

**Statement by the South Island Overdose Response Network (SICORN)
Re: Encampment Health and Safety (COVID-19) BC Ministerial Order M128**

The South Island Overdose Response Network was formed in Fall 2016 in response to the ongoing BC public health emergency of overdose. SICORN is comprised of people who use/d illicit drugs, family members of people who have died from overdose and of those who have survived, researchers, representatives of community organizations including frontline workers, and other community members. Our work together takes place on Lkwungen and Xwsepsum territory and we meet in what is also known as Downtown Victoria. We envision a world in which people are not criminalized or discriminated against because of their drug use. All individuals have a right to exist in public space, engage in the community, live in dignified housing and be free of poverty.

We stand in grave opposition to Ministerial Order M128 which requires all individuals sheltering at Topaz Park and on Pandora Avenue to stop living in or occupying these areas. While we advocate for considered action to make safe, clean, accessible housing options available to all individuals, we condemn the use of the Emergency Program Act to forcibly remove individuals from sheltering in place.

We strongly oppose the May 9 deadline which does not allow for a safe and supportive transition for individuals who will be moving into hotel rooms and other indoor sheltering locations.

As the announcement of Ministerial Order M128 was made to the public, fences were already being erected on Pandora Avenue to begin containment of individuals sheltering in that area. Following this containment, BC Housing's poor communications with individuals living in camps has created confusion and further anxiety, and reinforces the stigma, discrimination and criminalization they experience every day. The uncoordinated and rushed process to move people into hotel rooms has led to a heightened sense of chaos and unsafety and we strongly believe that this will also further increase overdose risk. We also know that due to this stress and anxiety, some people have fled the camps to find calmer and more isolated places to shelter, and support organizations are struggling to remain in contact with them. Many will not be included in this government initiative to temporarily house people and they will still require the same supports that those who are indoors do. We cannot afford to lose contact with people who are not moving to the hotels.

It is unclear how much outreach support local organizations will be able to provide to people who continue to shelter in dispersed outdoor locations with such an intense reorientation to providing services at the hotels. These organizations that have key relationships with people living in poverty have been stretched very thin and are also experiencing anxiety related to unclear communication about short and long-term plans for shelter and housing. We are gravely concerned about sustainability and the health and well-being of frontline workers in this context. Outreach workers do not need an outside 'emergency response team' to parachute in and offer counselling services without having any relationship to the community.

Local organizations require financial resources to shore up their own capacities to do this work, adequately compensate their staff through internal supports, and continue to provide care to the people they have built relationships with. Effective and culturally safe outreach and overdose prevention services for people who use drugs are those that are offered by staff who have lived experience, local knowledge, and adequate and ongoing supports to do the work.

We are particularly concerned that people have already moved indoors without access to a safer supply of regulated substances and that a local system for providing access to this critical overdose prevention measure is not yet in place. Currently the illicit drug supply is stronger, more toxic and deadlier than ever. While the existence of camps like Topaz Park make known the prevalence of overdose, we know that overdose is occurring in similar numbers in locations such as single-room occupancies that are not under the public gaze. Collective sheltering-in-place does not increase the likelihood of overdoses occurring: a toxic, unregulated supply of drugs does. For people sheltering outside, being together is safer. For those who will be moved indoors, we are concerned about a stress-induced rise in overdose due to loneliness, isolation and boredom. Around-the-clock, on-site overdose prevention services is one tool to reduce risk but we know that deaths will occur where people continue to be forced to use highly adulterated street drugs.

An April 6 letter from the Controlled Substances and Cannabis Branch of Health Canada to partnering organizations included the following statement:

Health Canada is very concerned that as the situation evolves on the ground, people who traffic illegal substances may start using harmful cutting agents, leading to an even more dangerous drug supply. We have heard that many PWUD are worried about dangerous withdrawal periods that may be precipitated by the current environment. I [the Associate Assistant Deputy Minister] continue to urge all jurisdictions to provide the **broadest possible access to medication**, as needed, during this very difficult time (emphasis added).

We anticipate more deaths as long as a safe, regulated supply of substances is not widely accessible to people who use drugs. Prescriptions under the new BCCSU guidance document for “Risk Mitigation in the Context of Dual Public Health Emergencies” are not being written in number and at the pace that is required to mitigate compounded harms associated with displacement and isolation in hotel rooms or in dispersed tenting sites. Primary health care supports are not in place, staffing has not been confirmed and coordinated, and the ‘decampment’ process is already causing harm and increased risk for overdose.

We strongly urge the Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General to extend the May 9 deadline of the Ministerial Order M128 in order to reduce serious risk of overdose and other harms to individuals sheltering on the streets and in the parks.