

Alberta addiction recovery conference focuses on recovery-focused drug policy

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Alberta Premier Danielle Smith says she is confident the province is going in the right direction with its recovery-oriented approach to address rising drug toxicity deaths, while acknowledging her government has not seen improvements more than four years into the strategy's implementation. Both the government and its critics point to a lack of data as a problem when assessing the effectiveness.

[Ms. Smith](#) and several senior members of her United Conservative Party government spoke at a two-day Calgary conference this week centred on [Alberta's](#) recovery-focused drug policy. The province's approach favours spending on treatment and recovery services over harm-reduction measures, such as supervised drug-use sites and supplying prescription opioids, that neighbouring [British Columbia](#) has introduced.

Ahead of the conference, Ms. Smith said it is too early to see the effect of her government's approach. She noted that recovery communities, which are long-term residential treatment sites and the cornerstone of the province's strategy, are still getting off the ground.

"Have we seen immediate success? Not yet," Ms. Smith said on Tuesday. "But I'm very confident we're on the right track."

Ms. Smith, in defence of the Alberta model, highlighted data twice this week that show deaths have fallen in relation to certain substances, such as pharmaceutical opioids (defined as typically prescribed opioids such as codeine, hydromorphone and methadone), by 70 per cent since 2018.

"In nearly every metric, we're seeing addiction related deaths at all-time lows, which is cause for optimism," she told a crowd of about 2,000 on Wednesday at the Recovery Capital Conference.

However, non-pharmaceutical opioids such as fentanyl are the biggest drivers of substance-related deaths in Alberta. Roughly 90 per cent of all deaths in 2023 tracked so far are linked to non-pharmaceuticals. Deaths from this category of substances have risen by nearly 150 per cent since 2018.

Alberta is expected to break its annual record for fatal drug poisonings, with 1,841 deaths recorded from January to November, 2023. The province has yet to release data for last December. There were 1,569 fatalities in the first 11 months of 2022 and 1,686 in 2021, which was the previous deadliest year for the province since it began collecting data in 2016.

Harm-reduction advocates, the Opposition New Democratic Party and a union representing 3,200 members on the front line of the drug crisis criticized the government's drug policy as inadequate. Mike Parker, president of the Health Sciences Association of Alberta, on Thursday called on the province to broaden its approach by strengthening harm reduction services and other social supports, including housing.

"The scale of the toxic drug supply crisis is killing the size of a small town every year and pushing our health care professionals to their limits," Mr. Parker said. "There is not a one-size-fits-all fix for this crisis."

Addictions Minister Dan Williams on Thursday was asked by reporters to disclose data that shows Alberta's recovery approach is working. He pointed to the same statistics highlighted by Ms. Smith and said he "can't let somebody who's struggling with the deadly disease of addiction just simply maintain that."

"As the system gets built, we're going to continue to see more progress," he said.

The minister also said the government has yet to see "full data sets" from an online tool, called [My Recovery Plan](#), that tracks waitlists, site capacities and outcomes for clients, because the tool needs to undergo privacy impact assessments.

Marshall Smith, chief of staff to the Premier, noted during a conference presentation that one of the biggest challenges to implementing Alberta's model is compiling data from addiction treatment service providers. He said they need to "come on board" so that the government can understand wait times for residential treatment, bed capacities and patient profiles.

He also said Alberta needs to "do a better job" when it comes to harm reduction, but did not provide specifics. Mr. Smith (no relation to Danielle Smith) added that the province will not consider implementing safer-supply programs, but pointed to clinic-based opioid agonist therapy in place, which involves medications to treat opioid use disorder.

Members of the Alberta government have raised concerns over [B.C.'s safer-supply program](#) that provides drug users with pharmaceutical alternatives to deadly street drugs. Mr. Williams claimed this week that safer-supply prescriptions have "massively increased" the availability of drugs in Alberta. Last month, B.C. RCMP said safer-supply prescriptions are "in the minority of drug seizures."

Harm reduction measures have been limited since the UCP came to power in Alberta in 2019, including supervised-consumption spaces and an injectable opioid agonist program. Twice the government has faced legal challenges for its policies, including a case

last year in which a judge granted an injunction that exempts a Calgary woman from Alberta's opioid prescribing rules.

Ms. Smith on Tuesday announced the creation of two organizations that focus on mental health and addictions as part of her government's broader overhaul of the health system.

Recovery Alberta will take over delivery of mental health and addictions services from Alberta Health Services and is expected to begin operations on July 1 with an annual budget of \$1.1-billion. A Crown corporation, called the [Centre of Recovery Excellence](#), is also being created to research recovery best practices, with a \$5-million starting budget.

Workers in the field were not consulted prior to the announcement of these organizations. Mr. Parker said, even after a subsequent meeting with government officials, he still has "no answers for them." He added that some members are considering jobs outside of the province. "The last thing we need is to lose anybody on the front lines."