the stigma which prevents victims from asking for help, and redirect them to healthcare solutions instead of to the criminal justice system. This is the approach taken by countries like Portugal for more than 20 years: directing people with criminal offences to the justice system while directing users to get the healthcare they need, along with administrative penalties such as fines or community service.

More than 30 countries around the world have introduced some form of decriminalization including Australia, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Chile. With a comprehensive approach including decriminalization, Portugal moved from having one of the highest per capita deaths caused by opioids in the European Union to the lowest. In 1999, Portugal suffered 369 opioid deaths, while in 2016 there were 30. Meanwhile, Canada is projected to have more than 4,000 deaths by June of this year.

Decriminalization has not been shown to lead to increased drug use. Most importantly, it cannot be treated as a single measure but must be accompanied by a more comprehensive solution, a National Strategy, that will include measures focused on recovery, treatment and harm reduction and provides enhancements in access to social and community supports and treatment where indicated.

We will still need police forces to address importation and trafficking. In the Yukon, we also have innovative and effective programs such as Kwanlin Dün's Community Safety Officers, who are trained and trusted officers that can help identify and support people at risk. Decriminalization will provide opportunities for those who need help to reach out. It helps reduce alone and at-home drug-use, where it is so often fatal. People in simple possession of drugs can be directed towards a healthcare response, as opposed to a criminal justice one which must be reserved for actual criminals.



WHAT'S NEXT?

I will continue to support a federal response to the toxic substance use crisis as your MP. Individual communities should know that there are additional steps they can take already. Under the *Controlled Drug and Substances Act*, municipalities, provinces, and territories can currently apply for what is called a Section 56 Exemption, which allows possession of a controlled substance from being considered a criminal act within that jurisdiction. Similar to what C-216 proposes with decriminalization, instead of arrest, drug users will be redirected to medical and social supports. Several Canadian communities, including Vancouver, have already applied for this exemption and I hope the Yukon will consider this step too.