

Substance Use Health Emergency

Minister of Health and Social Services Tracy McPhee

January 20, 2022, 10 am

Intro

- Good morning.
- Thank you for joining us today on the traditional territory of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and the Ta'an Kwächän Council.
- Thank you also to the acting Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Catherine Elliott, Chief Coroner Heather Jones, and Chief Superintendent Scott Sheppard for joining me virtually today.
- I wish we were all able to come together in person, but in these times, with Omicron surging, we must be careful and, fortunately, there are virtual platforms for us to come together.
- I would also like to thank all of our community partners that have joined us to show their support, including [insert guests here]
- Today is an important occasion but also a very sombre one.

- I have gathered everyone here today to speak to a health emergency that has stolen too many lives and left too many others grief-stricken and shattered.
- I am here to address substance use, overdoses and mental health challenges in our territory.
- Far too many are struggling.
- Far too many urgently need our help and support.
- Far too many are dying in our communities.
- There are no right words for news like this. It is truly heartbreaking.
- We are all completely devastated. It has been a very difficult start to this year. If you are hurting right now, please know I am standing with you - you are not alone.
- It is time to rally around our communities, our friends, our neighbours and family members who need our support.
- It is also time to come together to take action to address the tragedies that are impacting our communities.

- Today I am declaring a substance use health emergency in the Yukon.
- Throughout my tenure as Minister of Justice, we have taken a harm reduction approach to substance use.
- We know this is a public health issue at its core.
- We have expanded mental wellness and substance use services, especially in rural communities.
- We have taken major steps with our partners to address the harms associated with illegal drugs in our territory, which are increasingly laced with toxic substances like fentanyl and benzodiazepines.
- The distribution of naloxone kits, the expansion of drug testing services, and the treatment services available through the Referred Care Clinic have all helped to save lives and reduce harms in our territory.

- Last year we opened the first ever supervised consumption site in partnership with Blood Ties and expanded access to a medically prescribed safe supply of opioids to address the opioid crisis.
- But, we know we must do more. There is simply no other option.
- We also know that it is not just opioids that are wreaking havoc on our communities.
- It is also alcohol and other drugs like cocaine and crack.
- Substance use is killing people and creating mental health crises in each and every Yukon community.
- Last Friday, I called together community leaders and other leaders in government, as many as I could under very short notice, to discuss substance use and mental wellness.
- We discussed the need for bold action to address this emergency in a way that has never been done before in the Yukon.
- Taking a strong harm reduction approach to drug use, alcohol use, opioid use, overdose deaths and suicide is a priority for every community – and it is a priority for this government.

- We are committed to taking action and today is an important step towards doing more.
- We know we cannot do it alone. We need to work together with our community partners, our First Nations partners, and our partners in government at all levels from municipal to federal.
- This is going to take a collaborative, community approach.

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- This declaration I am making today, with the support of those who have joined me, and many others who could not join, is centred on our commitment to action.
- We are committed to immediate, short-, medium-, and long-term actions to address this emergency.
- Action like an aggressive public awareness and education campaign.
- People need to know that toxic drugs are in our communities and it is not safe to use alone.
- Action like expanding drug testing and safe supply to communities and increasing availability in Whitehorse.

- Action like enhancing the supervised consumption site to support those who use inhalants.
- Action like on-the-land treatment options that are rooted in cultural healing.
- We recognize immediate action is necessary as well.
- The Licensed Practical Nurse from the Supervised Consumption site will be at the Whitehorse Emergency Shelter during the day to promote the Supervised Consumption Site, be an extra health care worker, provide harm reduction supports, and transport people to the Supervised Consumption Site.
- Two additional counsellors will be on site at the shelter to provide client and staff care response.
- A physician will be providing drop-in services on site at the shelter next week to provide information about opioid treatment services that are available through the Referred Care Clinic to help people in need.

- We are working with Blood Ties to extend the Outreach Van hours to offer drug testing and harm reduction supports at the shelter in the afternoons.
- There are a number of initiatives underway.
- We also have commitments from our partners to support and participate in solutions to the challenges people are facing across the territory.
- In the coming weeks, in partnership with Yukon First Nations, we will host phase one of a mental wellness summit.
- This summit is part of our commitment to Yukoners and it will focus efforts to address substance use, the opioid crisis and suicide prevention.
- It will hone in on solutions.
- This is something we have been discussing for several months, including at the Yukon Forum meetings last year.
- This issue is a priority for me and for every leader that I have spoken to.

- I want Yukoners to know that your government is also working to provide more resources towards Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services, the Supervised Consumption Site, and our community partners like the RCMP and Blood Ties Four Directions.
- There will be more to share about funding in this year's budget.
- We are developing a new Opioid Action Plan, building on the success of our previous efforts.
- We are committed to the Yukon FASD Action Plan and the paths laid out in the Yukon's Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-spirit+ (MMIWG2S+) strategy.
- These are just some of the actions we are taking, but we know more is needed.
- We are actively working with our partners to identify more actions and solutions.
- We are resolutely committed to supporting Yukoners who are struggling with mental health and addictions.

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- Safety is paramount right now.
- Check in on your neighbours and your friends.
- I am once again imploring people to **be careful**: get your drugs checked for toxic substances, through Blood Ties and the outreach van or the supervised consumption site, do not use alone, and carry naloxone with you if you are using. Have naloxone kits nearby, maybe more than one.
- You can get a kit for free at numerous pharmacies, Blood Ties, the referred care clinic, Kwanlin Dün First Nation Health Centre, community health centres... there is a full list on Yukon.ca.
- This is not the time to shame people or pass judgement. Our fellow Yukoners deserve our respect and compassion. They urgently need our help and support.
- This declaration is a commitment to action by our government, and a call to action to all Yukoners.
- We need to address our substance use health emergency and make our communities more safe and healthy.
- Thank you.
- I will now pass it off to Dr. Elliott.