



Peer Support Workers & the Opioid Crisis

August 2020

Background

In July of 2020 paramedics attended approximately 2,700 overdose calls (previous averages have been in the range of around 2,000 a month). Additionally, May, June and July 2020 marked the deadliest months of this opioid crisis since December of 2016 with 171 lives lost in May, 175 in June and 175 in July. The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to this alarming rise because of an increasingly toxic drug supply and a higher incidence of people using drugs at home due to physical distancing guidelines, to name two key factors. While efforts are being made to reduce this number of deaths, the fact remains that lives are being lost to a crisis that is only worsening as we grapple with COVID-19.

An underutilized part of the broad strategy in helping to reduce the number of overdose deaths has been the use of peer support workers in a variety of settings including overdose prevention sites. Peers typically have equal standing in the community with those with whom they work and have lived experience. This lived experience becomes part of their professional work as they build trust, reduce stigma and provide all important harm reduction services in their communities. When properly utilized, evidence clearly shows that peers play a crucial role in supporting individuals who use substances and in responding to overdose situations. They are paid relatively little for their life-saving work (anecdotal evidence indicates between \$10.00 and \$30.00/hourly) and work in the middle of highly stressful situations that can have lasting mental and emotional impacts.

As Judy Darcy, Minister of Mental Health and Addictions so aptly noted: "Peers are often the unsung heroes of the overdose crisis and we have so much to learn from their wisdom and experience."ⁱ However, during this time of COVID-19 people are less apt to visit overdose prevention sites and are more likely to use drugs alone, without the safety and support of those who may be able to help in the event of an emergency. The opportunity to provide life-saving work has been hampered by this global pandemic, however the need for their expertise has only increased. NNPBC was pleased to see that on August 4, 2020, the province of BC announced it was increasing funding to overdose prevention sites in the amount of \$10.5 million. These monies would be used to open new consumption and inhalation sites, hire nurses, social workers and peer support workers in an effort to help mitigate the opioid crisis.ⁱⁱ

From a nursing perspective, NNPBC both supports and applauds the work that peer support workers across this province undertake on a daily basis. Life saving work occurs and without peer support workers, there is little doubt the number of overdose deaths would be far worse.

Key Messages

- NNPBC applauds and supports the numerous peer support workers who work all across this province for their life-saving work.
- Peer support workers are an integral part of harm-reduction strategies.
- NNPBC applauds the BC government for its efforts in supporting overdose prevention and harm reduction.
- While NNPBC recognizes that peer support works across many settings, with varied pay and sometimes in unions, many peer support workers are underpaid for their work.
- NNPBC supports better integration of peer support workers across all harm reduction settings throughout all health authorities.
- Peer support workers must have access to mental health services that focus on their well-being given the stresses of their jobs.



Further Reading/Resources

- [Toward the Heart](#)
- [BCCSU](#)
- [Canadian Association of People who use Drugs](#)
- [Moms Stop the Harm](#)
- [Government of BC- Treatment and Support](#)
- [Trauma Informed Practice and Opioid Crisis](#)
- [Mental Health Commission- Stigma and the Opioid Crisis](#)

Please feel free to direct questions and additional comments to info@nnpbc.com.

ⁱ <http://www.vch.ca/about-us/news/news-releases/street-smart-peers-receive-canadas-first-certificate-in-overdose-response>. Accessed August 2020.

ⁱⁱ <https://globalnews.ca/news/7249840/funding-overdose-prevention-british-columbia/>. Accessed August 2020.