

BRITISH COLUMBIA HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

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ENSURING CHOICE IN ADDICTIONS RECOVERY

BC Humanist Association submission on draft mental health and addictions strategy

Executive summary

The Province of British Columbia has long led the country in using evidence-based approaches to tackling public health crises. There is also a growing recognition, backed by empirical evidence, that offering people choice in their treatment results in better outcomes. Finally, the Government has a duty of religious neutrality, which should preclude direct support of faith-based programs where secular alternatives exist.

To this end, the BC Humanist Association and 535 petitioners¹ call on the Government of BC to ensure every patient seeking treatment for a substance use issue has access to secular, evidence-based treatment options, by:

1. Expanding support for secular, evidence-based addictions treatment programs and ensuring no public support is given to faith-based programs,
2. Regulating and inspecting addictions treatment facilities to protect patients' freedom of and freedom from religion, and
3. Informing physicians, mental health professionals, social workers, employers, unions and judges of secular, evidence-based addictions treatment programs and their duty to protect a person with an addiction from religious coercion.

About the BC Humanist Association

Since 1984, the British Columbia Humanist Association (BCHA) has provided a community and a voice for Humanists, atheists, agnostics and the non-religious in BC. Humanism is a worldview that promotes human dignity without belief in a higher power. We campaign for the rights of the non-religious and an end to religious privilege.

¹ Petition text in Appendix. Signature list included separately.
https://www.bchumanist.ca/secular_recovery_petition?splash=1

Prevalence of the nonreligious in British Columbia

Fewer and fewer Canadians identify with traditional religious worldviews. According to the 2011 National Household Survey, 24% of Canadians and 44% of British Columbians are not religious². This is an increase from 17% and 36% in 2001³.

The question asked by Statistics Canada includes those who no longer practice a religion or faith. In 2013, our poll with Justason Market Intelligence found that 64% of British Columbians do not practice a religion or faith⁴, a number that rose to 69% in our June 2016 poll with Insights West⁵. When asked if they believe in a higher power, 56% of British Columbians said yes in 2016, down from the 70% who said yes in 2013.

AA is a religious program

Community based recovery programs play a major part of the province's approach to treating addictions. The most prevalent and well-known approach is Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and related 12-Step programs. These approaches aren't limited to mutual support groups, however. In 2016, we investigated a number of treatment facilities across BC and identified 24 that base their program on AA or require attendance at 12-Step meetings as part of their program.⁶ Only nine didn't require attendance at 12-Step meetings.

AA was founded by Bill Wilson in 1935 based on a view of alcoholism as a moral failing.⁷ He incorporated explicitly Christian principles of treating all people as sinners in need of God's salvation. Wilson and the founding members of AA wrote what came to be known as "The Big Book" that set out the 12-step program, which remains largely unchanged from when it was written in 1939. These steps refers to "a Power greater than ourselves" and repeatedly to "God".⁸

Based on its history and unchanging ideology, AA is an unquestionably religious program. This is the conclusion of numerous US court rulings⁹, although the question hasn't been ruled on in Canadian law.

² Statistics Canada. (2011) *2011 National Household Survey* [Data Set].

³ Statistics Canada. (2001) *Census of Population* [Data Set].

⁴ BC Humanist Association. (2013) *2013 BC Religious and Secular Attitudes Poll* [Data Set]. Justason Market Intelligence [Producer]. http://www.bchumanist.ca/2013_bc_religious_and_secular_attitudes_poll

⁵ BC Humanist Association. (2016) *Religious and Secular Attitudes 2016* [Data Set]. Insights West [Producer]. http://www.bchumanist.ca/religious_and_secular_attitudes_2016

⁶ BC Humanist Association. *Ending Religious Coercion in Addictions Recovery: Submission to Select Standing Committee on Health*. Appendix. July 12, 2016.

https://www.bchumanist.ca/bcha_asks_health_committee_to_end_religious_coercion_in_addictions_recovery

⁷ "AA Timeline." Alcoholics Anonymous. Accessed July 8, 2016. http://www.aa.org/pages/en_US/aa-timeline

⁸ *The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous*. Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. 1981 Accessed July 5, 2016 http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/smf-121_en.pdf

⁹ "Court Cases and Mandated 12-Step Attendance." SMART Recovery. Accessed July 5, 2016. <http://www.smartrecovery.org/courts/court-mandated-attendance.htm>

As AA meetings are run by volunteers, there is a large variation in how individual groups. Some reportedly begin every meeting with a prayer, while others welcome atheists and encourage individuals to interpret “higher power” in their own way.

Some atheists have sought to establish strictly secular versions of AA under the AA umbrella. However, they have often been met with opposition from the AA hierarchy. A human rights complaint in Ontario followed the local umbrella group’s unwillingness to recognize an agnostic meeting in Toronto. Following mediation, the Intergroup agreed to relist the group provided it maintained references to God in the 12-Steps.¹⁰ A similar group called We Agnostics in West Vancouver was delisted in 2014.¹¹

Regardless, 26% of British Columbians do not believe in a higher power⁵ and we should not be asking people with substance use issues to perform mental gymnastics when they attend treatment. The prevalence of faith-based addictions treatments, like AA, creates a significant barrier for a sizeable portion of the public. Further, the Supreme Court of Canada has been clear that the state has a duty of religious neutrality¹² and we’d argue that encouraging people to attend faith-based options is a violation of that duty.

Finally, aside from the arguments about its religious nature, the effectiveness of AA as a treatment program is widely questioned. A Cochrane Systematic Review (a thorough analysis of all available clinical evidence) found in 2006 that, “No experimental studies unequivocally demonstrated the effectiveness of AA or [12-step program] approaches for reducing alcohol dependence or problems.”¹³

The need for recovery options

At this point, no one disputes the importance of expanding addiction recovery services in BC. This consensus recognizes the importance of combatting the stigma faced by people with mental health and substance use issues. There is also widespread agreement about the need to provide effective and evidence-based recovery services.¹⁴ It’s also widely recognized that people respond better when they are offered a diverse range of treatment and recovery options.

Unfortunately, this ideal is not the case for many people with substance use issues who come into contact with BC’s healthcare system. Many residential treatment facilities have

¹⁰ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/organizing-body-of-alcoholics-anonymous-in-gta-opens-doors-to-secular-groups/article33920196/>

¹¹ Todd, Douglas, “Atheist alcoholics seek to be well without ‘God’.” *Vancouver Sun* April 5, 2014. <http://vancouver.sun.com/news/staff-blogs/atheist-alcoholics-finding-recovery-without-the-god-talk>

¹² <https://scc-csc.lexum.com/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/15288/index.do>

¹³ Ferri M, Amato L, Davoli M. “Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step programmes for alcohol dependence.” *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2006, Issue 3. Art. No.: CD005032. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD005032.pub2.

¹⁴ British Columbia Centre on Substance Use. *Strategies to Strengthen Recovery in British Columbia: The Path Forward*. July 18, 2018. <https://www.bccsu.ca/news-release/new-report-on-strengthening-addiction-recovery-in-b-c/>

long waiting lists or charge prohibitive fees.¹⁵ In other situations, individuals may be forced to attend a specific treatment facility or obey a certain treatment plan as part of a court order or to maintain employment. We've heard from a number of people who've been required to attend facilities based on the 12-Step model or follow up with AA.¹⁶

Treatment facilities need oversight

Where options do exist, people seeking treatment face a patchwork of standards and accreditations for facilities claiming to provide addiction recovery treatments. A 2015 report from the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse found six separate accreditation bodies that accounted for only two-thirds of residential treatment facilities.¹⁷ In some provinces, less than one quarter of treatment agencies were registered.

This patchwork has led to a wide range of treatment offerings and little accountability, as demonstrated by a 2016 investigation by CBC News.¹⁵ We are particularly worried about the number of facilities that are reported to actively eschew harm reduction and evidence-based approaches, promote pseudoscience and involve faith-based approaches. In particular, facilities are under no obligation to measure or disclose success rates.

In any residential treatment facility, patients arrive in a highly vulnerable state. A draft strategy must therefore ensure that steps are taken to protect the rights of these individuals, with specific attention to their freedom of and freedom from religious coercion.

Existing community options

The good news is that today there are a number of secular recovery programs operating in BC. Many of these seek to base their programs on the best available evidence. While it's not within our expertise to evaluate or recommend any of these programs specifically, they do demonstrate the possibilities available.

The largest of these programs is the **SMART** Recovery Self-Help Network, an evidenced-based program¹⁸. This group consists of over 2000 free meetings in 24 countries. There are currently 111 weekly meetings in BC, more than any province or state except California¹⁹.

¹⁵ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/what-we-learned-phoning-every-drug-rehab-facility-in-british-columbia-1.3756425>

¹⁶ https://www.bchumanist.ca/human_rights_complaint_over_religion_in_aa_to_proceed

¹⁷ <http://www.ccsa.ca/Resource%20Library/CCSA-Accreditation-Treatment-Centres-Guide-2015-en.pdf>

¹⁸ See: <http://smartrecoverybc.com/> and <http://www.smartrecovery.org/>

¹⁹ Full meeting list download. Smart Recovery. Accessed: August 9, 2018.
<https://www.smartrecoverytest.org/local/full-meeting-list-download/>

LifeRing is another international attempt to provide secular and evidence-based recovery. Michael Walsh started the first Canadian meetings in 2008 in Victoria and there are now 15 groups on Vancouver Island and in Metro Vancouver²⁰.

Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS) was founded in the USA in 1985 and attempts to provide a secular alternative to 12-step recovery programs²¹.

Vancouver AA meetings for Agnostics and Atheists lists meetings in Vancouver, Langley and Nanaimo “for recovering alcoholics who prefer an alternative to the emphasis on religion and high power encountered in many meetings.”²² There are other websites listing various secular AA meetings.²³

The need for awareness

Few people disagree with the concept that individuals with substance use issues should have access to choice in their treatment. Nevertheless, we continually hear from medical professionals who are unaware of any community-based treatment options besides 12-Step programs. This becomes a self-defeating cycle where secular alternatives lack the capacities of scale to hire organizers to build the public awareness of their offerings.

This becomes particularly problematic in instances where an individual is required to attend treatment to maintain employment or as part of a judicial sentence. If the people who decide these treatment plans are unaware of secular options, then patients can be required to attend programs that violate their religious freedoms.

By providing basic information about the options that exist right now to the people involved at each step of this process – employers, family physicians, social workers, addictions specialists, judges, etc – we can avoid these situations.

Recommendations

1. Expand support for secular, evidence-based addictions treatment programs and ensure no public support is given to faith-based programs
2. Regulate and inspect addictions treatment facilities to protect patients' freedom of and freedom from religion
3. Inform physicians, mental health professionals, social workers, employers, unions and judges of secular, evidence-based addictions treatment programs and their duty to protect a person with an addiction from religious coercion

²⁰ See: <http://liferingcanada.dreamhosters.com/find-meeting-region>

²¹ See: <http://www.sossobriety.org/> <https://secularaa.org/meetings/?tsml-day=any&tsml-region=315>

²² See: <http://vancouveraaaa.ca/>

²³ See: <http://aaagnostica.org/> <http://www.agnosticaanyc.org/worldwide.html#Canada>

PETITION TEXT: PUT SECULAR RECOVERY OPTIONS FIRST

To:

Hon Adrian Dix, Minister of Health

Hon Judy Darcy, Minister of Mental Health and Addictions

British Columbia remains in the midst of an overdose and fentanyl crisis. Every day that we continue to rely on antiquated treatments costs lives.

Commendably, the province has taken steps to ensure harm reduction and evidence-based treatments are at the forefront of its response. However, for far too many people their only recovery options rely on unproven and faith-based treatments like Alcoholics Anonymous and twelve-step programs.

We call on the Government of BC to ensure every patient seeking treatment for a substance use issue has access to secular, evidence-based treatment options, by:

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