

Close to Home



Families & Caregivers

Set priorities for addressing substance use and addiction in BC

Cover photo collage of loved ones lost to substance use and overdose, courtesy of Moms Stop The Harm. To see more photos visit:

www.momsstoptheharm.com/our-loved-ones

Background

The BC Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU) is a provincially networked organization with a mandate to develop, help implement, and evaluate evidence-based approaches to substance use and addiction. By supporting the collaborative development of evidence-based policies, guidelines and standards, the BCCSU seeks to improve the integration of best practices and care across the continuum of substance use, thereby serving all British Columbians.

The BCCSU prioritizes engagement with knowledge holders impacted by substance use, seeking input from people who currently use or formerly used substances, family members and caregivers, and people in recovery. These knowledge holder networks provide their invaluable experiences and expertise to the BCCSU, in turn helping the BCCSU to set priorities. The knowledge holder networks meet regularly to plan and implement initiatives that will advance their community's interests and address concerns.

Although families of all descriptions are an extremely valuable resource in a person's addiction care and recovery, they are too often overlooked in substance use service planning.

The **BCCSU Network of Family Members and Caregivers** aims to address this. The Network of Family Members and Caregivers is comprised of families across British Columbia who are affected by and want to change the existing substance use system, including representatives from various support and advocacy groups (listed on the next page).

On August 15, 2017, representatives from the BCCSU met with Judy Darcy, the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions. Following that meeting, the Network of Family Members and Caregivers was tasked with identifying gaps in the substance use system of care and developing recommendations for the Ministry.

Close to Home details the challenges family members and caregivers face when seeking to support loved ones who struggle with substance use disorders. It also outlines priorities and action items for the BCCSU Network of Family Members and Caregivers, the Provincial Government, and the regional health authorities.

Participants

The Network of Family Members and Caregivers is comprised of individuals, as well as representatives from the following family support and advocacy groups:

- From Grief to Action
- Grief Recovery After a Substance Passing (GRASP)
- Moms Stop the Harm
- Parents Forever
- Parents Together
- SHARE
- VCH Family Advisory Committee

Identified Challenges

Family members have identified several long-standing challenges in the health care system when seeking care for their loved ones, including a non-existent continuum of care that lacks follow-up, transitions, and communication.

The group highlighted that access to treatments and services is insufficient, and many services have restrictive or onerous eligibility rules. Furthermore, it was reported that substance use care, mental health care, medical and primary care and acute care services are siloed, making it difficult to receive coordinated health care. When a person does have access to treatment, families often experience very little flexibility with limited choices or options for treatment and inconsistent quality of treatment. Health providers are often not sufficiently trained or educated on how to manage substance use issues with evidence-based practices. An additional major challenge that was reported is that family members are often prohibited from being involved in their loved one's care and treatment plan, due to patient privacy and confidentiality policies.

Family members reported that they regularly struggle a great deal with navigating the health care system for their loved ones, educating themselves about substance use and addiction, providing supplementary care where services and supports are lacking, and often struggling to manage their own emotional and health needs in light of insufficient resources and support groups.

Priorities

The Network of Family Members and Caregivers has identified the following priorities for substance use and addiction treatment in British Columbia, through a pre-meeting survey followed by several in-person open discussions.

The provincial government, through the new Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions, must:

- Eliminate stigma by implementing a provincial public awareness campaign to educate all communities on substance use disorders. Families must be consulted in the development of this work.
- Work with the Ministry of Health to create a strict set of regulations and a monitoring system for all recovery centres in the province. This will include security, standards of care and safe discharge plans.
- Work with the Ministry of Education to ensure that provincial public school education strategies include standardized, up-to-date drug safety messages from primary through secondary school, including mental health literacy and coping strategies and timely referrals to treatment and supports for individuals experiencing problems.
- Support the creation of a comprehensive, regularly updated, online resource site, to facilitate access to counselling, patient housing, and financial assistance and thereby improve the chances for families to see success in the recovery of their loved ones.
- Work with public safety partners to acknowledge the harmful impacts of criminalization and punitive drug policies in driving the addiction and overdose crisis, and work with the federal government to decriminalize the possession and use of illicit drugs in Canada.

Together, the provincial government and regional health authorities must:

- Build a more timely and porous communication system allowing better information flow between service providers who provide care to people with substance use problems. This, in turn, will allow for a personalized continuum of care to be established either on demand or following admission to the Emergency Department.
- Greatly increase capacity to train all healthcare professionals who care for people with substance use disorders and concurrent mental disorders with evidence-based treatments and compassionate, trauma-informed responses. This will include fellowships for physicians, nurses, pharmacists, social workers, and psychologists.

Regional health authorities must:

- Empower families by increasing inclusion of and support for family or caregivers of loved ones with substance use disorders. This includes involving families in overdose emergency response planning, local addiction services development, and establishing supports for families provincially to bring their life experiences and knowledge to inform.
- Ensure adequate sustainable funding for and equitable access to the full range of evidence-based care delivery options, including nurses, nurse practitioners, home health care providers, and integrated teams which include family members. The goal is optimize access to evidence-based, customized, culturally sensitive, and age appropriate pathways to recovery.
- Increase capacity for rapid access to evidence-based treatment in the province. Individuals who seek treatment need immediate access to evidence-based care.

Next Steps

In order to begin addressing these priorities, the Network of Family Members and Caregivers is calling on the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions to take the following next steps:

- 1 Immediately commit to establishing an effective substance use system of care and involving families in all stages of development and planning. This includes family involvement in the new Overdose Emergency Response Centre (OERC), as promised at the OERC announcement on December 1st, 2017.
- 2 Endorse the creation of a provincially-recognized best practices process outlining how to involve families affected by substance use disorders, and addressing privacy/confidentiality issues through the provincial expansion of policies like Vancouver Coastal Health's Family Involvement Policy.
- 3 Utilize BCCSU resources and other relevant tools to establish family support groups across the province.
- 4 Involve families in developing messaging for provincial public awareness and anti-stigma campaigns regarding addiction and overdose prevention/response, to be rolled out across the province immediately.

Based on the above priorities, BCCSU's **Network of Family Members and Caregivers** will take the following next steps:

- 1 Create and regularly update an online resource where families in BC can find information on addiction treatment and related substance use services, navigating the addiction system, self-care, advocacy, and support through personal stories.
- 2 Create a support handbook for families who have lost loved ones to substance use-related harms such as overdose, in partnership with the BC Coroners Service and the BC Bereavement Helpline.
- 3 Revise the Coping Kit, a support handbook for families struggling with addiction, and create two condensed versions in partnership with From Grief to Action and the Canadian Mental Health Association – BC.

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