



Urban Indigenous Opioid Task Force

The Urban Indigenous Opioid Task Force (UIOTF) is a coordinated response team of stakeholders who collaborate to share information and develop strategies for navigating the opioid crisis in Metro Vancouver. UIOTF was created in response to BC's opioid overdose public health emergency announced in April, 2016. Since then, over 4,000 people in BC have died from overdose, making this the leading cause of unnatural death in Canada. Many services have been overwhelmed in meeting the high demands this crisis has caused. These providers have an opportunity to share on successful initiatives and identify challenges. This allows members to learn from one another, coordinate efforts, and network. UIOTF supports community engagement and also relieves the pressure of responding to the crisis in isolation.

The Metro Vancouver Aboriginal Executive Council (MVAEC) is an umbrella organization serving 25 urban Indigenous organizations. MVAEC facilitates and coordinates UIOTF's meetings and operations. The role of MVAEC is to gather information from the group to disseminate to with various groups within the community.

UIOTF includes over 150 representatives from all levels of response including those with lived experience, service providers, and municipal & provincial health authorities. They collectively serve the 70,000 urban Indigenous people living in the Metro Vancouver area.

Meetings are held approximately every two months with an average of 40 participants. Each meeting is attended by at least one participating Elder to ensure discussions are culturally appropriate and conducted in a good way.

Scope: UIOTF adopts a community-based, lifespan approach to support families and address core issues. The target demographic includes anyone using substances containing opioids. These uses may be for medical, recreational, spiritual, and/or maintenance purposes. The scope of UIOTF begins when individuals using these substances access health and community services.

Objective: The UIOTF's top priorities are to reduce overdose deaths, increase access to immediate care, and facilitate smooth transition into a long-term support network by collaboratively sharing information amongst members to create and improve opioid response strategies.

UIOTF Members:

- The City of Vancouver (COV)
- First Nations Health Authority (FNHA)
- Culture Saves Lives (CSL)
- BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC)
- VCH's Aboriginal Wellness Program
- DUDES Club
- Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (WAHRS)
- BC Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU)
- Urban Native Youth Association (UNYA)
- Aboriginal Front Door Society (AFDS)
- Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society (VAFCS)
- SFU's Public Health Department
- Circle of Eagles Lodge (COELS)
- Vancouver Aboriginal Community Policing Centre (VACPC)
- Aboriginal Front Door Society (AFDS)
- Overdose Emergency Response Centre (OERC)
- Vancouver Aboriginal Transformative Justice Society (VATJSS)
- Tenant Overdose Response Organizers Program (TORO)
- Community Action Initiative (CAI)

Metro Vancouver Aboriginal Executive Council

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Outcomes:

- ✓ Created *UIOTF Information Exchange* to update members on current initiatives responding to the opioid crisis (visit www.mvaec.ca/urban-indigenous-opioid-task-force)
- ✓ Developed messaging for a five-poster anti-stigma campaign
 - Stigma, Resiliency, Support & Prevention
 - Created *Indigenous Substance Use Guide* featuring 27 key resources
- ✓ Hosted a *Talking Circle for Frontline Workers* to address burnout and establish community-led recommendations for self-care amidst the crisis
- ✓ *Shared Vision Workshop & Report*
 - Defined UIOTF's objective & scope
- ✓ *Street Outreach Report*
 - Assessed information on street patrols in Vancouver to learn where and when harm reduction services are being offered
- ✓ *UIOTF Issues Identified* report has been reviewed by the *Vancouver Mayor's Overdose Task Force* and the *Overdose Emergency Response Centre (OERC)* to inform their response strategies
- ✓ Hosted 3-day trauma-informed workshop on Grief & Wellness for Indigenous frontline workers
- ✓ Hosted Indigenous Service Providers Fair to facilitate interagency networking and increase community awareness of Indigenous programming
- ✓ Conducted focus groups with Indigenous youth, men, and women to generate community knowledge related to the impacts of the overdose crisis
- ✓ Facilitated *Not Just Naloxone* training to educate community members on overdose response and Indigenous harm reduction
- ✓ Hosted Talking Circle with MVAEC Members document the how Indigenous organizations can work together to respond to the overdose crisis

Key Recommendations:

1. Support *Culture as Necessity*, the process of restoring Indigenous cultures, identities, and practices that were systematically outlawed by the Indian Act and enforced by the Potlatch Law and Residential schools for over 70 years in Canada.
2. It is recommended that community-based healing centres provide continuity of service and opportunities for reconnection/belonging through an Indigenous Wellness Framework.
3. A top priority is to secure low-barrier Indigenous housing with a zero tolerance for exclusion policy to offer people the right to housing that is not conditional on abstinence.
4. The difference between on & off reserve should be acknowledged and jurisdictional restrictions across the health authorities are to be removed.

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