

Cowichan Leadership Group

Honourable XXX
Minister of XXX
Room XXX Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC, V8V 1X4

February 16, 2020

Dear Minister:

We are writing to you because our community is in crisis. The impact of substance-use addiction on our community members has reached a fever pitch. We are no longer able to manage on our own, and we are seeking your help in finding solutions.

Our region is unique in its composition: we have the social issues of a city but all the appearances of a rural community. Of the nearly 84,000 residents, approximately 55% live in an urban environment. Cowichan Tribes is the largest First Nation in British Columbia. The Cowichan Overdose Prevention Site has received over 54,000 visits to date, averaging over the last 12 weeks at 622 visits per week. These numbers are second only to the Harbour and Rock Bay Landing in Victoria and thus **higher than all other rural/suburban OPS sites on the island**. We are a smaller centre dealing with numbers of people seeking services for harm reduction and addiction that no one expected. Yet, the response from higher levels of government has not been commensurate with this data.

We are concerned for the safety of our residents and service providers. At the end of December, we had two violent deaths in Duncan and then another unrelated stabbing a week later. Our community is not accustomed to violent deaths on our streets. Our homeless outreach staff is fearful of their safety at work. Other front-line workers express despair about the outlook of an epidemic that only shows signs of growing. Residents have grown tired and are angry that nothing appears to be working.

At the suggestion of the RCMP, the mental health workers are considering hiring security staff to help them move the most aggressive clients off the Warmland shelter's property. But where will they go? The RCMP is inundated with calls for service and is overburdened with the investigative requirements of a judicial system that isn't able to adequately contain drug offenders.

Cowichan Tribes members are struggling on reserve. Members are concerned for their safety because of homeless camps near their residences. Campers are getting more aggressive — some are walking into people's homes and taking whatever they want.

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What is the fate of our community if we continue to receive no additional support from the provincial government? In fact, we have received less funding from the province. In 2018/2019, our community action team received approximately \$100,000 of overdose emergency response funding; last year they received \$66,000. Funding is going in a direction counter to the increasing demand for programs to support everyone along the addiction spectrum.

We were optimistic when your government announced that it would make mental health and addictions a priority. In the Cowichan Valley, it has been the issue that most negatively impacts our community. This is a crisis that is only deepening. We are on a trajectory for a consistent requirement for more resources, not fewer.

This issue did not start yesterday. The Cowichan region is a perfect representation of how the problem will continue to grow if only bandaids continue to be put on the problem. We need temporary treatment facilities and outreach-based treatment services. We need transitional housing. We need a safe-supply program. We need them now before more tragedies occur, and more local funds are spent on cleaning up and providing security in our neighbourhoods for a problem that has grown beyond our community's ability to afford.

We request a meeting with you and your ministry staff as soon as possible to see how we can work together on finding a way forward for Cowichan. There are many individuals and organizations that are asking questions and trying to find solutions for how to respond to the opioid crisis in rural/suburban communities. As a community that is reeling from this crisis, we offer the attached proposal as a local solution for a rural response.

We remain focused and determined to work collaboratively with you and each other to find solutions, and we will continue to advocate for greater support and coordination from our provincial government on this issue.

It is going to take all of us—all levels of government, businesses, residents, service organizations—to take on the amount of additional work that is required to solve this problem. At the moment, there is a gap in support for Cowichan from the higher levels of government. We hope you and your colleagues will find a way to support our urgent request.

Sincerely,

Cowichan Leadership Group