

For Immediate Release

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Harm Reduction Advocates Send Letter to Minister Farnworth in Response to his Rejection of Provincial Health Officer's Call to Decriminalize Drug Possession

Vancouver, B.C. – Pivot Legal Society and 22 other harm reduction advocates and organizations from across the Province have sent a letter to Minister Mike Farnworth, B.C.'s Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General. The letter responds to the Minister's dismissal of Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry's urgent call to effectively decriminalize illicit drug possession in B.C. In her April 2019 [report](#), Dr. Henry recommends supporting a harm reduction-based provincial policing priority and legislative amendments to divert police resources away from drug possession enforcement in order to address the ongoing overdose crisis. Minister Farnworth [cited jurisdictional constraints in order to reject Dr. Henry's recommendations](#).

The letter explains that federal drug prohibition does not preclude the Province from taking immediate measures to decriminalize drug possession in B.C. in order to address the opioid crisis and the harms of drug law enforcement. **We call on the Minister to 1) amend the B.C. Police Act and 2) set policing priorities focused on harm reduction rather than criminalization.** The letter outlines the reasons why legislative amendments to divert police resources away from low-level drug law enforcement and a commitment to a harm reduction-based policing are actions well within the jurisdiction of the Province and Mr. Farnworth's Ministry.

B.C. has the highest rate of fatal overdoses in the country and faces a staggeringly toxic drug supply. Accordingly, B.C. needs a public health approach to drug use that accounts for the nature of drug use and addiction, the harms of criminalization, and the impact of stigma on the health and safety of people who use drugs. Hugh Lampkin, a Board Member with the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU) shares why a provincial move to decriminalize low-level drug possession is critical in ensuring people who use drugs have access to life-saving harm reduction services amidst the overdose crisis:

"This continuing drug war policing that targets people who use drugs in our own neighbourhoods and communities is making the overdose crisis worse by pushing people who use drugs into unsafe places, criminalising and punishing people who need support, and contributing to social stigma."

The overdose crisis is affecting British Columbians across the province. Communities outside the Lower Mainland already experience less access to harm reduction services and the over-policing of drug possession makes drug users in these communities even more likely to use alone. Alison Houweling, Social Worker (Vernon, BC), concurs:

"It [these recommendations] would be a much needed step towards re-framing illicit substance use as the health issue it is and reducing the stigma that is keeping people from getting help. For us front line workers, it is all too apparent that criminalization absolutely does not work for the person struggling with illicit substance use and on a community level, it only serves to legitimize and foment the stigma."

Drug Policy staff lawyer at Pivot Legal Society, Caitlin Shane, explains the urgency of these calls to action: B.C. cannot claim to take a public health approach to drug use if it continues to support the criminalization of people who use drugs. De facto decriminalization in B.C. is both possible and necessary.

The letter asserts that treating substance use as a matter of criminality is an outdated and harmful approach, and governments at every level must continue to adapt laws, policies, and practices to reflect public health aims and to mitigate the harms of harsh drug laws and aggressive law enforcement, neither of which are relevant or evidence-based goals or objectives during an ongoing [public health emergency](#). The letter calls on Minister Farnworth to take bold and immediate action to save lives across B.C.

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About the Signatories

23 harm reduction advocates and organizations from across the Province have co-signed this letter.

About Pivot Legal Society

[Pivot Legal Society](#) is a leading Canadian human rights organization that uses the law to address the root causes of poverty and social exclusion in Canada. Pivot's award-winning work includes challenging laws and policies that force people to the margins of society and keep them there. Since 2002 Pivot has won major victories for sex workers' rights, police accountability, affordable housing, and health and drug policy.

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