



---

**MAYOR KENNEDY STEWART**

January 26, 2021

Mayor Lyn Hall  
1100 Patricia Blvd  
Prince George, B.C.  
V2L 3V9

Dear Mayor Hall,

I am writing on behalf of Vancouver City Council to request support from the members of BC Urban Mayors' Caucus to shift British Columbia away from a criminal justice-based approach to substance use and possession, towards a health-focused one.

A shift from enforcement and criminalization to decriminalization of simple possession of illicit drugs has begun to receive widespread support in society, both globally and here in Canada. Vancouver Coastal Health's Chief Medical Health Officer, the Vancouver Police Department, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, Premier Horgan, Dr. Bonnie Henry, addictions experts, and civil society groups have all argued that a drastic change in drug policy is needed, alongside improvement to the addictions system of care, in order to save the countless lives being lost to overdose. In *Stopping the Harm*, Dr. Henry writes "B.C. cannot 'treat' its way out of this overdose crisis or 'arrest' its way out either". After a thorough consideration of the evidence laid out by public health experts, I have come to the same conclusion.

Although Vancouver's addictions treatment and harm reduction programs have been greatly expanded throughout the overdose epidemic and have been shown to save lives, stigma continues to drive people to use substances alone in private residences, thus elevating their risk of death. Decriminalization of personal possession would help our municipal government, health officials, and law enforcement break down the stigma associated with substance use, and represents a crucial next step in building a response that is proportionate to the scale of the emergency. Furthermore, decriminalization of personal possession of controlled substances would assist local governments to optimize pathways to treatment and supports by reducing the stigma that prevents people from reaching out for help in the first place. As Indigenous people are disproportionately affected by the emergency, this exemption would also advance our collective efforts at health equity.

On November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Vancouver City Council unanimously approved motion B.4 *Work with Senior Governments to Address the Overdose Crisis* and issued instructions to seek local government, Union of BC Municipalities, and the Federal Canadian Municipalities' support for a regional and national framework to decriminalize the simple possession of illicit drugs.

On December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020, I wrote federal Minister of Health, Hon. Patty Hajdu to seek an exemption from section 56(1) of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (CDSA) to decriminalize personal possession of controlled substances within Vancouver's municipal borders. If approved, the exemption would mark a watershed moment in Canadian drug policy. However, a section 56(1) exemption is but one option within an array of changes that can be made to achieve *de jure* decriminalization in municipal contexts.

BC Mayors are well-positioned to work with local police detachments to deprioritize enforcement of the CDSA when it comes to simple possession. Municipalities can also work with health and social service providers to ensure that supervised consumption and overdose prevention sites are available to allow people to use drugs safely and without fear of arrest.

During the Vancouver City Council meeting on November 25 where motion B.4 was debated, all 41 people registered to speak were in favour, and Council received 181 emails voicing support. Additionally, Vancouver's Community Action Team (a provincially-funded and City-led cross-sectoral group of key local stakeholders including Indigenous health and community leaders and people with lived experience of substance use) has endorsed the call for decriminalization of personal possession. We plan to hold additional consultation events with drug user organizations, Indigenous partners, the local business community, and a range of health and public safety experts in the weeks to come.

I hope to continue this timely and important conversation about drug policy reform with you and the BC Urban Mayors' Caucus to explore ways in which we can work together to advocate for a regional and national framework to save lives and stop further harm associated with mental health and addictions. Please do not hesitate to reach out directly if you would like to hear more details about our plan to stop further harm and save lives.

Sincerely,



Mayor Kennedy Stewart  
City of Vancouver

## APPENDIX

### **Motion: Work with Senior Governments to Address the Overdose Crisis Submitted by: Mayor Stewart**

#### WHEREAS

1. The overdose crisis continues to claim many lives, with 1,536 deaths in Vancouver since a Provincial Overdose Emergency was declared in April 2016, and an estimated 328 overdose deaths in the City of Vancouver this year to date, putting 2020 on track to be the worst year yet;
2. The COVID-19 pandemic has further isolated drug users, impacted access to harm reduction services, and fueled greater toxicity within the illicit drug supply;
3. Premier Horgan wrote to Prime Minister Trudeau on July 20, 2020, asking the federal government to decriminalize personal possession of all psychoactive substances, as a necessary next step to reduce the stigma associated with substance use and encourage people at risk to access lifesaving harm reduction and treatment services;
4. The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police agree that decriminalization of simple possession is an effective way to reduce public health and public safety harms associated with substance use and endorses alternatives to criminal sanctions for simple possession of illicit drugs;
5. Vancouver Coastal Health's (VCH) Chief Medical Health Officer Dr. Patricia Daly and Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry have called for the decriminalization of personal possession of illegal substances, as an urgent and necessary next step to addressing the overdose crisis;
6. The PIVOT Legal Society, Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, and Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network recently wrote to the Federal Ministers of Health, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, and Justice and Attorney General to urge their government to use all available tools to decriminalize simple drug possession;
7. Decriminalization is a step toward addressing anti-Black, anti-poor, and colonial policing at this time; and
8. Vancouver is in a unique position to move forward with decriminalization within its municipal borders, in a coordinated partnership with the Vancouver Police Department and Vancouver Coastal Health Authority.

THEREFORE IT BE RESOLVED Council direct the Mayor to consult with the Vancouver Coastal Health Chief Medical Health Officer and then write to the federal Ministers of Health, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, and Justice and Attorney General to request a federal exemption from the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act to decriminalize personal possession of illicit substances within the City's boundaries for medical purposes, in order to address urgent public health concerns caused by the overdose crisis and COVID-19;

FURTHER THAT the Mayor write to all other B.C. local governments urging them to consider pursuing a federal exemption from the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act to decriminalize personal possession of illicit substances within their municipal boundaries;

FURTHER THAT the Mayor write to the Union of BC Municipalities and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities seeking their support for decriminalizing personal possession of illicit substances;

FURTHER THAT Council acknowledge that a spectrum of measures are necessary to address the ongoing poisoned drug supply crisis, including the need for additional treatment and therapy options;

AND FURTHER THAT Council direct the Mayor to advocate vociferously and write to the Federal and Provincial governments including the respective Ministers of Health for expanded investment in and access to mental health and addictions treatment services and therapy options, towards shifting the paradigm and working to break the cycle of addictions and overdose deaths in Vancouver.