
NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
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Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions

New provincewide Opioid Treatment Access Line provides same-day access to care

Updated on Aug. 27, 2024

VANCOUVER – The Province has launched the Opioid Treatment Access Line to make it faster and easier for people to get life-saving medication to treat opioid-use disorder and get connected to same-day care.

“When people struggling with opioid addiction decide to reach out for help, they need access to treatment and care quickly, free from barriers,” said Jennifer Whiteside, Minister of Mental Health and Addictions. “This new confidential access line will help people across B.C. start on a path to recovery right away. It’s part of our work to expand access to treatment and recovery so people can get the care they need, where and when they need it.”

The Opioid Treatment Access Line is a provincewide telephone-based health service. People struggling with opioid addiction can call 1 833 804-8111 toll-free for immediate assistance from a dedicated team, including doctors and nurses, who can prescribe life-saving opioid agonist medications. Callers will also be directly connected to regional health-care teams for ongoing treatment and support within their community. Dedicated nurses will help make sure people are getting the longer-term care they need. The service is confidential, the treatment is covered under BC PharmaCare, and it is available seven days a week from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m.

It is estimated that there are at least 125,000 people living with opioid-use disorder in B.C., and there are approximately 24,000 people currently on opioid agonist treatment. The Opioid Treatment Access Line will help many people, especially those in smaller communities, who find it challenging to find a local clinic or prescriber.

The Opioid Treatment Access Line supports the expansion of the Road to Recovery program across all regions of B.C., and serves as an immediate measure to improve access to opioid-addiction treatment. This is part of the Province’s comprehensive effort to ensure individuals receive the treatment and recovery care they need, prevent overdose deaths and keep people and communities safe.

“Opioid agonist treatments can reduce the harmful symptoms of opioid use and support long-term recovery, but too often people face challenges with getting a prescription when they need it,” said Dr. Penny Balleem, the Premier’s special adviser on health care. “Through this new telephone service, people from anywhere in B.C. can quickly and easily get an assessment and be prescribed the treatments they need to start their healing journey.”

Opioid agonist treatment uses medications such as buprenorphine/naloxone, methadone and slow-release oral morphine, prescribed by a trained doctor or nurse to prevent withdrawal symptoms and reduce the risk of overdose. Opioid agonist treatment is an evidence-based

approach used widely across Canada and around the world. It is the recommended first-line treatment for people with opioid addiction and has been shown to help people stabilize their health and life, stay in treatment, stay away from toxic opioid use and start a path to recovery.

The toxic-drug crisis continues to devastate families across B.C. and North America, and men working in the trades are over-represented in the number of deaths from overdose. A BC Coroners Service report from 2022 found that of the 35% of people who were employed at the time of their death, 52% of them worked in the construction, trades or transport industry. The Province has been working with the sector to expand Tailgate Toolkit, a harm-reduction program that aims to educate employers and employees about the risks and supports available to them. The Opioid Treatment Access Line is another tool to add to that toolkit.

“It can be especially hard for people in the construction industry to overcome stigma and ask for help with an addiction. There is a need to remove further barriers that cause people to turn away,” said Vicky Waldron, executive director of the Construction Industry Rehabilitation Plan. “We are hopeful that the Opioid Treatment Access Line will improve access to treatment and care for construction workers who are struggling.”

In addition, the Province is supporting the Construction Industry Rehabilitation Plan with the expansion of the BuildStrong App, an app for construction workers that provides on-demand access to mental-health and addiction support, including tools and techniques for managing stress and anxiety, tips for overcoming addiction challenges, and information about treatment options.

More details about B.C.’s work to address the toxic-drug crisis and expand treatment and recovery services is available on a new website: <https://gov.bc.ca/BetterCare>

Quote:

Adrian Dix, Minister of Health –

“Timely access to care is crucial for those dealing with opioid addiction. Our new access line provides same-day support and is an important step forward, which will help save lives and addresses the fear and stigma that often prevents people from getting the help they need.”

Dr. Andy Ryan, addiction medicine physician at St. Paul’s Hospital, and medical director of the Road to Recovery program at Providence Health Care –

“As an addiction-medicine physician, one of the great frustrations is the missed opportunities to provide care for someone when they are ready to ask for help. Too many times I have witnessed or heard stories of someone sent to a clinic in another town or waiting to seek care because they didn’t know where to turn at that moment. I’m so pleased that this new service will change that, making evidence-based treatment and care more widely accessible to people when they need it.”

Quick Facts:

- B.C. now has 3,645 publicly funded substance-use treatment beds, including 659 beds opened since 2017 with more to come.
- More than 4,600 people received publicly funded live-in treatment and recovery support last year – 1,000 more than the year before.

- More than 1,500 people accessed detox beds through Vancouver Coastal Health’s Road to Recovery Access Central phone line (1 866 658-1221) between Oct. 1, 2023, and June 30, 2024, with people prioritized as urgent able to access a bed within one day.
- In 2021, B.C. became the first province in Canada to train nurses to prescribe opioid agonist medications, and nearly 200 nurses in the province are already helping people access this life-saving treatment with more to come.
- The number of toxic-drug deaths in the first six months of 2024 was 9% lower compared to the same period in 2023, and the rate of death was at its lowest point in four years.
- There have been 4.8 million visits and 30,000 overdoses survived at overdose-prevention and supervised-consumption sites since 2017.

Learn More:

To learn how B.C. is building better mental-health and addiction care, visit:

<https://gov.bc.ca/BetterCare>

To learn more about the Opioid Treatment Access Line, visit:

<https://HelpStartsHere.gov.bc.ca/OpioidTreatment>

To learn more about the Tailgate Toolkit program for trades workers, visit:

<https://thetailgatetoolkit.ca>

To find a treatment option that works for you, visit: <https://HelpStartsHere.gov.bc.ca>

To learn how government is working to keep people and communities safe, visit:

<https://strongerbc.ca/SafeCommunities>

To learn more about Road to Recovery’s new model of seamless addictions care, visit:

<https://news.gov.bc.ca/files/RecoveryGraphic.pdf>

Two backgrounders follow.

Contact:

Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions

Media Relations

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BACKGROUND 1

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Details about new Opioid Treatment Access Line

The Opioid Treatment Access Line is an immediate step to improve same-day access to opioid agonist treatment for people who need help to stop using and better connect them to further treatment and supports in the community.

About opioid agonist treatment

- Opioid agonists are slow-acting medications that prevent withdrawal symptoms and reduce the risk of overdose by moving people away from the toxic-drug supply. This includes kadian, methadone and suboxone.
- Opioid withdrawal can be a life-threatening condition if not managed carefully. Symptoms often include cravings, chills, sweating, nausea, diarrhea, stomach cramps and muscle aches.
- Opioid agonist medications are different than the regulated form of opioid medication (hydromorphone) used in the prescribed alternatives program for people at high risk of death from street drugs. These people may transition to opioid agonists when they're ready to begin treatment.

How the Opioid Treatment Access Line works

- People may call 1 833 804-8111 toll-free from anywhere in B.C. to speak to a trained doctor or nurse practitioner who will:
 - conduct an initial addiction-medicine consultation over the phone;
 - prescribe an opioid agonist treatment medication, if medically appropriate; and
 - connect to regional health teams for further treatment and supports in the community.
- Fill the prescription at a pharmacy:
 - It's free – costs are covered under BC PharmaCare if enrolled in the Medical Services Plan (MSP) and have a personal health number.
 - If not enrolled in MSP, a pharmacist can help enrol in MSP immediately.
- Afterward, health authority substance-use liaison nurses will make sure people are getting the longer-term care they need.

Access line is available:

- daily from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. (last intake at 3:30 p.m., voicemail after hours); and
- health authority substance-use liaison nurses will receive and follow up with clients as needed from 8:30 a.m. until 8:30 p.m. daily, once fully implemented in each health authority; recruitment is underway.

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BACKGROUND 2

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How government is taking action to build better care, keep people safe

Intervening early to help people access care sooner:

- providing quality free or low-cost counselling sessions to individuals, couples and families through a total of 49 communities agencies across B.C. with more than 290,000 sessions provided since 2019;
- opening 35 Foundry centres for young people between 12 and 24 to access integrated health and wellness services to help with life, school and work -- more than 16,000 young people accessed Foundry services in 2023;
- expanding Integrated Child and Youth Teams to 20 school districts to help people under 19 and their families connect to mental-health and addiction care at school and in the community, teams that will serve as many as 5,800 children and youth every month once fully operational;
- helping parents of children between three and 12 develop skills and strategies to deal with anxiety and behaviour challenges through the Confident Parents/Thriving Kids and the We Are Indigenous: Big Worries, Strong Spirit programs; and
- making it easier for people with mild to moderate mental-health and addiction challenges get the care they need at the health clinics and hospitals they already visit with 39 Urgent and Primary Care Clinics now open across B.C., with plans to open as many as 50 by end of 2025.

Reducing risk to save lives:

- saving lives and connecting people to care and treatment at more than 47 overdose prevention sites, up from one location in 2017, which have seen more than 4.8 million visits and 29,641 overdoses survived as of May 2024;
- working to ensure consistent access to Take Home Naloxone kits in more locations, including post-secondary institutions – with 2.4 million kits shipped, research estimates 43% of them were used to reverse an overdose;
- encouraging people to use the Lifeguard app if using drugs alone as it will alert 911 in the event of an overdose;
 - as of June 2024, there were 144,000 uses of the app from nearly 55,000 users with 200 calls made to 911, leading to 114 “confirmed OK” callbacks and 92 overdose reversals, with no deaths reported;
- testing for deadly contaminated drugs at 119 drug-checking sites and investing in a cutting-edge enhanced drug-checking technology, HarmCheck, developed by Vancouver Island University that more accurately identifies substances in drugs; and
- expanding the Hope to Health Clinic so it can reach 1,000 more people with complex mental-health and addiction challenges, meaning 2,800 people in Vancouver’s

Downtown Eastside will now be able to get the care and wraparound support they need.

Connecting people to treatment and recovery:

- expanding Road to Recovery across B.C. – a new model of addictions care seamlessly moving people through detox, treatment and recovery services without delay;
 - more than 1,500 people accessed detox beds through Vancouver Access Central phone line in its first nine months, and people prioritized as urgent were able to access a bed within one day;
- opening 659 adult and youth substance-use treatment beds since 2017, bringing the total number of publicly funded beds to 3,645 with more to come;
- supporting eight First Nations-run treatment and healing centres, six of which are being renovated with two new facilities are being planned;
- launching B.C.'s first-of-its-kind treatment centre for Indigenous youth at Orca Lelum Youth Wellness Centre in Lantzville;
- being the first province in Canada to train nurses to prescribe opioid agonist treatment, with nearly 200 nurses across B.C. already helping people access this lifesaving medication; and
- supporting people with brain injuries from toxic drug overdoses with specialized care and wraparound services, such as Complex Care Housing, concurrent disorder treatment, and cognitive rehabilitation.

Supporting people in the community:

- expanding Recovery Community Centres across B.C. so people throughout the province who are leaving treatment receive ongoing support in the community when they return home;
- building 8,800 supportive homes since 2017 to move people out of homelessness and housing insecurity and provide wraparound supports – of those, nearly 6,000 are now homes for people;
- funding 6,100 shelter spaces in 50 communities, including permanent, temporary and extreme weather spaces this past winter, up 45% overall and double the permanent spaces since 2017;
- launching civilian-led Peer Assisted Care Teams in six communities by the end of 2024 so people in crisis receive care from trained peers and health workers instead of police, teams that responded to nearly 3,500 calls to date with just 1% requiring a police response; and
- establishing Mobile Integrated Crisis Response Teams that pair police officers with health-care workers to respond to mental-health or substance-use crises where there may be a safety risk in 19 communities by the end of 2024, with teams currently active in 17 communities.

Keeping people and communities safe:

- going after the gangs and organized criminals responsible for making and pushing the toxic street drugs that are killing loved ones and hurting communities, by:
 - using Unexplained Wealth Orders to make it faster and easier to seize proceeds of crime and using it to fund victim services programs;
 - establishing an Integrated Gang Homicide Team in the Lower Mainland to focus on

- investigating complex gang-related homicides and improving intelligence to disrupt gang activity and hold criminals accountable; and
- hiring 256 more provincial police officers and expanding their investigation and enforcement abilities so they can target criminal activity more effectively.

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