

New B.C. Health Minister vows to revamp approach to overdose crisis after addictions portfolio is scrapped

Dirk Meissner - The Canadian Press



B.C. Health Minister Josie Osborne says she's aiming for more treatment beds and fewer deaths in a revamped approach to the province's drug overdose crisis. DARRYL DYCK/The Canadian Press

British Columbia's new health minister says she's aiming for more treatment beds and fewer deaths in a revamped approach to the province's drug overdose crisis.

It comes after David Eby's newly elected government eliminated the stand-alone Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions, which advocates say had no "teeth."

The former ministry was created in 2017 to provide co-ordinated responses to the toxic drug crisis, which has killed more than 15,000 people in the past eight years, but it has now been absorbed into the Health Ministry.

"Certainly, I really do think the time is right to fold the ministry back into the Ministry of Health," said Josie Osborne, who was appointed health minister last week, replacing former minister Adrian Dix.

“I think we’re in a much better position to expedite action and decision making,” Osborne said in an interview. “Now is the time to bring that together. The premier’s been very clear he expects an all-of-government approach to this.”

The B.C. Coroners Service says 1,749 people have died of toxic drug overdoses so far this year. Last year the service reported 2,551 overdose deaths, the most ever recorded in a single year in the province.

“We are going to do everything possible that we can to reduce the number of deaths and the impacts on people and families,” Osborne said. “This is one of the toughest challenges our government, our society, that B.C. faces and one of our government’s top priorities. The key here is helping people and doing everything we can from all different approaches to reduce the number of deaths and to help people recover and be well.”

B.C. drug policy advocates who are calling on the government to support more safe supply and drug decriminalization policy initiatives say they will watch for signs that the changes, and Osborne’s appointment, result in shifts in direction and approaches.

“It’s good because the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions wasn’t ever really set up to succeed,” said DJ Larkin, executive director of the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition and an adjunct professor at the faculty of health sciences at Simon Fraser University.

“It didn’t have the budget or the authority to do what needed to happen and it set expectations they couldn’t meet,” Larkin said. “It didn’t have the teeth. That sets up people for disappointment because they gather the data. They get the expert input. They get the ideas but they didn’t have the teeth to make it happen.”

Leslie McBain, co-founder of Moms Stop the Harm, a harm-reduction advocacy group, said she’s looking forward to the ministry change because “we have not got very far in terms of the toxic drug crisis.”

She said she believed the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions was “a little bit hooped,” because it fell under the health ministry but had little power.

“I’m optimistic now, of course,” said McBain. “I think change is better than being stuck in a place where there hasn’t been great movement. These seven or eight years we’ve been waiting for things to improve and they have not. So, with a change, there’s hope.”

But Larkin and McBain, whose son Jordan died of an overdose more than a decade ago, say they will continue to push Osborne and the NDP government to support efforts to back decriminalization and safe supply efforts.

The government flatly rejected calls from the province’s chief coroner Lisa Lapointe earlier this year to provide non-prescription access to controlled drugs.

It also rolled back a decriminalization pilot project after political and public outcry over open drug use.

“Decriminalization has been basically gutted by the premier,” McBain said. “It needs to be strengthened rather than gutted for people to be able to use drugs safely.”

Larkin said advocates intend to push Osborne and the government to continue to initiate policy reform towards more decriminalization of drugs.

“There are hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people every year who use unregulated drugs. That is the source of this problem. If we want to save health care dollars, policing dollars and reinvest in communities we need to deal with the unregulated drug supply, and that means changing the law,” Larkin said.

Osborne acknowledged the issues of decriminalization, safe supply and involuntary care, but said as a new minister she is looking to address the overdose crisis by reaching out to agencies, communities and people.

“Right now what’s ahead of me is learning about and listening to people, communities and all the agencies and organizations to understand the real on-the-ground impacts of different approaches to this,” she said.