



# THE CAPITAL AND VANCOUVER ISLAND

Editor: Dave Senick > Telephone: 250-380-5333 > Email: localnews@timescolonist.com

## More RCMP staff sought in drug fight

**LINDSAY KINES**  
and **CINDY E. HARNETT**  
Times Colonist

The Canadian government needs to fill more than 200 federal RCMP vacancies in B.C. to help the province deal with its drug overdose crisis, B.C.'s director of police services said Monday.

Clayton Pecknold, who co-chairs the province's task force on overdose response, credited the federal government with introducing legislation to ease the way for safe consumption sites and prevent the smuggling of opioids into Canada.

"But there's more they can do," he said. "We are still down in the number of RCMP officers that we have doing federal drug enforcement in this province. We'd like to see the federal government act quickly on filling those positions."

Pecknold said the RCMP is supposed to have more than 900 federal officers and civilians handling drug investigations, counter-terrorism and other federal duties in province. As of October, there were only about 700, he said.

The province, meanwhile, has devoted "a considerable amount of money" to its anti-gang Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit and the Organized Crime Agency of B.C., Pecknold said. "So we're doing our part."

He made the comments as the B.C. Coroners Service released statistics showing that 128 people died from illicit drug overdoses in November, the worst tally for a single month in recent memory. So far this year, 755 people have died across the province, most of them from overdoses linked to fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid that officials say has been entering Canada by mail from China.

The RCMP was unavailable for comment, but Scott Bardsley, a spokesperson for federal Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale, blamed the problem on the former Conservative government for cutting half a billion dollars from the RCMP's budget over the past four years.

"One of the consequences was a steady erosion of funding for the federal policing program, which is not able to fill all its positions in 'E' Division [British Columbia]," he said.

The federal government is conducting an Integrity Review to assess whether the RCMP has the resources it needs to deliver on its mandate and, in the meantime, a temporary fund was created to ensure the force can provide "critical services" to Canadians, Bardsley said.

He also said the federal Liberal government is committed to strengthening its response to the crisis. Health Minister Jane Philpott and Goodale last week announced proposed legislation to restore harm reduction as a key part of its drug strategy, prohibit the unregistered import of pill presses, and allow Canada border officers to inspect suspicious mail weighing less than 30 grams.

Pecknold said he recognizes the overdose problem will not be solved by law enforcement efforts at the border.

"But clearly, when you're bringing in this level of toxic substance that has been described as a poison, we've got to try to stem it at the border," he said.

He said drug smuggling investigations are complex and require specialized officers with a high degree of ability.

"I would like to see the federal government expedite whatever's necessary to get us those positions in British Columbia," Pecknold said. "Now whether that's a budgetary challenge or a redistribution of federal resources, I leave to them. But fill our holes."

lkines@timescolonist.com  
ceharnett@timescolonist.com



Ross Nicholls will be the on-site paramedic at the supervised injection site at Our Place. DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST

## Supervised site aims to cut OD deaths

**SARAH PETRESCU**  
Times Colonist

An orange shipping container converted into a supervised consumption site for injection drug users opens today in the courtyard at Our Place on Pandora Avenue.

The hope is that the new temporary and limited service helps to curb the catastrophic number of overdose deaths in Victoria. It is the first supervised consumption service to open at the end of a year of unprecedented deaths, the day after the B.C. Coroners Service announced November overdose deaths were the highest on record for the province.

Victoria is in the top three communities of overdose deaths, and Vancouver Island has the highest rate of overdose deaths in the province, with 139 so far this year and November the worst month yet with 18 deaths.

"It's completely devastating. The numbers are devastating but sadly I'm not surprised," said Heather Hobbs, who has worked in harm reduction with Aids Vancouver Island for 13 years. "I remember very clearly this time last year when there were a number of deaths in the community and it started to get really bad. We've never seen anything like this. It just keeps getting worse."

Hobbs said that despite harm-reduction measures such as supervised consumption services and training to administer naloxone — the antidote to the powerful opioid fentanyl — part of the problem stems from years of "bad" drug policy.

"We've done a lot of work to treat drug use as a health issue, not a criminal justice issue, but the justice system is far behind," said Hobbs. "Systems that criminalize and punish people for having a health problem do not work. The whole attempt to keep on top of drugs and dealers is not working. We thought fentanyl was bad, now there's carfentanil."

Hobbs said the key is to listen to people with lived experience of drug use about what could best help them. She noted opioid replacement programs and access to different kinds of treatment options.

"Abstinence based treatment doesn't work for everyone," Hobbs said. "We need other options, even non-residential ones."

Hobbs said supervised consumption services are something users have been asking for. She's glad Victoria will now have some, but said she and others are nervous given the time of year.

"This is [social assistance] cheque week and a difficult time of year," Hobbs said, adding many frontline workers are conflicted about taking time off over the holidays. "There's fear. It's typically a time when people would take a rest but they want to be there."

At Our Place, longtime volunteer Ross Nicholls has come out of retirement to be the on-site paramedic for the new supervised consumption site. This year, there have been about 60 overdoses at Our Place and 20 in the past month. Three clients have died: one in the housing units, one at

Choices Transitional Housing in View Royal and one in the washroom at the centre.

"When I heard about this opportunity, I jumped on it," said Nicholls, who has volunteered at the homeless hub for two years and helped in many overdoses. "There's a huge need here and I want to be part of the solution."

Nicholls will be working at the site, which has two stations for injection-drug use, safe supplies and a reception desk, alongside staff from the Society of Living Illicit Drug Users — who will do outreach and naloxone training.

"I hope to learn a lot from them," said Nicholls, who often becomes involved in overdose situations after someone has "gone down." He said the new site will allow him to look for early symptoms and intervene sooner.

"This has to make a difference," Nicholls said. "Look at the conditions where people are using: in the cold, alone, dark alleys. This is a more humane environment with immediate medical response that gives a lot more chance of survival," he said.

The supervised consumption site will be open during regular Our Place hours until a more permanent site is opened next door. Island Health hopes to have the federal applications in by the end of the month. Communications director Grant McKenzie said the organization lost at least one monthly subscriber because of the new service and had to change their policy of not allowing drug use — though this is limited to the new site. spetrescu@timescolonist.com

## Salvation Army helps fill the gaps for working single mom

**AMY SMART**  
Times Colonist

For one Victoria mother without sick-leave benefits, a seasonal cold means the space under the Christmas tree can be sparse.

Tyra, 35, is a home-support worker who has never been on social assistance but still finds herself turning to places like the Salvation Army at Christmas to help fill the gaps.

"I'm a single parent and unfortunately, when I'm sick or my kids are sick, I can't go to work," she said.

This year, she and one of her daughters both got strep throat at the beginning of December.

"Over two weeks, I could only make it to four shifts ... it made an impact on the paycheque that comes right around Christmas."

Tyra was able to pick out toys



for her youngest daughter after being directed to the Salvation Army by the Christmas Giving Network.

The network is an umbrella organization that ensures aid is distributed fairly, by offering co-ordination among different agencies. Those agencies include the *Times Colonist* Christmas Fund, Salvation Army, Mustard Seed, St. Vincent de Paul and Sooke Christmas Bureau & Sooke

### HOW TO DONATE

Since 1956, this newspaper has collected money to benefit the less fortunate. Last year, through the Christmas Fund, we raised and distributed about \$320,000, and we hope to beat that total this year.

We work with the Salvation Army and the Mustard Seed, which handle the

disbursement of most of the funds, and also provide financial help to Our Place.

To donate, go online to: [timescolonist.com/donate](http://timescolonist.com/donate). You will be directed to a Canada Helps donation form; once you make your donation, a tax receipt will be provided immediately.

Or mail a cheque, payable to the **Times Colonist Christmas Fund Society**, to the Times Colonist Christmas Fund, 2621 Douglas St., Victoria, V8T 4M2. You can use your credit card by phoning **250-995-4438** between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m., Monday through Friday. Outside those hours, messages will be accepted.

Harbourside Lions.

"I literally walked into this room full of toys that was honestly a bit overwhelming, but also exciting, because there are so many options. You can find something geared specifically to your kid," she said.

While her three kids — 11, 17 and 19 — made almost no requests this Christmas, she did find one toy on her youngest's list.

"The one thing my daughter asked for was the pie-face game,

which I found here," she said.

The holiday season has provided a big financial struggle, but it doesn't mean the rest of the year is easy. In the past 10 years, Tyra said she has experienced the cost of living skyrocketing in Victoria, when her wage has not.

She's not alone. Housing affordability and the cost of living were identified as the biggest priorities to Greater Victorians in the Victoria Foundation's

Vital Signs survey this year.

Her eldest daughter contributes to the rent, which is \$1,900 per month — one of the few places under \$2,000 they could find big enough for the entire family. By the time Tyra pays rent and bills, she only has a bit left over for groceries and other expenses, she said.

"I'm pretty much paycheque-to-paycheque right now, so this is a huge, huge help." asmart@timescolonist.com

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