



Statement Déclaration

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LIFE WON'T WAIT: Statement in support of National Day of Action on the Overdose Crisis

TORONTO, February 21, 2017 — On this first National Day of Action on the Overdose Crisis, the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network stands in solidarity with the Canadian Association of People who Use Drugs (CAPUD) and with other groups of people who use drugs, frontline harm reduction workers and other allies. We demand action, by all levels of government, to put an end to the ongoing crisis of overdose deaths and related harms.

For nearly 25 years, the Legal Network has been an advocate for harm reduction and for broader, deeper drug policy reform that jettisons the failed, costly model of drug prohibition that has caused so much damage to so many lives, from fueling the spread of HIV and hepatitis C to contributing to over-incarceration and creating conditions for the ongoing epidemic of overdose fatalities. Instead, we need drug policy that is guided by evidence, by public health objectives and, most importantly, by a commitment to respecting, protecting and fulfilling the human rights of people who use drugs.

In particular, the Legal Network adds its voice in calling on the **federal government** to take the following actions to reduce harms related to drugs and harms related to bad drug policy:

1. **Ease rapid access to life-saving safer consumption services.** Approve without delay the outstanding applications for all safer consumption services. Amend Bill C-37 to create simpler, faster pathways to getting exemptions from criminal liability for the clients and operators of such services — including granting additional authority to issue such exemptions to provincial and local health officials based on local needs. Provide emergency funding where necessary to get such services up and running.
2. **Improve access to safer substances, including as treatment.** Work with people who use drugs, frontline workers and others to reduce the risk of harm associated with substances of unknown composition. This must include removing all barriers, and scaling up access, to evidence-based treatment options for opioid dependence — including injectable opioid therapy (i.e., prescription heroin and hydromorphone).
3. **Implement comprehensive harm reduction in federal prisons.** Implement prison-based needle and syringe programs without delay, in consultation with people in prison, key service providers and advocates. Improve access to opioid substitution therapy (OST) in prison. Ensure access to the continuation of opioid substitution therapy upon release, as well as naloxone, when people are at heightened risk of overdose.

4. **Strengthen Canada’s drug strategy, including community-based responses.** In keeping with the recently stated commitment to restore harm reduction to the newly-renamed “Canadian Drugs and Substances Strategy,” dramatically increase funding under that strategy to support and expand harm reduction services and initiatives. This funding should include explicit funding for the development of drug user–based organizations and advocacy groups, who are key experts in addressing the health needs of their peers.
5. **End the “war on drugs” and the criminalization of people who use drugs.** Introduce legislation immediately in Parliament to decriminalize the possession for personal use of all controlled substances, as has been done in some other countries with very positive outcomes. Move eventually to the legalization and regulation of drugs so as to be able to better protect individual and public health.

Provincial and municipal governments must also take action, including removing regulatory and financial barriers impeding access to treatment (e.g., punitive, invasive regulation of opioid substitution therapy) and implementing comprehensive harm reduction programs in provincial prisons. Key harm reduction services including safer consumption services, OST, naloxone, and needle and syringe programs should also be financially supported.

Thousands of people have died in 2016 alone from overdose. The “war on drugs” keeps getting deadlier. It is a dereliction of duty for policy-makers to perpetuate the harmful failures of prohibition and to fail to look for new approaches guided by evidence, including the experience and expertise of people who use drugs.

Today, people who use drugs — people who are as ordinary and diverse as everyone else, yet stigmatized, vilified and criminalized, and facing a terrible toll of loss — will come together across Canada for the first time to demand the changes needed to build a more healthy and just society. Listen to their voices, to the bold solutions they propose. Listen, and then act.

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For more information:

Lauryn Kronick
Communications and Outreach Officer
Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network
+1 416 595-1666 ext. 236
lkronick@aidslaw.ca