

For Immediate Release | May 30, 2022

Text alerts for toxic drugs now available in Interior

IH Wide – In response to the ongoing toxic drug emergency, a new health alert system has been launched across Interior Health.

“Across the province – in every community – we continue to see tragic deaths due to the toxic drug supply. The new alert system is an example of innovation and community collaboration to save lives in this crisis,” said Minister of Mental Health and Addiction Sheila Malcolmson.

The Toxic Drug Alerts system uses text messaging to send alerts as a public health measure to prevent drug poisonings and deaths, and provides timely information and up-to-date resources to people who use drugs and community members.

“We are thrilled to have this new tool available in the Interior to support people and to get information out immediately to those who need it most,” said Interior Health president and CEO, Susan Brown. “As the number of lives lost continues to grow, we are focused on removing barriers to supports, and implementing new strategies to prevent drug poisonings and deaths and mitigate harm from the toxic drug supply.”

People who use drugs, those who support them, and community members are encouraged to opt-in for toxic drug alerts by sending the keyword JOIN to ALERTS (253787). They will receive toxic drug and drug poisoning alerts and, in the future, public health alerts, such as COVID-19 related information.

“Timely and targeted information regarding the current drug supply is vital when we are seeing the toxicity of illicit drugs increase at an alarming rate. Alerts will help people make better informed decisions and ultimately help reduce harms, including overdose and death, from poisoned drugs,” said Jessica Bridgeman, Interior Health sexual health and harm reduction manager.

To further help keep communities safe, subscribers can anonymously submit information relating to toxic drugs or drug poisonings via text using the keyword OD.

“The priority is to get people access to safe supply, but while we’re waiting, toxic drug alerts will be really helpful in letting us know what is going around in our communities, and can help people make harm reduction decisions for themselves,” said Sara Young, manager of Harm Reduction at BC Centre for Disease Control.

Drug alerts play an important role in empowering people who use drugs to do so more safely.

“I have been so glad that I have been getting the drug alerts in my area and surrounding areas because anything that is in the surrounding areas is going to make it here eventually,” said one person with lived experience who was involved in developing the new system. “I used this information to prepare myself for any toxic drugs that could be coming our way by doing smaller testers, trying to

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get samples into the drug testers, asking my peers what they think and informing my peers of the drug alerts. It helped a lot when there were photos in colour. The description was also helpful.”

Interior Health is the first health authority to be launching the new system which is developed by the BC Centre for Disease Control and the Office of Virtual Health at the Provincial Health Services Authority in partnership with regional health authorities. The alert system is expected to expand to additional health authorities summer 2022.

A program called RADAR has been managed as a research project in Vancouver Coastal Health since 2015. It has demonstrated the success of a text message-based drug and overdose alerting system.

To learn more about the DOPhE system visit towardtheheart.com.

For more information about substance use and the toxic drug crisis visit interiorhealth.ca.

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Attached: Screen shot of the new drug alert text system on a mobile phone.

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