



## Alberta addiction minister defends province's recovery approach before federal committee

*The committee meeting Thursday morning produced a few testy exchanges between Alberta Addiction Minister Dan Williams and opposition MPs*

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Mental Health and Addiction Minister Dan Williams speaks as the Government of Alberta announced a new organization that will support the development of a mental health and addiction system of care during a news conference in Calgary on Tuesday, April 2, 2024. PHOTO BY JIM WELLS /Postmedia

## Article content

Alberta's addiction minister appeared before a federal committee of MPs on Thursday to defend the province's drug-recovery model against accusations it was ideologically biased and not producing results.

Minister of Mental Health and Addiction Dan Williams appeared in Ottawa as a witness before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health about the opioid epidemic and toxic drug crisis.

In his opening statement, Williams outlined the dangers of addiction, the province's plans to improve supports, including opening 11 recovery communities.

"Our communities are increasingly unsafe," he said. "Individuals who are suffering from addiction do not get the dignity and the care that every one of them deserve at the opportunity of recovery."

He went on to say the government continued to reject "experimentation like decriminalization" and characterized terms like harm reduction and safe supply as "marketing terms, meant to convince Canadians of something that they intuitively know doesn't work."

"It's clear that if you're distributing the drugs, if you're the one purveying them into the community en masse, that will produce more harm," he said.

## Debate over ideological approach

Williams, who said he was "not ideological" on the issue, was challenged on those points by committee vice-chairman and Bloc Quebecois MP Luc Theriault.

"You often mentioned this, what is an ideological approach? Because I could say that you have an ideological approach," Theriault asked.

"I'm not going to throw out evidence-based data and evidence-based policy-making because of a pre-existing ideological commitment," Williams replied, referencing data he claimed showed safe supply was a poor policy.

"You said harm reduction leads to miseries and the only hope is treatment," Theriault said.

"If I say that harm reduction is the beginning of treatment, what would you say to this? Do I have an ideological approach to treatment?"

"Are you going to tell people in the streets, 'Either you continue to live in misery or you can come get treatment in my treatment centre?' "

Williams responded, "I will meet Albertans where they are to get them the care that they need, but certain programs, like safe supply, I oppose."

## Alberta toxic drug deaths hit record high

The number of deaths from toxic drugs hit a record high in Alberta last year, according to the province's data, with 2,052 deaths, including 743 in Edmonton and 629 in Calgary.

Last month, Williams told reporters more recent data showed better results, with the number of deaths has showing a general declining trend since peaking at 198 deaths in April of last year.

In contrast to Alberta, B.C. has adapted a so-called "safer supply" approach.

That province saw at least 2,511 deaths from toxic drugs over the last year, also a record high.

New Democrat MP Gord Johns questioned Williams for evidence to support the Alberta government's claim that drugs meant for safe-consumption sites were being diverted into the general population and across the provincial boundary from B.C.

"The peer-reviewed research is showing that (safe supply) is actually working. You haven't provided any evidence of what your claims are," he said.

Williams said he would table a news release from Prince George RCMP alleging two individuals had exchanged illicit drugs for safer-supply drugs.

"That's not enough," replied Johns, who represents a B.C. riding.

Williams responded that he's proposed adding a chemical tracer to safe-supply drugs as a tracking mechanism. The federal government has rejected that, stating those drugs are not specifically manufactured specifically for safe-supply programs.

The two engaged in one more terse exchange before the meeting ended.

"Giving drugs to drug addicts to address an addiction crisis will make it worse," Williams said.

"How's that going in Alberta?" Johns shot back.

"We see improvement," Williams replied.

[mblack@postmedia.com](mailto:mblack@postmedia.com)