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## **Legal and civil society groups commend City of Vancouver’s leadership on drug decriminalization**

*As the opioid overdose crisis devastates communities across Canada,  
groups hope that other jurisdictions will follow suit*

November 18, 2020

**Vancouver, Coast Salish Territories** – Today, the Mayor of Vancouver, supported by Vancouver Coastal Health, announced a motion that could lead to the decriminalization of simple drug possession in Vancouver. If the motion is passed, Vancouver City Council will request an exemption from the federal government — under the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* — that would protect all people in Vancouver from the enforcement of simple drug possession as a criminal offence. If implemented properly, this could eliminate all criminal consequences for possessing drugs for personal use. Decriminalization would be a critical move towards addressing record overdose deaths and rampant stigma against people who use drugs, reducing barriers to accessing services, and avoiding ineffective and unnecessary use of public funds.

In May, Pivot Legal Society, the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition (CDPC), and the HIV Legal Network called on the federal government to use this same exemption power to decriminalize simple drug possession. To date, more than 170 civil society organizations have endorsed this call. Following their October release of a report on drug decriminalization in Vancouver, Pivot launched an email petition urging Vancouver’s Mayor and Council to apply for a local exemption and take more meaningful action than simply calling on other levels of government to do the right thing. Last week, the HIV Legal Network released a primer for municipal and provincial governments on why and how to request an exemption from the federal Health Minister to effectively decriminalize simple drug possession.

**[READ: The City of Vancouver announcement on decriminalization](#)**

**Pivot, CDPC, and the HIV Legal Network welcome Vancouver’s leadership in seeking to curb an ineffective and deadly war on people who use drugs. We urge City Councillors to quickly and unequivocally adopt the proposed motion as presented, without proposing administrative sanctions or other amendments that would weaken its positive outcomes. In addition, we urge cities and provinces across the country to take similar action. Inaction will only lead to more preventable deaths and infections.**

**Caitlin Shane**, Drug Policy Staff Lawyer at Pivot Legal Society, says all municipalities and provinces must urgently tackle the drug policy crisis ravaging communities across the country:

“Overdose fatalities have ballooned during COVID-19, far surpassing the number of fatalities caused by the coronavirus itself. Criminalizing people who use drugs is a public health disaster that causes untold harms to poor and racialized communities. Decriminalization is a key step towards reducing over-policing and rampant incarceration, and re-allocating funds to health, harm reduction, and safe supply efforts.”

**[READ: Pivot Legal Society’s Report: Act Now! Decriminalizing Drugs in Vancouver](#)**

**Scott Bernstein**, Director of Policy at CDPC, calls the announcement bold and necessary:

“A growing chorus of civil society and rights organizations, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, public health officers, and people who use drugs across the country have decried the failure of drug prohibition and significant harms caused by treating a public health crisis as a criminal law issue. We are pleased that Vancouver is heeding these calls.”

**Sandra Ka Hon Chu**, Director of Research and Advocacy at the HIV Legal Network, urges other cities, provinces, and territories to follow Vancouver’s lead and apply for a similar exemption:

“Policymakers have a responsibility to adopt measures that uphold the health and safety of people who use drugs in their respective jurisdictions. Requesting an exemption from the federal Minister of Health is simple and vital. Municipal and provincial actors can take concrete actions now to move from harmful, failed criminalization to evidence-based public health approaches that respect human rights.”

**[READ: HIV Legal Network’s Report: Decriminalizing People Who Use Drugs: A Primer for Municipal and Provincial Governments](#)**

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## **Media Contacts**

Sozan Savehilaghi, Pivot Legal Society

Email: [sozan@pivotlegal.org](mailto:sozan@pivotlegal.org)

Direct: 604-255-9700 ext. 154

Peter Kim, Canadian Drug Policy Coalition

Email: [peter\\_k@sfu.ca](mailto:peter_k@sfu.ca)

Direct: 604-787-4043

Janet Butler-McPhee, HIV Legal Network

Email: [jbutler@aidslaw.ca](mailto:jbutler@aidslaw.ca)

Direct: 647-295-0861

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION & DOCUMENTS

### **Letter to Canadian Government: Decriminalize Simple Drug Possession Immediately**

*May 13, 2020 | Updated September 21, 2020*

Open letter signed by over 170 civil society organizations calling for a the Canadian government to decriminalize drug possession via exemption: <http://www.hivlegalnetwork.ca/site/letter-to-canadian-government-decriminalize-simple-drug-possession-immediately/?lang=en>

### **Pivot Legal Society Report: Act Now! Decriminalizing Drugs in Vancouver**

*September 16, 2020*

Technical report urging the City of Vancouver to apply for a federal exemption to ensure local decriminalization: [https://www.pivotlegal.org/act\\_now\\_decriminalizing\\_drugs\\_in\\_vancouver](https://www.pivotlegal.org/act_now_decriminalizing_drugs_in_vancouver)

### **Pivot Email Petition: It's time to decriminalize drug possession in Vancouver!**

*October 17, 2020*

Petitions submitted by over 1300 people to Vancouver Mayor and Council urging the City to apply for a federal application to ensure local decriminalization.

[https://www.pivotlegal.org/drug\\_decriminalization\\_in\\_vancouver](https://www.pivotlegal.org/drug_decriminalization_in_vancouver)

### **HIV Legal Network: Decriminalizing People Who Use Drugs: A Primer for Municipal and Provincial Governments**

*November 12, 2020*

Report detailing actions that municipal and provincial governments can take to decriminalize drug possession in their jurisdictions: <http://www.hivlegalnetwork.ca/site/decriminalizing-people-who-use-drugs-a-primer-for-municipal-and-provincial-governments/?lang=en>

### **About Pivot Legal Society**

Pivot Legal Society is a leading Canadian human rights organization that uses the law to address the root causes of poverty and social exclusion in Canada. Pivot's work includes challenging laws and policies that force people to the margins of society and keep them there. Since 2002 Pivot has won major victories for sex workers' rights, police accountability, affordable housing, and health and drug policy. [http://www.pivotlegal.org/our\\_story](http://www.pivotlegal.org/our_story)

### **About Canadian Drug Policy Coalition**

The Canadian Drug Policy Coalition (CDPC) is a coalition of over 50 organizations and 4,000 individuals working to support the development of progressive drug policy grounded in science, guided by public health principles, and respectful of human rights. CDPC operates as a project within Simon Fraser University Faculty of Health Sciences. CDPC seeks to include people who use drugs and those harmed by the war on drugs in moving toward a healthier Canadian society free of stigma and social exclusion. <https://drugpolicy.ca/>

### **About HIV Legal Network**

The HIV Legal Network, formerly the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, promotes the human rights of people living with, at risk of or affected by HIV or AIDS, in Canada and internationally, through research and analysis, litigation and other advocacy, public education and community mobilization. <http://www.hivlegalnetwork.ca/>