



# News Release

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**For Immediate Release**  
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## **YOUTH-INFORMED RCY REPORT CALLS FOR HARM REDUCTION AS KEY PART OF COMPREHENSIVE SUBSTANCE USE SERVICE SYSTEM**

VANCOUVER – The provincial government should develop a comprehensive system of substance use services capable of addressing the diverse needs of young people across British Columbia, says a report released today by the Representative for Children and Youth.

The need for harm reduction to be a key component of this wrap-around system is among the recommendations in *Time to Listen: Youth Voices on Substance Use*, a report that offers the first-hand perspectives of 100 young people in B.C. with lived experience and also draws on lessons learned from an aggregate review of substance use-related injury and death reports received by RCY in 2017.

“We must face the reality today that too many youth in B.C. with significant substance use issues are overdosing and, tragically, some are dying,” said Representative Jennifer Charlesworth. “Many are not safe, in part because of the inadequacies of our current system of substance use supports, and additional help must be offered to make these young people safer. We need a comprehensive system that offers a wide range of services – from education and materials to encourage prevention and safer substance use, to easy-to-access information about available services, to safe-consumption sites for youth.”

The RCY report is timed to help inform the mental health and substance use strategy currently being developed by the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions for release in spring 2019. It adds the important voices of youth to the ongoing dialogue on the current overdose crisis, which in 2017 alone took the lives of 1,452 British Columbians, including 24 youth between the ages of 10 and 18.

The report reflects the perspectives of 100 youth across B.C. who participated in focus groups and completed surveys, offering their views on substance use and suggestions about what could be changed to make youth safer. It also incorporates the findings of an aggregate review of the 154 substance-related critical injuries and deaths reported to RCY in 2017 by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD).

Youth who participated said many of them use substances to “numb” negative feelings caused by past trauma and many spoke up about the need for positive connections with supportive, non-judgmental adults to help keep them safe. Said one youth: “You need that one person who won’t give up on you.”

Acting on the strong youth voice in this report, the Representative recommends that government develop and fund an array of substance use services that can meet the diverse needs of all youth, including the development of culturally relevant and safe services and supports for First Nations, Indigenous, Métis and Inuit youth, their families and communities.

Also reflected in the recommendations of this report were youth calls for:

- Youth engagement – with a diverse range of youth – to be embedded into the province’s Mental Health and Addictions Strategy, including the implementation of that plan.
- The creation of an accessible and youth friendly single source of information about all publicly funded youth substance use services available in the province.
- The creation of a full spectrum of youth-specific harm reduction services, including youth-specific spaces for supervised consumption “I was turned away from a needle exchange because I was too young,” said one youth participant. Added another: “It’s not safe to go to [adult] safe injection sites . . .”
- The implementation of a comprehensive training program to help foster parents build skills for open dialogue with youth about substance use. Said one participant: “Youth who use a drug should be able to say [to their caregiver] ‘I tried this’ without people freaking out . . . there needs to be less fear and more family.”

“Evidence shows that employing an array of harm reduction approaches, including prevention initiatives, education about safer substance use and measures to reduce and respond to overdoses, is the right approach,” said Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry, who was consulted as part of the RCY project. “I am pleased to see that B.C. youth have been engaged and that their ideas and needs are reflected in the pages of this report.”

The Representative acknowledges that the issue of harm reduction is controversial but stresses that the overdose crisis in B.C. requires specific action on behalf of young people. “Youth have spoken, and government should listen,” Charlesworth said. “There is a real opportunity to take action that can help save young lives.”

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