

## **NEVER ALONE WITH ADDICTION**

It's 4:25pm on a Friday and a client walks into one of the community service agencies in Merritt requesting intervention for drug addiction, whether methadone, detox, or just someone to talk to about wellness. But the service provider has limited options to help them at that point.

While Merritt has an inter-disciplinary array of programs that could help, most are offered from 8:30 to 4:30 Monday to Friday. A client, despite being ready to take a first step towards recovery, has to wait at least 64 hours until services open again after the weekend.

This could be any one of a minimum of 30 residents of Merritt currently considered at high risk of opioid overdose, 87 others served by the local shelter, those who are transient, persons considered part of a local hidden homelessness population, youth at-risk, or countless others.

Within those 64 hours, they might have contact with first responders, the hospital, or they could lose their life to overdose. The ER might keep them a few hours, as might the RCMP, or they might find refuge in the shelter at certain times of year. What they won't have access to is treatment or recovery services until Monday morning - or longer on a holiday weekend.

With 15 overdose deaths over the past three years, the Merritt Local Health Area is currently ranked 6th in illicit deaths in all of British Columbia (44.6 per 100,000 people).

64 hours should be considered unsustainable anytime, but especially during the opioid crisis. This response gap has brought together a group of organizations intent on delivering addiction care that involves peer navigators with lived/living experience of substance use, wrap-around harm reduction support, referral resources and tools, community education and prevention.

The City of Merritt via its Community Policing Office, Interior Health, Scw'exmx Community Health Services Society, ASK Wellness Society, and Nicola Valley Shelter and Support Society have developed this proposal with the support of local RCMP. As this initiative develops, we anticipate participation from or consultation with First Nations Health Authority, Nicola Valley Hospital and Health Centre, Nicola Valley & District Food Bank, Soup Kitchen, Conayt Friendship Society, Nicola Valley Institute of Technology culinary arts program, Rural & Remote Division of Family Practice - Merritt Chapter, Merritt Secondary School, Merritt Fire Rescue Department, paramedics, pharmacists, Merritt Community Corrections, Business Watch, Pain BC, clients and volunteers.

### **Peer Navigators**

The Nicola Valley Shelter and Support Society recently piloted a day program, developed with client input, that connected persons at-risk with social and recreational activities in the community, using peer workers for support. This took place during the summer months when there was no longer access to cold weather shelter services. The latest report shows that in September 2019, 85 individual clients participated, with 40 identifying as Indigenous.

The Never Alone With Addiction initiative plans to expand the peer navigator role in Merritt to provide peer support to help fill the gap in services after hours and on weekends. Peer Navigators are uniquely equipped to engage other members of the community due to lived/living experience of substance use and added expertise from training that includes insight into mental health, inter-generational trauma, chronic pain, poverty and other common challenges. They will provide information about local programs and services available to meet the needs of clients where they are, encourage wellness and empowerment, as well as participate in planning and delivery of the initiative.

By reducing barriers with food as an engagement tool in an environment that is welcoming to all persons and accessible via drop-in, peer navigators will use healthy conversations to draw on the strengths and lived experience of participants to help each client determine the best options to reduce harms and increase individual and community wellness based on their own personal situation. This initiative will also build community integration through casual labour in clean up activities, public event set up and other projects.

### **Wrap-Around Harm Reduction Support**

A Situation Table model will be implemented so that a coalition of service agencies can ensure wrap-around harm reduction support is initiated for persons at risk or in need of immediate interventions. It will monitor and connect people with outreach teams, health agencies, treatment centres, Elders, cultural workers and knowledge keepers with a goal to build a better system of local care.

For example, clients can be connected with the OAT clinic at the Nicola Valley Hospital and Health Centre, zu?mintéxw wellness team at Scw'exmx Community Health Services Society for the Wellbriety Program, needle exchange at ASK Wellness Society, or other programs.

### **Referral Resources & Tools**

A 2018 event in Vancouver, *Pain and Overdose Dialogue*, brought together people working in research, policy and direct care in both the pain and substance use fields, as well as people with lived experience of both pain and substance use. The main issue, which surfaced repeatedly, was identified as the compartmentalization of pain and substance use as distinct and unrelated issues when they are, in fact, deeply enmeshed; evidence shows that more than half of people who have died from overdose since 2016 had sought treatment for physical pain in the year previous to their deaths.\*

The Never Alone With Addiction initiative will provide peer navigators and agencies with resource tool kits and populate a website to share information on how to access a wide array of services. This will include online self-care links that individuals and families can access at any time for addiction, mental wellness, pain management, etc. The collaborative group will continuously improve the quality of resources based on participant and facilitator feedback.

### **Community Education & Prevention**

We will communicate how the City of Merritt is responding to mental health and substance use issues to improve awareness and reduce stigma. To help the community be safer, healthier and more inclusive, we will offer public education opportunities, such as a community forum that would involve a peer navigator and service agency panel; Naloxone training; liaising with Business Watch for information sharing, needle pick up and general clean up; and youth diversion activities, such as offering a presentation by a peer navigator to secondary school students.

### **Summary**

A Community Wellness and Harm Reduction Grant for the Never Alone With Addiction initiative would help Merritt enhance knowledge, skills and resources for individuals, families and our community as a whole to be safer, healthier and more inclusive. It can provide mental wellness support, encourage harm reduction outcomes, and potentially achieve health and social stabilization for people with a substance use disorder. This grant has the potential to help Merritt reduce overdose deaths and reduce harms associated with substance use. Thank you for your consideration of this proposal.

\*[PainBC.ca](http://PainBC.ca)