



Metro Vancouver Aboriginal Executive Council

100 - 2732 East Hastings Street | Vancouver, BC, V5K 1Z9

phone: (604) 255-2394 website: www.mvaec.ca

Urban Indigenous Opioid Task Force (UIOTF) Meeting for MVAEC Members

Introduction

"IT DOESN'T MATTER WHO YOU ARE OR WHAT WORK YOU DO, WE ARE ALL ONE MIND AND ONE HEART" –SHANE POINTE

The Metro Vancouver Aboriginal Executive Council (MVAEC) is an umbrella organization serving 23 Indigenous non-profits in the Metro Vancouver area including Surrey, New Westminister, and Burnaby using an *Indigenous Collective Impact (ICI)* model. ICI is a framework that allows stakeholders to define common goals to bring about broad social changes.

MVAEC's member organizations were invited to a UIOTF meeting held on January 23rd, 2019 to share on their experiences and recommendations in response to BC's Overdose Epidemic. A talking circle was facilitated by Elder Dr. Lee Brown to gather knowledge from Indigenous service providers who are most impacted by the issues related to the fentanyl contamination of illicit drugs.

The voices of MVAEC members were recorded and documented using Grounded Theory, a method ensuring that knowledge generated comes directly from the community and is not influenced by the opinions of MVAEC's staff. The following information is a summary of MVAEC members' response to the question **"How can we work together to respond to the overdose crisis?"**

Ongoing Deprivations

"OVERDOSES ARE BECOMING NORMALIZED AND YOU CAN SEE ONE OR TWO BLUE BODIES A DAY ON THE STREET" – JOSEPH, CULTURE SAVES LIVES (CSL)

"THERE IS A BLACK CLOUD OVER THE DTES, BUT THERE ARE ALSO SPARKS OF LIGHT AMIDST THE DARKNESS." – BRENDA PRINCE, AFDS

"WE'RE STILL STANDING AND HONORING OUR PEOPLE." – KEVIN BARLOW, MVAEC

Workers who provide services to Indigenous people are routinely losing friends, family, and community members to overdose. Indigenous people have unique needs due to the history of Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the ongoing consequences of colonization. Current models of care have not been good for Indigenous people and responses must be innovative and adaptable.

Service organizations are struggling with the increased demands brought on by the overdose epidemic. For example, workers at the *Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre (VAFCCS)* recognize that many people who access the centre have mental issues that are beyond their capacity to support and they must resort to calling the *Vancouver Police Department (VPD)*.

Despite the steady high rates of overdose, service providers continue to do the best with resources they have. Group members agreed that their involvement with UIOTF has been positive because it provides a space to communicate, share information, and feel heard. The presence of Elders creates a safe space where it feels safe to share. Participating in UIOTF also allows different services an opportunity to connect with one another and learn about other work being done in the community. Engaging with



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other stakeholders, like public health institutions at UIOTF's general meetings was said to be helpful to learn about other perspectives.

Needs:

- Meet people where they're at, whether it be abstinence-based treatment, access to Suboxone, or harm reduction
- Basic needs of life still need to be met like food, housing, & cultural resources
- Old models of care must be adapted to meet the needs of Indigenous people
- More support programming needs to be available for men

Successes:

- MVAEC receiving funding to purchase a van for land-based activities and to pay Elder honorariums
- The establishment of the *Metro Vancouver Indigenous Services Society (MVISS)* and the hiring of Indigenous counsellors, facilitators, and cultural workers
- Not Just Naloxone (NJN) training offered by *First Nations Health Authority (FNHA)* to certify participants to deliver culturally safe naloxone training
- VAFCSS's open door policy at their transition home, Skeena House
- Using a more personal approach to engaging with clients, like knocking on doors and taking them out for coffee
- Life skills programming that teaches men how to cook and prepare food

Treatment & Recovery

"WE PRACTICE FREESTYLE OUTREACH BY FINDING NEW WAYS TO LOVE PEOPLE WHERE NO ONE IS LEFT OUT OF THE CIRCLE."
– MARNIE SCOW, CSL

Long waitlists and lack of culturally appropriate treatment options were identified by UIOTF as priority issues. When a person is ready for treatment they must often wait over a week to be admitted. Many people are unable to wait this long and are then lost. There are currently no residential detox programs in Metro Vancouver that offer cultural support and Christian-based detox services can be an unsafe barrier for those seeking treatment.

UIOTF members recommend there be a comprehensive Indigenous healing centre with nurses, doctors, mental health counsellors, and cultural workers available downtown. These centres are envisioned as places for healing the hearts of those who are emotionally repressed to end the cycle of trauma and addiction. Treatment and detox is only a stepping stone to achieving a lifelong recovery program that connects people to follow-up care, a support network, and traditional culture.

Successes:

- The 20 treatment beds at Tsow-Tun Le Lum Society Helping House, an Aboriginal Residential Healing Centre providing programs that address the issues of addictions, substance abuse, mental health and trauma
- The establishment of MVISS to deliver culturally appropriate mental wellness care



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Access to Culture

"IDENTITY IS IMPORTANT FOR PEOPLE TO KNOW WHO THEY ARE BECAUSE CONFIDENCE AND SELF-ESTEEM ARE LOW. THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT CEREMONY IS, BUT THEY'RE CURIOUS WHEN THEY HEAR THE VIBRATIONS OF THE BIG DRUM." – DENISE FORSYTHE, VAFCSS

The issues associated with the Overdose Epidemic are not new to the Indigenous community. The underlying root causes have been ongoing since traditional culture was forcibly outlawed with the Indian Act in 1876 designed to "kill the Indian in the child". Today, many Indigenous people are still disconnected from practicing traditional culture, yet are curious to learn more about their identity. Efforts to connect people with their culture and identity help to ignite a sense of pride and belonging that colonization attempts to destroy.

Culture Saves Lives (CSL) is a frontline organization in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) that practices "Cultural Equity" by providing low-barrier access to traditional Indigenous cultures to anyone regardless of their relationship with substances. Culture is accessible to those who have been disconnected from knowing who they are and where they come from. Marnie Scow describes *Culture Saves Lives* as "truth through traditional dance, language, and taking care of yourself".

Elders are experts in connecting people to traditional culture and play multiple valuable roles within the community. They offer many services other than just prayers & welcomes. Their knowledge of traditional arts, culture, language and healing is as extensive or more as a Ph.D. education. They can help provide healing in many forms, including smudging, sweats, circles, brushings, prayers, and songs.

Frontline Worker Burnout

"MY HANDS GO UP TO EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU FOR THE WORK YOU DO" – ELDER THERESA CAMPBELL

"MORE UNCLAS AND AUNTIES ARE NEEDED FOR FRONTLINE SERVICES AND FOR FRONTLINE WORKERS" – JOSEPH, CSL

"WHEN YOU GET TIRED, LET US KNOW BECAUSE WE'RE HERE TO HELP YOU" – KEVIN BARLOW, MVAEC

Burnout is a state of exhaustion that is caused by prolonged stress. Self-care can prevent burnout and can take shape in a variety of ways. Elder Shane Pointe asked UIOTF members to think about what they are doing for fun? Engaging in enjoyable activities like pottery, artwork, and creativity are acts of self-care. Taking care of yourself is respecting everyone's views, being present in your own body, and giving space to yourself to get healthy and go back home. Organizations can also support one another by acknowledging the good work that everyone is doing.

MVAEC and MVISS offer workshops, information, and support to frontline healing agencies. Although MVAEC does not provide a direct service, it serves as backbone support for other urban Indigenous non-profits who do. MVAEC has responded to the opioid crisis by establishing the *Urban Indigenous Opioid Task Force (UIOTF)*. UIOTF facilitates strategic collaboration among its partners by hosting regular meetings and by operating an email Information Exchange. MVAEC also hosts events and training to educate and build the capacity of services providers, such as the *Talking Circle for Frontline Workers* and the *Indigenous Service Provider's Fair*. now that space is available at the new MVISS location, MVAEC can host traditional and alternative healing events. Elders may be available to offer brushings and spiritual guidance while healing practitioners can provide other modalities like massage, Reiki, and acupuncture.



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MVAEC established The *Metro Vancouver Indigenous Services Society (MVISS)* as a subsidiary organization to respond to the lack of Indigenous mental health services available. MVISS offers trauma-informed care through a cultural lens to Indigenous people through group and one-to-one counselling. They extend their support out to other agencies and invites frontline workers to attend their ceremonies, circles, and group programs.

Elders are also available to provide healing support to frontline organizations and they encourage workers to ask for help and voice what they need when they need it. Their wisdom can aid in healing burnout for frontline workers and also guide the work of service providers.

Successes:

- UIOTF e-newsletters and updates
- The services offered by the *Mobile Response Team (MRT)*, like Frontline Massage and fitness classes
- The workshops and talking circles offered by MVAEC have been educational while supportive of team-building for organizations
- MVISS group cycles like their *Grief & Loss* and *Recovery Renewal* programs

Information Sharing

“DISCONNECTION OF COMMUNICATION IS A PROBLEM AND COMMUNICATION IS KEY FOR A SOLUTION” – CODY HUNT, CSL

“WITHOUT COMMUNICATION, WE KNOW NOTHING, WE’RE IN THE DARK” –SHANE POINTE

Clear communication is needed between agencies is needed to understand who is providing what services. The *UIOTF Information Exchange* has been helpful to keep service providers updated on events, funding opportunities, job openings, and other overdose response initiatives. Members like the Information Exchange and would also like to see more events and opportunities to network in person.

Generating and disseminating information is one of MVAEC’s primary roles within the community. MVAEC bridges the gap between Indigenous service providers, health authorities, government, and the 70,000 Indigenous people living in Metro Vancouver. Knowledge gathered during MVAEC meetings and forums is recorded, documented, and shared with various levels of stakeholders. Information sharing reduces the workload of service providers and keeps authorities accountable to the communities they serve.

MVAEC is currently conducting focus groups to document the knowledge of Indigenous youth, women, and men who have been impacted by the Overdose Epidemic. This information can be used to tailor messaging and create educational materials. As the crisis spreads, smaller communities in BC and other Canadian provinces can also benefit from the lessons learned and shared by UIOTF.

Successes:

- Email updates sent via the UIOTF Information Exchange
- New knowledge generated by MVAEC’s Focus Groups project



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Youth in Care

"THERE'S NO PLACES FOR THESE CHILDREN TO BE. CHILDREN HAVE NO PLACE TO GO, NOWHERE TO CALL HOME." – ELDER THERESA CAMPBELL

A disproportionate amount of Indigenous children lives in temporary homes, foster care, and juvenile correctional facilities. This puts them at higher risk of the negative health determinants that can lead to substance abuse and overdose.

Many parents and caregivers are being lost to overdose and children are being left without homes. People may not be asking for help or disclosing their substance use because of their distrust of child welfare and fear that their children will be apprehended. Anju Sohal from *Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Services (VACFSS)* that they always try to keep children within the family.

Needs:

- It is important people reach out for support and create a plan for children in case their guardians are no longer able to take care of them
- Supports are needed for the many single fathers, grandfathers, and uncles who are unexpectedly raising families

Next Steps

- ❖ MVAEC will consider hosting healing events at its MVISS location to deliver traditional cultural practices and alternative wellness to the Indigenous community and frontline workers
- ❖ MVAEC will continue to announce upcoming cultural events like the Vancouver Friendship Centre's upcoming *Spring Solstice*
- ❖ The Elders present at the meeting will provide their information for UIOTF members to access their services
- ❖ MVAEC's Resource Guide will be emailed to UIOTF members so they can learn what services are being provided
 - Please also see MVAEC's online resource directory at <http://www.mvaec.ca/directory/directory-list>