

PEEP STATEMENT

Reflections on the State of the Overdose Crisis for Overdose Awareness Day 2021



PEEP (Professionals for Ethical Engagement of Peers) is a BC-wide multi-regional based committee of professional consultants with past or present substance use experience working in collaboration with the BCCDC. Our purpose is to represent and empower the interests of those who use drugs in matters that impact our lives.

Our group appreciates the collaboration working with the BCCDC taking on the challenges of the current drug toxicity and overdose crisis. We appreciate the immense value of the successes we have had in expanding harm reduction measures and the work on social stigma toward those who use drugs. It is safe to say that work guided by the BCCDC expanding harm reduction in BC is at least in part responsible for saving the lives of thousands of people who use drugs, and for that we are extremely grateful.

While it is appropriate to appreciate our successes, we as people with living/lived experience of drug use (PWLE) cannot help but recognize that this horrifying overdose crisis continues at an unprecedented rate. As members of our community continue to be taken from us, we are compelled to focus our attention on the fundamental problems that are allowing this crisis to persist.

In July 2021, PEEP along with PWLE representing communities from around BC gathered for a 4-hour long meeting to discuss the priorities of people who use drugs (PWUD) for health authorities and the ministries to consider in policy related to drug use and harm reduction. The discussion of the meeting centered on a realization that we as PWLE can and will, over and over again, keep making lists of asks for our governing bodies. After more than five years of this crisis and so many of our close ones dying, this exercise is starting to feel hollow. It was agreed that there are problems more fundamental in our policy making that need to be addressed in order to alleviate this crisis.

The fundamental problem is that there are not enough of us working in drug policy who truly understand the magnitude of the social injustice that is happening, and the sacrifice required from each of us to change it. We must adopt a new drug policy framework that respects the political and social rights of people who use drugs. A framework that accommodates the needs of people who use drugs, rather than a framework aimed at making people not use drugs. What we are doing now is not nearly enough. Treatment is not enough. Harm reduction is not enough. For people who use drugs, we need regulated versions of preferred drugs in order to keep people healthy, safe, and legal.

Harm reduction is a tool to minimize our suffering as we wait for our rights to exist as people who use drugs. Our emancipation is what is required to end the suffering. This reality should form the basis for all decision-making around policy affecting the lives of people who use drugs.

With that reality in mind, PWLLE attending the meeting put together 5 broad priorities required as a fundamental solution to adequately address the injustices inflicted upon PWUD:

- o **Priority 1 – Engagement of PWLLE at all levels of policy and programming is still lacking and not being done in a meaningful way.** This is the core reason why the crisis continues. This is not just a principle from “Nothing about Us without Us”. Integrating PWLLE into the design of policy and programming is an obvious and practical way to discover and address the needs of PWUD. It is absurd to think effective policy could be created without this.
- o **Priority 2 – There is an overemphasis on abstinence in drug policy and programming.** There needs to be more respect and consideration for people who choose to use drugs. On the surface, the attitude behind policy determined to save people from their drug use may seem compassionate but is actually based on stigma of drug use and bears a lack of respect for the basis of “who we are as people who use drugs”.
- o **Priority 3 – Access to a legal and regulated supply of non-medical drugs that meet the varied preferences of people who use drugs.** Safer and legal drugs should be available for everybody, not just for those diagnosed with a substance use disorder
- o **Priority 4 – Provide more ways of meaningful engagement in society for PWUD.** The goal should not be to just keep people alive, but to create the capacity for a purposeful existence as people who use drugs.
- o **Priority 5 – Anti-stigma and decriminalization.** Stigma of PWUD can never be adequately addressed while PWUD are consistently devalued and criminalized by our governing institutions.

Please see the [2021 HRSS Peer-Only Meeting Report](#) for a more detailed breakdown of the five broad priorities as well as other top issues concerning PWUD in BC today.