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Wednesday October 4, 2023:

“Drug users are family people too”: Drug users speak out against forthcoming provincial public use legislation

VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA – Today, representatives of the [Vancouver Network of Drug Users \(VANDU\)](#) held a press conference to speak out against BC’s planned legislation to undercut its own decriminalization policy through the banning of public consumption of illicit substances. At a time where nearly 7 people die each day in BC due to the toxic drug supply, legislation prohibiting drug consumption poses deadly consequences for drug users who face fewer and fewer options for housing and indoor sites to use safely.

In response, VANDU publicly released *The Users’ Code* [see below], a member-ratified, sixteen-point document outlining community safety protocols that drug users have historically used to keep themselves and their communities safe from harm.

[Under BC’s decriminalization pilot](#), launched January 31, 2023, adults (18 years and older) are not arrested or charged for possessing small amounts (up to 2.5 grams) of certain criminalized drugs for personal use. Framed by the BC government as a, “critical step in B.C.’s fight against the toxic drug crisis,” the pilot aims to “reduce the barriers and stigma that prevent people from accessing life-saving supports and services.” The decriminalization pilot is being implemented with the stated assertion that, “substance use is a public health matter, not a criminal justice issue.”¹

The expected public use legislation comes amidst an urgent need to open overdose prevention sites (OPS) across the province, particularly those with safe inhalation options. This much has been recognized by the Province’s [now seven-year-old Ministerial Order](#). Despite mounting overdose deaths and the dire need to expand harm reduction services, municipal governments have moved this year to [close down](#) safe consumption sites. [Contrary to her stated support for expanding municipal OPS](#)

¹ <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/overdose/decriminalization>

[programs](#), BCNDP Minister of Mental Health and Addictions Jennifer Whiteside has been silent on these life-threatening closures.

Today's speakers consider BC's planned legislation to "re-criminalize" drug user communities a cynical political maneuver ahead of the upcoming provincial election. [Evidence has demonstrated that there has been no increase in public consumption since the decriminalization pilot project began](#) on January 31, 2023. Despite this, municipalities across the province have publicly petitioned the Province to act based on stigma and moral panic, and the BCNDP quickly backtracked on its stated commitments to drug user safety. Amidst increasing partisan rhetoric and the resulting ill-informed legislation around drug use, drug users have been excluded from policy processes, and remain underserved in the way of housing and harm reduction services.

Bi-partisan stigma – a deadly narrative

Only weeks ago, BC United's Kevin Falcon promised to "end decriminalization" if elected Premier. In response, the BCNDP did little to defend their initiative. Instead, Minister Whiteside announced the Province would increase restrictions on the decriminalization pilot, such that the policy would no longer operate in public spaces adjacent to play structures and splash pads. According to the Province, this measure was made "[to help ensure kids and families feel safe in their communities.](#)"

Today's speakers emphasized that drug users are parents and family members too, and that community safety is at the forefront of harm reduction.

"I am a mother, a grandmother, and great grandmother. And I'm a user. I lost two daughters, one to HIV, and another to overdose. [...] That's bullshit to say we as users don't care about kids' safety. I wonder what politicians would say if they had their kids out there using on the street."

Lorna Bird, VANDU Board Member

"Public backlash against decriminalization stems from the Province's failure to support its own policy, and its refusal to provide proper public education about harm reduction," says Dave Hamm, VANDU Board member. "For this pilot to have any chance of success in reducing the harm of toxic drugs, the BC government must stand behind it with proper resources, not water it down and walk it back."

Speakers moreover criticized the BCNDP’s use of stigmatizing language to justify its latest measures – implying that drug users are not members of the community, not belonging to families, and somehow a danger to the interests of children. This flies in the face of the Province’s [own assertion that](#): “Stigmatizing language contributes to shame, isolation and risk taking.” VANDU Community Organizer Vince Tao comments, “By labeling users as a supposed danger to society, the BCNDP is sanctioning the further criminalization of people who use drugs. In the seventh year of this toxic drug crisis, this is unacceptable.”

The Users’ Code: How drug users keep their communities safe

To conclude the press conference, representatives of VANDU released *The Users’ Code*, a sixteen point document outlining the various ways in which drug users have historically kept themselves and their communities safe from harm. Drafted over several months and ratified by the VANDU membership, the document compiles previously-unwritten community safety protocols that have been practiced by drug users over generations.

“Drug users care about our communities. We care about each other, our families and our neighbours,” said Martin Steward, VANDU Board Member. “Drug users have always had to work hard and work together to keep ourselves and each other safe in the face of the laws that put us in danger, and the stigma that follows those laws. We’re proud to share *The Users’ Code* as an example of some of the ways we take care of each other and our communities.”

MEDIA CONTACTS:

Dave Hamm , VANDU Board of Directors	(778) 939-4370
Debra Bailey , Mom and member, Moms Stop the Harm	(604) 970 0416
Heather Spence , Indigenous Coordinator, Parents Advocating Collectively for Kin (PACK)	(250) 826-8376
Keri Guelke , Staff, PACK	(604) 880-2824

THE USERS' CODE

*Ratified by the VANDU membership
September 19, 2023*

1. **“Kids on the block!”** When there’s children and families on the sidewalk, shout to let your neighbours know to put away their gear;
2. **We keep us safe.** Time and time again, the government and cops leave us to die in the streets. Only a strong community of care can keep women, kids, and elders safe from harm;
3. **Be good neighbours.** Cap your needles, carry a rig box with you. Keep your gear and belongings tidy. Be ready to move if asked respectfully;
4. **Keep the sidewalk open.** Elders and disabled folks have enough trouble getting around. Be respectful of everyone’s needs in public space;
5. **Be discrete.** We fight for the right to use where and when we need to keep us safe, but don’t do anything that will attract unwanted attention;
6. **Always carry naran.** It’s up to us to be first responders before the ambulance arrives. Teach your community how to use naran and reverse ODs;
7. **“Six Up!”** Interactions with cops often endanger the lives of users. Let your neighbours know when cops are around to prevent harm;
8. **Keep it cool!** If there’s violence on the block, try to de-escalate. We can settle our own disputes without getting cops involved;
9. **Don’t steal from your neighbours.** Our community is being robbed by slumlords, bosses, and corporations every day. We don’t need to make the lives of our neighbours harder than they already are;
10. **Look out for users who are down, benzo’d, or passed out on the block.** Check if they’re breathing, check their pulse. If it’s not an OD, gather any belongings they might’ve dropped and make sure someone’s looking after them;
11. **Never use alone!** As long as we don’t have a safe supply, you can go down no matter how much you try to keep yourself safe. If you can, always have a friend with you when you use and don’t use at the same time;
12. **Don’t turn someone onto drugs for the first time.** Let people make their own decisions about using;
13. **If someone is new to using and is set on doing it, show them how to use in the safest way.** People won’t learn themselves if they die from their first hit;
14. **Alert your neighbours about bad dope.** If you know someone’s supply is tainted, let people know to avoid it;
15. **Ask for help when you need it.** Take responsibility for your actions and don’t be afraid to admit when you’ve done something wrong;
16. **Act as teachers and leaders in your community.** Oldschool users have a lot to teach the next generation to keep themselves and their neighbours safe.

The VANDU Membership began drafting this document in the summer of 2023. The knowledge compiled in these sixteen points detailing protocols of community safety has been passed on through generations of drug users struggling to survive in a society hostile to our survival.