

Rahim Mohamed: Albertans to choose between NDP's free opioids, UCP's forced treatment

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A woman injects hydromorphone at the Providence Health Care Crosstown Clinic in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, B.C., on Wednesday April 6, 2016. Photo by THE CANADIAN PRESS/Darryl Dyck

As advertised, Alberta's month-long provincial election campaign has been a bitter and heated affair, punctuated with almost non-stop fireworks. (My apologies to Calgary's city council for not using the more anti-racist term, "[enhanced pyrotechnic show](#).") For all this belligerence, there's a surprising amount of overlap between the platforms of the province's two major parties.

At last week's leader's debate, United Conservative Party Leader Danielle Smith and New Democratic Party Leader Rachel Notley found themselves nodding in agreement on multiple occasions. They concurred that no Albertan should ever have to pay to see a family doctor, that the province should not wind down oil and gas production, and that the provincial government should build more schools. Heck, the two women even wore the [same shade of blue](#) to the debate stage.

Amidst this sea of similarities, addictions policy arguably stands out as the area where the two parties differ most dramatically. Alberta's imminent provincial election could, in fact, be a key flashpoint in a brewing national debate over rival approaches to combatting drug addiction.

Alberta has been hit extraordinarily hard by the Canada-wide opioid crisis, trailing just British Columbia in per capita [opioid-related fatalities](#). In 2021, the province's [deadliest year on record](#), Alberta notched more than [one in five](#) of Canada's documented opioid overdose deaths, despite comprising just 11.5 per cent of the country's total population. The number of overdose deaths declined in 2022 but still [surpassed 1,000](#) for the third straight year.

This grim state of affairs has pushed Alberta's UCP government to reject the orthodoxy of harm reduction and pivot toward a more hands-on [treatment and recovery-oriented](#) model for combatting drug addiction. While this shift started under former premier Jason Kenney, Danielle Smith has gone all-in on the "Alberta model" for combatting addictions with her pre-election budget dedicating a record [\\$275 million](#) to the issue. The addictions strategy is central to Smith's efforts to rebrand herself as a "compassionate conservative".

"I can tell you (addictions policy) is one of the biggest differences between us and those on the left," Smith told [Donna Kennedy-Glans](#) in the National Post last week. "I think you can see the wreckage of lives and communities all down the West Coast — and maybe the worst is in Vancouver's east side — as a result of failed policy (harm reduction) that has given up on people."

"That's what compassionate conservatism is... the compassionate side is getting people the help they need."

Accordingly, the crux of the budding "Alberta model" is a focus on expanding treatment capacity for addicts. Under the UCP, the province has opened 10,000 new treatment spaces, designed to provide detox and recovery services for up to 29,000 Albertans per year. The UCP government has also discontinued a [\\$40 per day fee](#) for users of publicly funded treatment facilities. The party's longer-term strategy includes a province-wide network of residential "[recovery communities](#)" where residents may stay for up to a year. Ground has already been broken on six such communities and three more are in the works. One recovery community, located in Red Deer, is [fully built](#) and began taking clients on May 15.

Smith upped the ante last week, announcing that a re-elected UCP government would pass the [Compassionate Intervention Act](#), a sweeping piece of legislation that would open the door to involuntary addiction treatment for drug users deemed to be a danger to themselves or others. If passed, the law would be the first of its kind in Canada.

In April, Notley denounced involuntary addiction treatment: "Imprisoning Albertans against their will for addiction treatment is doomed to failure, both from a treatment perspective and a legal one.

Effective and lasting treatment meets people where they're at and supports them in taking a different path.”

Notley [re-iterated this sentiment](#) at a campaign event in Calgary last week, telling reporters that “overall, forced recovery is not successful.”

Notley previously called for an expansion of so-called “safe supply” — a strategy of diluting demand for hard drugs by introducing less dangerous pharmaceutical alternatives to the marketplace. A three-point [emergency action plan](#) proposed by the Alberta NDP in the summer of 2021 also called for the expansion of safe consumption sites in Edmonton, Calgary and other municipalities. Failures of safe supply programs have been documented by the National Post’s [Adam Zivo](#), who found in the course of his writing that these programs have spurred a secondary black market for “free” government-provided drugs.

Last year, Notley promised to re-instate [harm reduction programs](#) that were shuttered by the UCP government. Accordingly, the Alberta NDP’s recently released [public safety plan](#) promises that an NDP government will provide “wrap-around supports and support (for) community agencies” engaged in harm reduction activities. The party’s support for harm reduction, coupled with its prior endorsement of safe supply, place it squarely in line with the longstanding “hands-off” approach to drug addiction.

With Alberta’s provincial election now just days away, one of its most important implications could concern government responses across Canada to drug addiction. After years of failed progressive policies, Canadians may now be looking to conservative parties for answers.