



Statement

Aug. 31, 2023

For Immediate Release

As B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth, I am often asked what keeps me awake at night and what worries me most about what young people in B.C. are experiencing. Like many other parents, family members, peers, service providers and leaders, I have many areas of concern these days, but the one that makes my heart ache consistently is the devastating impact that the toxic drug crisis is having on children and youth.

Today is International Overdose Awareness Day. As I came in to work this morning, I noticed dozens of beautiful purple ribbons tied around poles, each with a card of remembrance for a loved one lost to the toxic drug crisis. Through these acts of remembrance and resistance, organizations such as Moms Stop the Harm and peer networks are urging us to remember that this crisis has a very human face.

The people lost to toxic drug poisonings come from every demographic and community in this province. They are children, siblings, parents, aunties and uncles, grandparents, friends and colleagues. And these losses are having a profound direct and indirect impact on children, youth and young adults, as my Office has endeavoured to demonstrate through our recent social media campaign.

Statistics and media coverage of the crisis are plentiful but they don't tell the whole story. To comprehend it, we need to dig deeper into understanding peoples' stories. Today is an invitation to all of us to seek to understand rather than judge, and to answer the calls to action in whatever small or bold ways we can.

I know that there is tremendous controversy around how we should respond to the toxic drug issue. I am dismayed and deeply disappointed to see that the issue has become so polarized and that one set of resources for addressing the crisis has been pitted against another.

Let's be clear: it's not about harm reduction versus treatment and recovery. It's not one or the other. To effectively address this crisis, keep families together and people alive, we need a robust array of voluntary services and supports that meet people where they are at.

In 2018, when I first became Representative, I released a report called *Time to Listen: Youth Voices on Substance Use*. As part of the creation of that report, we talked with 100 young people who used substances. We found out why they were using and what they said they needed.

They told us then that they were using to cope with emotional pain and past trauma. And as you will see in the forthcoming second phase of RCY's Toxic Drug Crisis social media campaign, that is still a key reason they use.

What do young people need? They need to feel a sense of safety and belonging. They need non-judgmental supports, people who understand why they use and who won't try to force them into recovery before they're ready. They need youth-specific harm reduction facilities, and a full array of wraparound supports to help them in their journey.

We need to look upstream, too. We need to prevent the kinds of pain and trauma young people are experiencing that lead them into using in the first place. We need to concentrate on keeping families safely together, providing supports and education for entire families and providing cultural and personal connections.

When young people feel safe and have a sense of belonging, they thrive.

But public services in B.C. for children and youth who use substances and their families remain fragmented and inefficient.

So, we have a crisis. But the polarizing rhetoric is not helpful.

The negativity we have heard recently around safer supply, for example, is inconsistent with the evidence. Safer supply is not indicated in the vast majority of toxic drug deaths.

And more than that – while the toxic drug crisis is real, we need to hold on to hope, too.

Let's not let fear take hold. Fear just drives us apart. Let's especially not put fear in the driver's seat and let it control our reactions. That will not lead to good outcomes.

Staying balanced, reasoned and evidence-based is how we can move forward in a good way. There's no room for polarizing rhetoric here.

I urge government to move quickly to provide a comprehensive array of services for children, youth and families that will work to prevent substance use, and to

effectively and compassionately address it when it does occur. This is what will make positive change possible, and that's what everyone wants.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "J Charlesworth". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Dr. Jennifer Charlesworth
Representative for Children and Youth