



Harm Reduction
Nurses Association

Association des
infirmiers et infirmières
en réduction des méfaits

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: NURSES CALL PROVINCE TO THE TABLE — 8 years into a public health emergency, nurses call on BC to fix drug regulations, focus on solutions

Victoria, British Columbia | April 16, 2024 —Nurses who challenged B.C.'s proposed policing and public space legislation are calling on the provincial government to resolve issues with Bill 34 and focus on solutions that support safer communities for everyone. The [Harm Reduction Nurses Association](#) (HRNA) has reached out to the provincial government to discuss legal and policy changes that could help struggling communities amid the drug poisoning crisis. The Association is asking the Province to engage in productive efforts rather than continuing to defend a law that puts lives at risk.

“We are eight years into a public health emergency. No one wants to be in court for this,” says Corey Ranger of the Harm Reduction Nurses Association. “It takes time and focus away from where we need it. Every day we spend on this court process is a day we lose [seven](#) loved ones to unregulated drug toxicity. That’s why we are asking the Province to come to the table, in that spirit of practicality. Let’s get to work on solutions.”

On April 14, 2016, B.C. declared a public health [emergency](#) in response to increasing fatalities driven by the unregulated drug supply. That year, 996 people [died](#). In 2023, the annual death toll reached 2546. Since the emergency declaration, at least 14,000 people have lost their lives, more than the entire population of Powell River.

In Nov. 2023, the B.C. government passed [Bill 34](#), the *Restricting Public Consumption of Illegal Substances Act*. The Act imposed sweeping restrictions on the three-year decriminalization [pilot](#) that launched Jan. 31, 2023. HRNA alleged it would put people at greater risk of fatal overdose, make healthcare outreach more challenging, and drive racial discrimination, particularly against Indigenous people. In Dec. 2023, the B.C. Supreme Court granted HRNA an injunction, preventing the Act from coming into force until March 31, 2024, later extended to June 30. The [ruling found](#) that in severely restricting public drug consumption, the Act would cause irreparable harm to people at risk of injury and death from fatal drug poisoning amid a public health crisis.

“Bill 34 is punitive, political and lacks evidence,” says Caitlin Shane of Pivot Legal Society and co-counsel for HRNA. The Province has spent precious months and resources defending a law that will not only fail to stop public drug consumption, but will also cause irreparable harm to people who use drugs and their health-care providers. The Province has options and we are offering to help them navigate those options.”

HRNA has reached out to the Province with an offer to discuss a list of legal and policy changes that would better protect the lives of people currently at risk of overdose and increase public safety, including:

- Legislative changes to Bill 34 aimed at prioritizing health and safety of people most impacted by the public health crisis and mitigating the harmful effects of Bill 34. Responses to these crises must properly balance the rights, health and interests of all people.
- Ensuring that the 2016 Ministerial [Order](#) requiring overdose prevention sites wherever there is need is fulfilled. Public and visible drug use is connected to a lack of safe, legal, indoor locations.
- Increasing access to care and community-based programs that will separate people from the toxic unregulated drug supply, including innovative support for responsible public health-focused regulation of the drug supply. It is well established that the unregulated nature of the drug supply is [driving](#) overdose deaths in B.C.
- Investing in housing and services. Until there are adequate housing and services available, some people will have no choice but to rely on and exist in public places.

“The Province is on the wrong path with Bill 34. When we see public drug use, it is because people do not have housing, services or safe places to go – and because people are scared for their lives,” says DJ Larkin of the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition and co-counsel for HRNA. “Just a week ago the Province acknowledged [acknowledged](#) that the answer to people using substances in hospital rooms is to ensure there is an alternate, sanctioned, safe place for them to go -- the same holds true for people in public places. To help save lives and resolve community concerns, we must ensure people have somewhere safe to go, not spend time in court to defend a deeply flawed law.”

The Province has provided no empirical evidence that connects public drug use to the decriminalization pilot. Conversely, there is ample [evidence](#) that homelessness has [increased](#) in B.C. and that a lack of housing, health and harm reduction services leaves people with nowhere to go other than public spaces. **“We are concerned that this BC Supreme Court injunction is being scapegoated for all manner of public concerns, when what we need is for the Province to implement real solutions to those concerns,” says Shane.**

B.C. government representatives have suggested that regulations to accompany Bill 34 are forthcoming. HRNA is asking the Province to come to the table to ensure next steps put B.C. on a path to better health, stronger communities and an end to the now-eight year public health emergency.

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Links and Resources:

- [B.C. Supreme Court Ruling on Injunction Application](#)
- [Bill 34 - Restricting Public Consumption of Illegal Substances Act](#)
- [HRNA Press Release](#) December 30, 2023, “BC Supreme Court rules in favour of Harm Reduction Nurses Association, pauses coming into force of BC’s public drug consumption law”

Media Inquiries:

HRNA and counsel has reached out to government with this offer and is not in a position to comment further or conduct media interviews at this time.