

BRITISH COLUMBIA HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

400 – 3381 Cambie Street
Vancouver, BC V5Z 4R3

+1 (604) 265-9298
bchumanist.ca
info@bchumanist.ca



July 12, 2016

ENDING RELIGIOUS COERCION IN ADDICTIONS RECOVERY

*BC Humanist Association submission to the Select Standing Committee on Health
on "How can we enhance the effectiveness of addiction recovery programs?"*

Prepared by Ian Bushfield, Executive Director

Executive summary

Many residential and community based addiction recovery programs are based on the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). AA relies on an unproven program that requires belief in a higher power. In this submission we set out how the Government of British Columbia continues to endorse and mandate individuals into AA. We argue that this endorsement is unconstitutional. Further, requirements by employers and courts that individuals with substance use problems attend AA violate those individuals' *Charter* rights. Churches and individuals who do believe in a higher power are free to form support groups based on their common beliefs but the government cannot show preference to these groups over secular and inclusive alternatives. We recommend that the Government instead promote any of a growing number of alternative secular, evidence-based recovery programs.

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.

Prevalence of the non-religious 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 religious¹. This is an increase from 17% and 36% in 2001².

¹ Statistics Canada. (2011) *2011 National Household Survey* [Data Set].

² Statistics Canada. (2001) *Census of Population* [Data Set].

Our own research suggests the question asked by Statistics Canada exaggerates the number of religious respondents by including those who no longer practice. In 2013, we commissioned a poll from Justason Market Intelligence that found that 64% of British Columbians do not practice a religion or faith³, a number that rose to 69% in our June 2016 poll with Insights West⁴. 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.

Alcoholics Anonymous

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

Topic Overview

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is a long-standing self-help organization for people who want to stop drinking or using other drugs. AA uses a 12-step program based on a spiritual connection to a higher power (such as God) to help people overcome their addictions. Although the program's success has not been validated by scientific study, it has helped many people.

Meetings are available in most communities at various times. Meetings can be "open" (for the person and his or her family) or "closed" (for the person only). Special groups for women, teens, and gay people are available in some areas. Phone numbers for local offices are listed in local area phone books, and information can also be found online at www.aa.org.

[Related Information »](#)

Figure 1 - Alcoholic Anonymous description from HealthLinkBC website, emphasis added⁵.

Alcoholism was viewed for a long time as a moral failing. The Oxford Group, which formed in 1931, sought to treat alcoholism using explicitly Christian principles of treating all people as sinners in need of God's salvation. Out of this movement, Bill Wilson created Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in 1935⁶. Wilson and the founding members of AA wrote what came to be known as "The Big Book" that set out the 12-step program. Much of that initial program remains unchanged from when it was written in 1939. A number of other addiction and substance use treatment programs, like Narcotics Anonymous, have been based on the 12-step program of AA.

³ 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

⁴ BC Humanist Association. (2016) *Religious and Secular Attitudes 2016* [Data Set]. Insights West [Producer]. http://www.bchumanist.ca/religious_and_secular_attitudes_2016

⁵ "Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)." HealthLinkBC. Accessed July 5, 2016.

<http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthtopics/content.asp?hwid=tp4990#tp4990-sec>

⁶ "AA Timeline." Alcoholics Anonymous. Accessed July 8, 2016. http://www.aa.org/pages/en_US/aa-timeline

The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous refers to “a Power greater than ourselves” and repeatedly to “God”⁷ and the Government of BC’s *HealthLink BC* website (Figure 1) describes AA as “based on a spiritual connection to a higher power (such as God).” Based on its history and unchanging ideology, AA is an unquestionably religious program. This is also the conclusion of numerous US court rulings⁸, although the question hasn’t been ruled on in Canadian law.

Attempts to establish secular versions of AA within the AA umbrella have been met with opposition from the AA hierarchy. The Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario (HRTO) is set to hear a case about an agnostic AA group in Toronto that was delisted by its parent organization⁹. A similar group called We Agnostics in West Vancouver was delisted by the local AA governing body in 2014¹⁰.

The effectiveness of AA as a treatment program has also not been established. 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.”¹¹

We investigated a number of treatment facilities across BC and identified 24, listed in Appendix I, that base their program on AA or require attendance at 12-step meetings as part of their program. Only 9, listed in Appendix II, didn’t require attendance at 12-step meetings.

AA’s religious program is not applicable for the 26% of British Columbians who do not believe in a higher power⁴. This means a sizable portion of our society faces a significant barrier to accessing one of the most common treatment programs.

⁷ *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

⁸ “Court Cases and Mandated 12-Step Attendance.” SMART Recovery. Accessed July 5, 2016. <http://www.smartrecovery.org/courts/court-mandated-attendance.htm>

⁹ *Kight v. A.A. World Services Inc. et al*, 2016 HRTO 208

¹⁰ 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>

¹¹ 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.

Government endorsement of AA

Home Treatment

Keep in mind that most people who drink alcohol or use drugs don't develop a substance use problem. Many people who want to cut back on or stop using alcohol or drugs are able to do so on their own. But others may need help.

If you're worried about your health and want to reduce your alcohol or drug use, ask your family, friends, or doctor for help. Or you could join a support group such as [Alcoholics Anonymous \(AA\)](#), or [Narcotics Anonymous \(NA\)](#). Your family members might want to attend a support group such as [Al-Anon](#), [Alateen](#), or [Nar-Anon](#).

Figure 2 - Alcohol and Drug Problems Home treatment options on HealthLink BC website¹².

HealthLink BC is run by the Government of BC to provide “medically-approved information” for British Columbians. Figure 2 is taken from the HealthLink BC website and shows that individuals considering whether they might have a substance use problem are directed to AA as one of the primary “home treatment” options. Aside from “your family, friends, or doctor”, the website makes no effort to link to secular support groups.

Referral to after-care or 12-step self-help programs	Community-based recovery programs. A 12-step program is an example of a program with a set of guiding principles outlining a course of action for recovery from addiction, compulsion, or other behavioral problems. This program is widely used by Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and Gamblers Anonymous.
---	--

Figure 3 - BC Medical Association policy paper on addictions

This endorsement is not limited to the Government. Figure 3 shows a recommendation from a 2009 report on improving addiction care by the Addictions Strategy Group of the British Columbia Medical Association (BCMA)¹³. The report specifically identifies AA and other 12-step programs as part of the “continuum of care” for addiction.

Government coercion through AA

Many individuals face mandatory treatment programs for substance use problems either through the courts or from their employer. In one such case, David Byron Wood, an atheist, was required by his employer to follow a treatment program that included attending a treatment centre based on a 12-step program, attending AA peer support

¹² “Home Treatment – Alcohol and Drug Problems.” HealthLinkBC. Accessed July 5, 2016. <http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthtopics/content.asp?hwid=alcpb#hw107856>

¹³ *Stepping Forward: Improving Addiction Care in British Columbia*. British Columbia Medical Association. March 2009. https://www.doctorsofbc.ca/sites/default/files/addiction_stepping_forward.pdf

meetings, completing the 12-steps and working with a sponsor from AA. Mr Wood's request to follow a secular treatment plan instead was denied. He eventually lost his job as a result of his objection to the religious content in AA. As he was employed by a provincial health authority, this case raises serious concerns that government bodies are forcing a vulnerable population to attend a religious program. Mr Wood has filed a human rights complaint over the issue and the BCHA and others wrote in support of the BC Human Rights Tribunal hearing that complaint.

There is little public information available on how unique Mr Wood's situation is in BC, though we have heard anecdotes from individuals who have received court orders that require them to attend a 12-step program or whose insurance company requires attendance at a 12-step based treatment centre. Given the prevalence of 12-step programs and their endorsement by HealthLink BC and the BCMA's Addiction Strategy Group, it is reasonable to assume that most physicians would include attendance at AA in their treatment plans and may be skeptical of alternative programs that lack equivalent endorsements. Patients mandated by their employer or a court to follow that plan will then be subject to similar coercion as Mr Wood, violating the BC *Human Rights Code* and their *Charter* rights.

While it should be clear on its face that mandating that an individual attend a religious program is as unconstitutional as requiring a believer to renounce their faith, the jurisprudence is worth repeating.

R v Big M Drug Mart is the seminal case on interpreting religious freedom in Canada¹⁴. Writing for the majority decision, Justice Dickson said:

Freedom can primarily be characterized by the absence of coercion or constraint. If a person is compelled by the state or the will of another to a course of action or inaction which he would not otherwise have chosen, he is not acting of his own volition and he cannot be said to be truly free. One of the major purposes of the *Charter* is to protect, within reason, from compulsion or restraint. Coercion includes not only such blatant forms of compulsion as direct commands to act or refrain from acting on pain of sanction, coercion includes indirect forms of control which determine or limit alternative courses of conduct available to others. Freedom in a broad sense embraces both the absence of coercion and constraint, and the right to manifest beliefs and practices. Freedom means that, subject to such limitations as are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others, no one is to be forced to act in a way contrary to his beliefs or his conscience.

¹⁴ R. v. Big M Drug Mart Ltd., [1985] 1 S.C.R. 295 <https://scc-csc.lexum.com/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/43/index.do>

Similarly, in *Mouvement laïque québécois v Saguenay*, Chief Justice McLachlin, writing for the majority, said¹⁵:

The state's duty of religious neutrality results from an evolving interpretation of freedom of conscience and religion. The evolution of Canadian society has given rise to a concept of this neutrality according to which the state must not interfere in religion and beliefs. The state must instead remain neutral in this regard, which means that it must neither favour nor hinder any particular belief, and the same holds true for non-belief. The pursuit of the ideal of a free and democratic society requires the state to encourage everyone to participate freely in public life regardless of their beliefs. A neutral public space free from coercion, pressure and judgment on the part of public authorities in matters of spirituality is intended to protect every person's freedom and dignity, and it helps preserve and promote the multicultural nature of Canadian society. The state's duty to protect every person's freedom of conscience and religion means that it may not use its powers in such a way as to promote the participation of certain believers or non-believers in public life to the detriment of others.

These cases have clearly set out that government institutions cannot use their power to coerce individuals to practice a religion or faith. The *Charter's* protection of freedom of religion extends to include the right to freedom from religion and encompasses those of all faiths and none. This is reflected in the Ontario Human Rights Commission's recently revised "Policy on preventing discrimination based on creed"¹⁶:

Atheists, agnostics and persons with no creed, as well as members of newer or lesser known creed communities also face various forms of stigma, prejudice and discrimination.

While these cases generally dealt with healthy individuals with the luxury of a secure life, people with a substance use problem do not enjoy that luxury. Substance use problems are considered to be a disability that is protected from discrimination under the *Canadian Human Rights Act* and *BC Human Rights Code*¹⁷. Additionally, in some marginalized communities, like First Nations communities and those living in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, a significant number of people suffer from substance use problems. Given the damage done to these communities by the state and organized religion through residential schools, the government has a duty to ensure that mandatory addiction treatment programs are inclusive and culturally sensitive.

¹⁵ *Mouvement laïque québécois v Saguenay (City)*, 2015 SCC 16 <https://scc-csc.lexum.com/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/15288/index.do>

¹⁶ "Policy on preventing discrimination based on creed." Ontario Human Rights Commission. September 17, 2015. <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-preventing-discrimination-based-creed>

¹⁷ Lynch, Jennifer QC, "Human rights and employer responsibility to accommodate disability in the workplace." *Visions Journal* 2009, 5 (3), pp 9-10. <http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/visions/workplaces-vol5/human-rights-and-employer-responsibility-to-accomodate-disability-in-the-workplace>

Aside from the serious constitutional issues raised by coercing individuals to attend AA, there is strong evidence against forcing a patient down a specific route to wellness. A 1999 meta-analysis of AA programs¹⁸ concluded that “coercion [to AA] apparently yields significantly worse results than treatment alternatives, and non-significantly worse than doing nothing at all.” In his supporting letter to the BC Human Rights Tribunal regarding Mr Wood’s case, Dr Dan Reist, Assistant Director, Knowledge Exchange at the Centre for Addictions Research of BC wrote¹⁹:

There is a large body of scientific literature that suggests that no one treatment approach for substance use disorders has demonstrated effectiveness for all patients. In fact, one of the most significant factors relating to the effectiveness of the program has to do with the patient’s relationship with the treatment provider. Refusing to allow other evidence-based treatment options would negatively impact the patient’s potential recovery.

Alternatives to AA

Today there are numerous community-based programs operating in BC that provide secular alternatives to AA. 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, their existence directly challenges the privileged position of AA within the established addiction treatment strategies of the province’s medical community.

The largest of these programs is the **SMART** Recovery Self-Help Network. This group consists of 2100 free meetings in 22 countries. There are currently 55 weekly meetings in BC. SMART is an evidence-based program²⁰.

Centre for Inquiry Canada (CFIC) Okanagan Branch has operated a “Secular Sobriety Group” based on SMART for over 2 years. CFIC Science Chair Blythe Nilson said²¹:

The religious component of the 12-step Alcoholics Anonymous program is a barrier to non-believers struggling with addiction. It is also an unethical requirement for those required to attend AA by court order or workplace requirement. Such a religious test would not be applied in any other kind of program designed to help people in Canada and it should not be applied here. The Okanagan branch of the Centre for Inquiry has been successfully offering a program called Secular Sobriety Group that uses the SMART (Self-Management and Recovery Training) program for over 2 years. We ask that BC consider using only those programs that do not require religious or spiritual acceptance and have no religious content.

¹⁸ Kownacki RJ, Shadish WR. “Does Alcoholics Anonymous work? The results from a meta-analysis of controlled experiments”, *Substance Use Misuse* 1999, 340 897-916.

¹⁹ Reist, D. Letter to BC Human Rights Tribunal. February 25, 2016.

²⁰ See: <http://smartrecoverybc.com/> and <http://www.smartrecovery.org/>

²¹ Nilson, B. Email. June 27, 2016.

An anonymous British Columbian described his discovery of SMART Recovery²²:

I am sixty-two, retired, and I've been drinking since I was twelve. For the most part of the past ten years it's been every single day, till I pass out, then go again. Last September, I took myself to detox because well, it was literally killing me. I've had five heart attacks and suffer peripheral neuropathy in the feet, causing me to require a cane to walk. My doctor says most everything that's wrong with me now is a result of drinking too much for too long. I spent nine days in detox but I had no idea how I was going to support my sobriety once released. Having tried AA several times in the past with absolutely no sustainable methods to maintain sobriety and actually grow in it, I was lost on how to carry on from there.

Then, on my second-to-last day there I saw an obscure little 4x6 card posted on the events board and it was about SMART. Everything about it resonated with me. I have lived much of my life involved in drugs and alcohol, so I've actually "been there-done that" in many situations. I intend on using all my past experiences to help guide me to understanding the troubles that bring people to SMART, and hopefully help some of them along. I'm sober eight months now and I really never knew just being alive and aware could feel this way. I'm my own mind, heart and soul now and we're all doing wonderfully, thanks for sure to SMART Recovery.

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 16 groups on Vancouver Island and in Metro Vancouver²³.

Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS) was founded in the USA in 1985 and attempts to provide a secular alternative to 12-step recovery programs²⁴. It lists two meetings in BC.

Vancouver AA meetings for Agnostics and Atheists lists four meetings in Vancouver and one in Nanaimo "for recovering alcoholics who prefer an alternative to the emphasis on religion and high power encountered in many meetings."²⁵ There are other websites listing various secular AA meetings²⁶.

Conclusion

It's entirely within the rights of individuals and private organizations to attend and create voluntary religious-based recovery programs like AA. However, programs supported and mandated by government bodies should be inclusive of people of all faiths and none. We recommend that the Government of BC:

²² SMART Recovery expands to Canada CoRs. *United Coalition of Reason*. Accessed July 8, 2016.

<http://unitedcor.org/smart-recovery-expands-canada-cors/>

²³ See: <http://liferingcanada.dreamhosters.com/our-story>

²⁴ See: <http://www.sossobriety.org/>

²⁵ See: <http://vancouveraaaa.ca/>

²⁶ See: <http://aaagnostica.org/> <http://www.agnosticaanyc.org/worldwide.html#Canada>

1. remove links to AA and 12-step programs from its HealthLink BC website and suggest secular alternatives instead,
2. establish addictions recovery guidelines requiring all licensed treatment facilities be evidence-based and attendance in religious-based meetings be voluntary,
3. require that any addictions recovery programs that receive government funding or that are mandated by courts or employers be secular and evidence-based,
4. inform physicians, counsellors and addictions specialists of their duty to ensure that patients receive culturally sensitive and evidence-based treatments and
5. monitor addiction treatment programs to ensure patients' religious freedoms are upheld.

Appendix I: 12-step based treatment facilities in BC

The following treatment facilities in BC are either based on the 12-step program or include attendance at 12-step meetings. This information is taken from websites and phone calls to the centres.

Centre	Website
Union Gospel Mission	https://www.ugm.ca/services/alcohol-drug-recovery/
Belkin House	http://www.belkinhouse.ca/
It's Up To You	http://iuty.ca/site/
PLEA Community Services (youth)	http://www.plea.ca/our-services/addiction
Nechako (youth)	https://northernhealth.ca/Portals/0/Your Health/Public%20Health/Nechako.pdf
Peak House (youth)	http://peakhouse.ca/
BC Teen Challenge	http://www.teenchallengebc.com/
Edgewood	https://www.edgewood.ca/
Orchard	http://orchardrecovery.com/
Last Door	https://www.lastdoor.org/
Cedars	http://www.cedarscobblehill.com/
Crossing Point	http://www.xrdstc.net/
Top of the World Ranch	http://ranchrecovery.com/
Westminster House (women)	http://www.westminsterhouse.ca/
Westcoast Wellness (women)	http://www.womenintohealing.ca/
Round Lake (First Nations)	http://roundlaketreatmentcentre.ca/
Young Bears Lodge (First Nations)	http://www.unya.bc.ca/programs/live-in-programs/young-bears-lodge
Kackaamin (First Nations)	http://www.kackaamin.org/
Tsow-Tun le lum (First Nations)	http://www.tsowtunlelum.org/
Wilp Si'Satxw (First Nations)	http://wilpchc.ca/
Harbour Light	http://www.harbourlightbc.com/
Valiant Recovery	http://www.valiantrecovery.com/
John Voken Academy	https://www.volken.org/
Peardonville House Treatment Centre (women)	http://peardonvillehouse.ca/

Appendix II: Non 12-step based treatment facilities in BC

Some treatment centres across BC have already recognized many of these issues and in the past few years have shifted toward more evidence-based treatment options. The following are some of the facilities whose programs are not based on the 12-step program and that do not incorporate attendance at 12-step meetings.

Centre	Website
Sunshine Coast Health Centre	https://www.sunshinecoasthealthcentre.ca/
Pacifica	http://www.pacificatreatment.ca/
Carrier Sekani Family Services (First Nations)	http://firstnationstreatment.org/2014/05/28/carrier-sekani-family-services-2/
The Bridge Services	http://www.thebridgeservices.ca/
Chopra Treatment Centre	http://www.chopratreatmentcenter.com/
Maple Ridge Treatment Centre	http://mrtc.bc.ca/
Vancouver Daytox	http://www.vch.ca/locations-and-services/find-health-services/?program_id=2272
Burnaby Centre for Mental Health and Addiction	http://www.bcmhsus.ca/programs/burnabycentre
Heartwood (women)	http://heartwoodwomenscentre.ca/