

**BRITISH COLUMBIA HUMANIST ASSOCIATION**

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Chief Neil Dubord  
Delta Police Department  
4455 Clarence Taylor Crescent  
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April 10, 2017

Re: Interfaith Symposium on Drug Addiction

Dear Chief Dubord

While we applaud the Delta Police Department's recent efforts to foster a broad conversation to tackle the fentanyl crisis, we are concerned about your recent Interfaith Symposium on responding to drug addiction and the role of religion.

The challenges posed to our communities by drug addiction, fentanyl and the opioid crisis are well documented and demand innovative solutions. Bringing community leaders, including faith leaders, into the conversation is an important step. Solving these crises require thinking beyond the outmoded "war on drugs" ideology and we're encouraged to see a local police department lead this effort.

However, we would be remiss not to push back against the inherent exclusionary aspects of this event. While there were a diversity of theistic faiths at the table – Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Jains and Mormons – there was no representation for Delta's sizable non-religious constituency. According to the 2011 National Household Survey, 47% of Metro Vancouver residents said they have "no religion". Our own 2016 poll suggests as many as 70% don't practice a religion or faith and 26% don't believe in a higher power.<sup>1</sup> Any way you slice it, this event needlessly excluded a significant portion of the community.

This endorsement by exclusion is problematic enough but, on the specific topic of addictions recovery, it also fails to recognize the long history of faith communities using recovery programs for proselytization. Notably, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) considers addiction "an illness which only a spiritual experience will conquer" and requires adherents to submit to a "higher power." You seem to reflect on this in the statistics you cite in your comments in the Delta Optimist regarding relapse rates among "people who

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.bchumanist.ca/religious\\_and\\_secular\\_attitudes\\_2016](http://www.bchumanist.ca/religious_and_secular_attitudes_2016)

accepted a religious faith into their lives.”<sup>2</sup> While the coverage didn’t provide a reference for your statistics, let us be clear: The most thorough analysis of AA concluded that, “No experimental studies unequivocally demonstrated the effectiveness of AA or [12-step program] approaches for reducing alcohol dependence or problems.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the BC Legislature’s Select Standing Committee on Health emphasized addiction treatment programs “that have proven to be effective and that have demonstrated positive long-term outcomes” in its recent report.<sup>4,5</sup> There are a growing number of secular options for addictions treatment in BC, including SMART Recovery and LifeRing.

Even beyond the statistics, for an atheist suffering from a substance use issue, faith-based programs represent a coercive and harmful attempt to evangelize to vulnerable populations. Nevertheless, AA remains a standard part of treatment plans prescribed by doctors, employers and the courts.<sup>6</sup> In this light, I hope you can see how your non-religious constituents might see your comments as marginalizing their worldview.

Finally, the Supreme Court of Canada has said, “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.”<sup>7</sup> We hope you will consider your future comments and your Department’s role in future interfaith events in light of this duty.

We are always happy to work with groups that want to include a secular perspective. We can typically find a representative to provide a thoughtful and respectful contribution to these events, which can help bridge different worldviews and communities. We would ask, however, that as a Police Department, you only recommend secular and evidence-based treatment programs going forward.

We hope you will receive these suggestions as a path toward a constructive relationship with Delta’s non-religious community.

Sincerely



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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.delta-optimist.com/news/delta-police-co-hosts-interfaith-symposium-1.13883250>

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> The Committee’s Report: <http://bit.ly/LegReport>

<sup>5</sup> Read The BC Humanist Association submission: <http://bit.ly/BCHAHealth>

<sup>6</sup> Read about the case of Byron Wood here: <http://bit.ly/ByronWood>

<sup>7</sup> *Mouvement laïque québécois v. Saguenay (City)*, 2015 SCC 16, [2015] 2 S.C.R. 3