CANADIAN STUDENTS FOR SENSIBLE DRUG POLICY

Edmonton Regional Chapter
edmonton@cssdp.org
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Open Letter to Mike Ellis, Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services, and Nicholas Milliken, Minister of Mental Health and Addictions

RE: Involuntary Substance Use Treatment in Alberta

May 3, 2023

Dear Minister Ellis and Minister Milliken,

In mid-April, comments were made suggesting that the Province of Alberta is considering legislation that would force people who use drugs into involuntary substance use treatment under the Compassionate Intervention Act. We are the Edmonton Regional Chapter of the Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy (CSSDP) and are representing the young people who have signed below. We are a group of young people who unanimously agree that mandatory treatment infringes on the human rights of people who use drugs and completely disregards the current body of scientific evidence on this topic. We urge you both, as the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services and as the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions in Alberta, to immediately stop considering involuntary treatment for people who use drugs and put an end to the Compassionate Intervention Act.

As students and researchers immersed in the drug poisoning crisis, we understand the urgency of the crisis within Alberta and the toll that is placed on our communities and, thus, the need for strategies to address this public health issue. Furthermore, we recognize the importance of considering diverse options to address the complexity of the crisis. However, we advocate for evidence-based interventions that will support people who use drugs and meet them where they are at.

Summaries of academic literature highlight that involuntary treatment of people who use drugs leads to limited short-term gains at the cost of long-term harms. Furthermore, data from similar policy implementation in Massachusetts suggests that individuals who are placed in involuntarily treatment are 2.2 times more likely to experience a drug poisoning event or 'overdose' after release (Page 48). In the most recent study out of the United States, all patients who received involuntary treatment had returned to substance use after release and had at least one emergency department visit. The current scientific literature critically undermines the argument that involuntary treatment is a form of "compassionate" care.

"The empirical evidence available, coupled with the manner in which these laws (on involuntary treatment) have been translated into practice does not support an expansion of such laws" (Udwadia & Illes, 2020)

While taken under the auspices of "compassionate" interventions, the proposed strategy violates the rights of Albertans and Canadians and perpetuates systemic racism within both the carceral and healthcare systems. For many reasons, including but not limited to intergenerational trauma from the legacy of residential schools; First Nations people are at disproportionately higher risk of fatal drug poisoning. Not

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only would involuntary treatment bear a resemblance to the involuntary institutionalization of Indigenous peoples in residential schools and the child welfare system, but it would also contribute to continued systemic racism and disproportionately impact this community. While it has been clarified that involuntary treatment would only be implemented as a last resort, previous implementations of this "last resort" policy in Massachusetts has faced criticism due to reported abuse of this legislation. The proposed policy undermines individuals' autonomy, dignity and fundamental right to make decisions about their own health.

As students, voters, and the future of healthcare and public policy in the province, we strongly stand against this act and propose instead that funding goes to increased support of a range of evidence-based programs and practices that support people who use drugs, including **voluntary treatment options and harm reduction programs.** Please see our recent evidence brief and policy recommendations for more information about our calls to action.

We urge you to listen to the experiences of experts in this province, including people who use drugs and their families. Timely action is critical to prevent the ongoing loss of lives in Alberta. Please let us know if you would like to connect with us and members of the CSSDP-Edmonton Chapter to further discuss these issues.

Sincerely,

William Rioux and Holly Mathias
On behalf of the Edmonton Regional Chapter of the Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy and Alberta students

Also signed by students, academics, researchers and allies in Alberta and across Canada (add your signature here):

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