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## Our Place sets goal to move people off Pandora Avenue by end of year



Outreach workers Cam Harper and Madeline Tessmer on Pandora Avenue near Our Place Society. The two are part of the Dandelion Street Outreach team, which has been working five days a week on the 900-block of Pandora since January, building relationships with people living there. DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST

**ROXANNE EGAN-ELLIOTT**  
Times Colonist

Our Place Society hopes to help everyone currently living on the 900-block of Pandora to get off the street by the end of the year.

"I think there's not a person in this city who is not deeply concerned and dismayed by what they see on Pandora Avenue," said CEO Julian Daly, standing on Pandora Wednesday surrounded by tents.

No one wants to see the encampment on the block gone more than the people who are living in it, he said.

Our Place's street outreach team recently spent two weeks surveying everyone living on the block, asking them what it would take to get them off the street.

They collected a list of 77

names along with information on their ages, how long they have been unhoused and what brought them to Pandora, said Daly, adding no one said they wanted to stay on the block.

Ninety-five per cent of those surveyed said they need support for mental-health and addictions issues, while 82 per cent cited physical health problems, he said. Twenty-three per cent said they are over 50 years old.

Daly called lack of affordable housing in Victoria a "massive barrier," saying those living on the block "simply do not have the income to pay for rent in our city."

More and more people are losing their housing because they can't afford their rent, he said.

How they get off the block will look different for each

person, said Daly.

Some have said they want a shelter space, while others want transitional housing, detox treatment or to get into a market rental.

Our Place staff will work with people on an individual basis to find the right solution for their situation, he said. "That's the only real way to do this."

The charity needs the province to help it find mental-health services, addiction and recovery treatment and housing to shelter everyone, Daly said.

"We know what they want. We know what it will take for them to get inside. We just need those that have the resources to make that possible to come forward and work with us on it."

While the community on the block is fluid, with people

coming and going, there is a core group of people living there, said Cam Harper, one of two people who make up the Dandelion Street Outreach team, which conducted the survey.

The team has been working five days a week on the 900-block of Pandora since January, building relationships with people living there and supporting them by offering rides to appointments, and filling out housing applications and detox referrals.

"The best days at this job are when we're helping people move into new housing," Harper said.

On Wednesday, a group gathered at the legislature to demand that housing be recognized as a human right.

The group, Housing Justice

Project, released a report calling for the creation of 2,000 deeply subsidized net new units each year over the next decade to end mass homelessness in the region.

Bruce Livingstone, a peer organizer with Housing Justice Project, said he has experienced homelessness several times over the past 25 years.

While unhoused in 2015, he was attacked by someone with a golf club and lost about a quarter of his top teeth. The assault left him unable to eat solid food for years.

"The last time I lost my housing, I felt like I wouldn't survive," said Livingstone, who now lives in a James Bay apartment building with help from a B.C. Housing subsidy.

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## Drug use banned in public places after feds approve change

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B.C. has received approval from Health Canada to once again make it illegal to possess and consume drugs in public places, including hospitals, parks and transit, scaling back a three-year decriminalization pilot project.

Ya'ara Saks, the federal minister of mental health and addictions, said the change will take effect immediately.

The province asked Health Canada on April 26 to amend its exemption from drug laws to "re-criminalize" both possession and use of illicit drugs in public places three years after it originally asked the federal government to "decriminalize" possession of small amounts of drugs for personal use.

Decriminalization came into

effect in January last year.

The reversal comes after increasing public outcry about open drug use on streets and in hospitals.

When police are called to a scene where illegal and dangerous drug use is taking place, officers will be able to compel a person to leave the area, seize the drugs when necessary, or arrest the person if required, said Public Safety Minister Mike Farnworth.

"We have never supported public drug use and we will not be supporting public drug use," said Farnworth. "Decriminalization was never about using drugs in public, ever."

Saks said she expects police to direct people with addictions to health services and only make arrests in extreme cases where public safety is at risk.

Despite the fact the change comes only a year into the three-year program, the minister said she doesn't consider it a failure.

"We said from the get-go that we would adjust and analyze as we move forward. This is the first time this has been done. As in any pilot, it is a process of learning."

Victoria Police Chief Del Manak has said that police will first seek compliance but may have to take a "harder line" initially so everyone understands the new rules.

Farnworth said the province will continue to treat addiction as a public-health issue, not a criminal-justice one, and people will continue to be able to have small amounts of drugs for personal use in homes or shelter, so they can call for help "without fear of being arrested."

Jennifer Whiteside, B.C.'s minister of mental health and addictions, said the large majority of people who die of toxic drug overdoses do so at home alone.

Illicit drugs are the leading cause of death for those age 10 to 59 — mostly males — surpassing accidents, suicide, homicides and natural causes combined, according to the B.C. Coroners Service.

Whiteside said she has heard of people who were afraid to call 911 for an overdose because they fear they'll be arrested.

On Tuesday, the B.C. Coroners Service reported that another 192 people died due to illicit drugs in the province in March, down 11 per cent from the same month last year. Fentanyl was detected in 85 per cent of the unregulated-drug deaths that

have undergone toxicology testing.

Saks said decriminalization is only one policy tool to deal with the toxic-drug overdose crisis, adding she is frustrated by Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre's attempts to politicize the issue.

Poilievre has repeatedly attacked the decriminalization policy, as well as a safer-supply program where alternatives like hydromorphone are provided to drug users.

In B.C., both BC United and the Conservative Party of B.C. have asked the government to end the decriminalization experiment.

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