

2026 Municipal and Provincial Elections in British Columbia; A Conversation Guide for PAN members and allies

Why engage with candidates?

Elections provide an opportunity to ask candidates how they understand the issues affecting our communities and what they would do if elected.

PAN members and allies bring significant expertise from working directly with people affected by HIV, viral hepatitis, substance use, the toxic drug supply, STBBIs, poverty, housing instability, sex work, and other health inequities. Many organizations also bring the expertise of people with lived and/or living experience(s).

Your experience is valuable political engagement. You do not need to speak on behalf of everyone, have all the answers or advocate for a particular political party or specific candidate. You can ask questions, share what you are seeing in your community and ask candidates to explain what they would do, why they would do it and how they would work with communities to implement their commitments.

Questions for municipal candidates

Not every issue falls within municipal jurisdiction. However, municipalities have important roles in areas such as housing, homelessness, public spaces, community safety, local services and relationships with community organizations. You might consider asking municipal candidates:

- What role should the municipality play in addressing homelessness and housing instability?
- How will you support low-barrier and supportive housing in our community?
- How will you ensure that people who use drugs are treated with dignity and respect in public spaces and municipal services?
- What role should the municipality play in supporting harm-reduction services?
- How will you work with community-based and peer-led organizations?
- How will you ensure that municipal policies do not create unnecessary barriers for people experiencing poverty, homelessness, substance use or other forms of marginalization?
- How will you approach public safety in ways that also promote health, dignity and inclusion?
- How will you engage people with lived and/or living experience in municipal decision-making?
- How will you address stigma and discrimination within municipal services?
- What partnerships would you build with health authorities, Indigenous organizations, community organizations and people with lived and/or living experience(s)?

More questions in the APPENDIX.

Questions for provincial candidates

Provincial governments have a particularly significant role in health care, mental health and substance-use services, treatment, harm reduction, funding for community organizations and broader health policy. Questions you might consider asking provincial candidates:

- What are your priorities for HIV, viral hepatitis and STBBI prevention, testing, treatment and care?
- What is your plan to address the toxic drug supply?
- What role will harm reduction play in your approach?
- What is your position on voluntary and involuntary treatment?
- What safeguards would accompany involuntary treatment?
- What will you do to ensure people have meaningful supports after treatment?
- How will you support sustainable funding for community-based and peer-led organizations?
- How will you ensure people with lived and/or living experience(s) have meaningful influence in provincial policy?
- How will you address health inequities related to housing, poverty and access to care?
- How will you ensure equitable access to services across urban, rural, remote and Indigenous communities?

More questions in the APPENDIX.

Before you meet with a candidate

A little preparation can help you make the most of your conversation. You don't need to cover every issue or ask every question. Focus on what matters most to your organization and the communities you serve. Here are a few things to consider:

Identify your priorities – Choose 2–3 issues that are most important to your organization or community. Think about what you would most like a candidate to understand, commit to or act on. You don't have to ask every question. Choose the questions that are most relevant to yourself, your organization and/or your community.

Bring a local perspective – Consider one or two examples that illustrate what you are seeing in your community. Personal stories, community experiences, and organizational expertise can all help bring an issue to life. Your organization's work and the experiences of the people you support are valuable evidence.

Know what you are asking for – Whenever possible, turn a concern into a specific question or request. Instead of only saying “*funding is unstable*,” you might ask: “Would you support sustainable, multi-year funding for community-based organizations providing these services? If so, what would that look like?”

Ask about the “why” – Don't be afraid to ask how a candidate has developed their position. This can help move toward understanding a candidate's values, assumptions, evidence and priorities. You can ask:

- Can you tell me why you believe this is the right approach?
- What evidence informs your approach?
- What experiences have shaped your position?
- What values guide your approach?

Ask for specifics – If you hear a general commitment, don't be afraid to ask what it would mean in practice:

- What specifically would you do?
- When would you do it?
- Who would be responsible?
- How would it be funded?
- How would you measure success?

Listen as much as you advocate – The goal is to understand the candidate's priorities, values and commitments. Take note of what they say, including areas where they are uncertain or where they identify limitations. Pay attention to whether candidates describe community organizations and people with lived and/or living experience(s) as meaningful partners in decision-making or simply as recipients of government decisions

Think about follow-up – If appropriate, ask whether you can follow up after the election or share additional information about your organization's work. Building relationships with candidates and elected officials can be valuable beyond election day. The goal is to understand candidates' positions, priorities and commitments and to ensure that the experiences of PAN members, allies and the communities they serve are part of the conversation.

You don't have to have all the answers.

Your organization's experience and the expertise of the people and communities you work alongside are valuable. Asking thoughtful questions, sharing what you are seeing and asking candidates to explain their commitments are meaningful forms of political engagement.

APPENDIX: More Questions to Consider Asking (by category)

This conversation guide provides a large list of questions to consider when speaking with candidates. Not every question will be relevant to every candidate or level of government.

HIV, viral hepatitis and STBBIs

HIV, viral hepatitis, and other STBBIs continue to affect communities across BC, while access to prevention, testing, treatment and ongoing care can vary significantly. Consider asking candidates questions about how they would improve access and address the barriers that prevent people from receiving the care and support they need:

- What would you do to improve prevention, testing, treatment, care and support for people living with or affected by HIV, viral hepatitis and other STBBIs?
- What do you see as the biggest barriers preventing people in our community from accessing HIV, hepatitis, STBBI and other health services?
- How would you address barriers related to poverty, housing instability, stigma, discrimination, substance use, geography or other social factors?
- What role do you believe community-based organizations should play in HIV, viral hepatitis and STBBI prevention, education, testing, treatment and support?
- How would you ensure that services are accessible to people who face multiple and intersecting barriers to care?
- What commitments will your government make to ensure equitable access to emerging HIV prevention options, including long-acting injectable PrEP, including through public funding and other measures to address barriers to access?

The toxic drug supply and harm reduction

The toxic drug supply continues to affect individuals, families, and communities across BC. PAN encourages members and allies to consider harm reduction broadly, not solely as overdose prevention or naloxone distribution, but as a public-health approach that can include drug checking, access to safer options, peer support, health and social services, education, prevention, connection to treatment, housing and other supports. Questions you might ask include:

- What is your approach to addressing the toxic drug supply and preventing drug-poisoning deaths?
- What role do you believe harm reduction should play in responding to substance use and the toxic drug supply?
- How would you support a broad range of harm-reduction services in our community?
- What role should community-based and peer-led organizations play in delivering harm reduction services?
- How would you ensure that people who use drugs have access to services without stigma, discrimination or unnecessary barriers?
- How would you balance prevention, harm reduction, treatment, recovery and other approaches in responding to substance use?
- What evidence, experiences or principles inform your approach to harm reduction?

Treatment, involuntary care and what happens afterward

There are many different perspectives on treatment and involuntary care, and these approaches raise important questions about health, rights, safety, dignity and effectiveness. Rather than focusing on whether a candidate supports or opposes a particular approach, consider asking what they believe a comprehensive continuum of care should look like including what happens before, during and after treatment:

- What is your position on voluntary and involuntary treatment for substance use?
- If you support involuntary treatment, what safeguards, oversight and accountability should be in place to protect people's rights, dignity and safety?
- How would you ensure that treatment is part of a broader continuum of care rather than a stand-alone intervention?
- What should happen when someone leaves withdrawal management, treatment or involuntary care?
- How would you ensure people leaving treatment have access to housing, primary care, mental-health care, medications, harm reduction, peer support and ongoing community connection?
- How should governments measure whether treatment and recovery systems are actually improving people's health and well-being?
- How would you address situations where people repeatedly enter treatment but do not have access to the ongoing supports they need afterward?

Community-based organizations and sustainable funding

Community-based organizations often provide trusted, accessible services to people who experience barriers with traditional healthcare systems. Consider asking candidates how they would support the organizations doing this work and whether current approaches to funding provide enough stability to sustain services, relationships and retain staff:

- What role do you believe community-based organizations should play in delivering health and social services, especially in smaller urban, rural, and remote communities?
- How would you support sustainable, multi-year and core funding for community-based organizations and networks?
- What would you do to address the challenges created by short-term, project-based or restrictive funding?
- How would you ensure that funding models allow organizations to retain experienced staff and maintain relationships with communities?
- How would you ensure that funding decisions do not unintentionally create or deepen service gaps?
- How should governments respond when the loss of funding puts an essential community service at risk of closing?
- How would you work with community organizations when government funding priorities change?

People with lived and/or living experience(s)

People with lived and/or living experience(s) bring expertise that is essential to understanding and addressing the issues affecting their communities and can strengthen the development, delivery and evaluation of policies and programs. Potential questions:

- How will you ensure that people with lived and/or living experience(s) have meaningful influence over policies and programs that affect their lives?
- How should people with lived and/or living experience(s) be compensated for their expertise and contributions?
- What would meaningful participation look like beyond consultation?
- How would you support meaningful paid employment and leadership opportunities for people with lived and/or living experience(s)?
- How would you ensure that peer-led organizations are recognized and supported as valuable partners?
- What mechanisms would you put in place to ensure that the perspectives of people with lived and/or living experience(s) are reflected in government decision-making?

Health equity, stigma and compassion

People affected by HIV, viral hepatitis, substance use and the toxic drug supply continue to experience stigma, discrimination and barriers to care that affect their health and well-being. Questions you might consider asking:

- What do you believe governments can do to reduce stigma and discrimination experienced by people who use drugs and people living with HIV, viral hepatitis and other STBBIs?
- How would you approach public education and communications about substance use and health in ways that promote compassion, dignity and understanding?
- How would you ensure that government communications do not contribute to stigma, division, scapegoating or exclusion?
- What role do you believe government has in addressing the social and structural conditions that contribute to health inequities?
- How would you address the connections between health, housing, income security, poverty and social isolation?
- What does health equity mean to you in practical terms?

Housing and homelessness

Housing, health and social well-being are closely connected, and housing instability can create significant barriers to accessing healthcare and support services. This is particularly relevant for conversations with municipal candidates. Questions you might consider asking:

- What will you do to increase access to safe, affordable and appropriate housing?
- How will you support people experiencing homelessness or housing instability?
- How should housing policy intersect with health, harm reduction and substance-use services?
- What role should municipalities play in supporting supportive housing, low-barrier housing and other housing options?

- How would you ensure that people are not discharged from hospitals, treatment programs or other services into homelessness?
- What would you do to address the barriers people face when trying to access housing because of substance use, income, disability or other circumstances?

Rural, remote, Indigenous, and underserved communities

Where someone lives can have a significant impact on the services and supports available to them. Questions you might consider asking:

- How will you ensure equitable access to healthcare and support services regardless of where someone lives?
- What will you do to address service gaps in rural, remote, Indigenous and underserved communities?
- How will you ensure that smaller communities have access to harm reduction, HIV, viral hepatitis, STBBI and substance-use services?
- How will you work with local community organizations to understand and address service gaps?
- How would you ensure that government funding decisions do not unintentionally undermine services in smaller communities?

Indigenous health and reconciliation

When engaging candidates on Indigenous health, PAN members should consider the importance of Indigenous leadership. Improving health equity requires meaningful partnership with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities and respect for self-determination and culturally grounded approaches to health and wellness. Questions you might consider asking:

- How will you work in partnership with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities and Indigenous-led organizations to improve health outcomes?
- What does meaningful implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples mean to you in relation to health?
- How will you support Indigenous-led approaches to health and wellness?
- How will you ensure Indigenous communities and organizations have the resources, authority and flexibility to develop culturally grounded responses?
- What steps will you take to advance the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action related to health?

Sex work

Sex workers continue to face significant barriers in part due to stigmatization and discrimination which are major contributors to poor health outcomes and reduced access to essential services. Questions you might consider asking:

- What commitments will your government make to address barriers to healthcare, housing, social services and workplace safety experienced by people engaged in sex work?
- How will you support their health, rights, dignity and safety? How will you actively address systemic discrimination?