

Braid: Tragic stories show need for UCP's 'compassionate intervention' for addicts

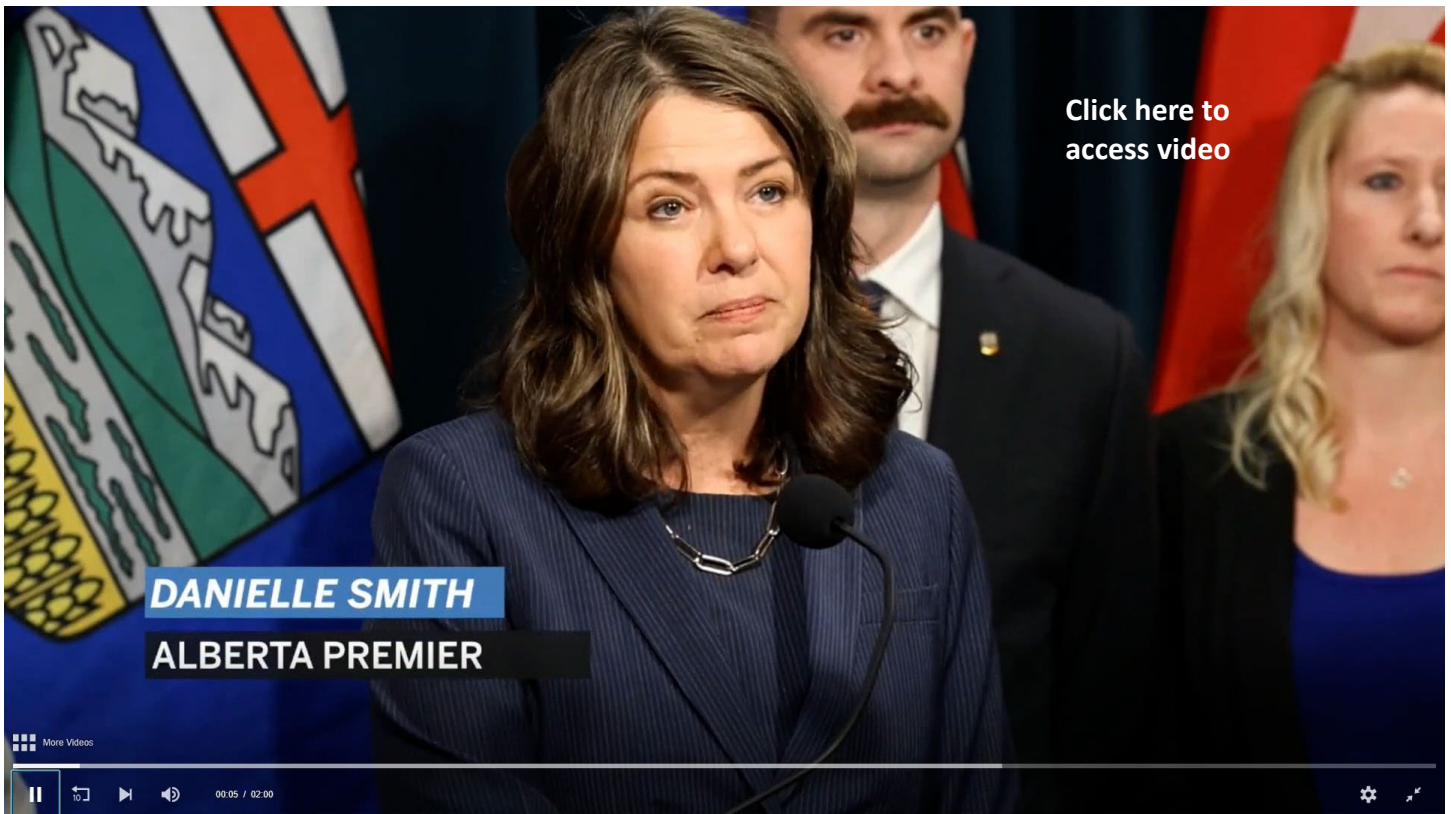
Treatment without approval happens all the time

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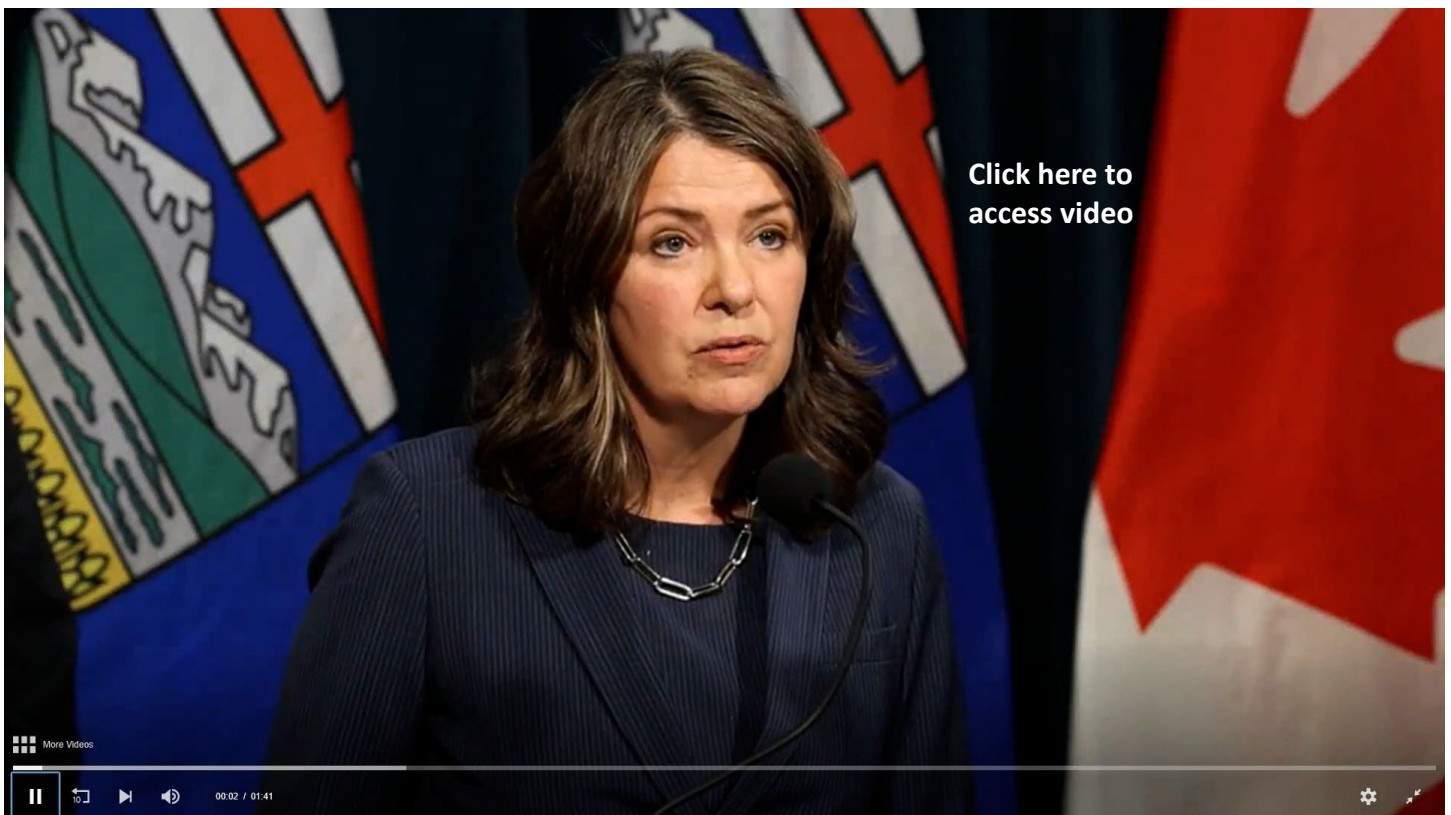
Premier Danielle Smith and Minister of Mental Health and Addiction Dan Williams announced the government's plan to build new Addiction facilities in Calgary on Monday, Feb. 24, 2025. Darren Makowichuk/Postmedia

It's not often a reporter signs in to a government news conference on the hunt for scandal, but ends up with a broken heart.



That’s how it felt for me Monday when Premier Danielle Smith announced the construction of two “compassionate intervention” centres for profoundly helpless, endangered addicts.

Reporters, including me, were fixed on the current running story, the scandal over a fired AHS CEO and allegations of political favouritism in contracts.



But I found myself haunted by the words of Amy Schiffner, the mother of an addicted son, and Earl Thiessen, executive director of Oxford House, which helps addicts find sober housing.

How could anybody hear what these people say without choking up — and understanding, after years of false compassion, why some addicted people need to be forced into treatment both for their survival and the safety of others?

Thiessen asked: “Is it a compassionate approach to step over people on the street and allow them to die in front of us, turn our heads and ignore the obvious because it’s their right?”

“No, it’s not. And for those that say it is, you have never been on the other side of the phone listening to a mother or father crying, begging for help for their children, asking why nothing can be done to help their child, who is wandering around aimlessly in constant danger of death, unable to make that decision for themselves.”

Thiessen explained that he’s an alumnus of his own agency.

“I’m also an Indigenous man in recovery, formerly homeless for seven years and in recovery from pharmaceuticals, alcohol and cocaine for over 17 years. A survivor of every type of abuse you can imagine.

“I need everyone to understand that this is life or death. This really is not about anything other than the need to be compassionate about people in the state I was in. It’s about those who no longer have the capacity to make safe, conscious decisions for their own well-being and safety.

“Take a walk around downtown Edmonton or Calgary, come down to my main office by Chinook station.

“My heart sinks in my stomach, seeing people in a state where they no longer have the capacity to function, seeing young ladies unconscious on the sidewalk, vulnerable and unsafe.

“Is this now a society that steps over these poor souls, shaking our heads and being totally baffled as to how they got there? I would like to think not.”



Dan Williams, the mental health and addictions minister, recounted the case of a man who overdosed 186 times in one year. The job, he says, is to make sure the 187th doesn't kill him.

The UCP will bring in a compassionate intervention bill that would allow a guardian, parent, health-care professional, police or peace officer "to intervene and request treatment for somebody who is in addiction, or because of their substance use has become a danger to themselves or others."

This will be controversial. Some will see it as a violation of rights.

There's still a place for supervised consumption, in my view, and certainly for voluntary recovery treatment in centres now planned.

But Smith and her minister are determined to act on compulsory treatment for the most extreme cases.

To back it up, they'll build compassionate intervention centres in Calgary and Edmonton with 150 beds each, at a total cost of \$180 million.

Schiffner described how her family tried everything when their son became addicted at age 14.

"We took immediate steps, seeking every possible avenue. We turned to medical professionals for guidance, attended weekly counselling, support groups and programs that help with emotional regulation and addiction.

"Unfortunately, despite these efforts, things took a turn for the worse, in the sense of self-harm, suicide attempts, numerous emergency calls and an overdose that was particularly harrowing to witness, a memory that haunts me every single day.

"As a mother, I should have the ability to ask for my son to receive secure addiction treatment as one would for a loved one facing psychiatric challenges.

"Individuals with addictions typically do not believe they need help. They will insist they are fine and plan to get clean soon. Yet this is often not possible without significant intervention.

"I believe compassionate intervention could break the cycle of addiction, repeated treatment, incarceration, homelessness and the ultimate fear of death.

"We must intervene to help people like my son reclaim their lives."

There's really no ethical dilemma here. Treatment without approval happens all the time.

Nobody asks an unconscious accident victim if they want emergency care. Doctors don't demand approval from a person dying of a heart attack.

Many of the addicted are just that endangered and helpless.

To simply let them die is a stain on our souls, not theirs.