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BC Coalition of Nursing Associations

VIA EMAIL (forum@bccna.com)

December 14, 2016

Dear Attendees and Organizers:

Thank you for the invitation to attend this important *Emergency Forum to Respond to the B.C. Opioid Crisis*. This is the final week in which the House of Commons is in session for 2016 and, as such, I am afraid I must send my regrets. Let me begin by expressing my deep appreciation for your dedication in the care and comfort that you provide to those who are most in need and in their most fragile state.

I also want to thank you for convening this important conference. I share the very real sense of alarm and urgency of what should be recognized as a national emergency unfolding in communities big and small right across the country. Family members, first responders, frontline workers, medical practitioners, and advocates are working intensely in response to the crisis. Every effort you make is a matter of life and death, and for your tireless efforts you are paying a heavy price: incredible stress, exhaustion, and many risks to your own physical safety.

Like so many others, I am dismayed that it took more than a year for the federal Minister of Health, Jane Philpott, to recognize the gravity of this horrific crisis. BC's provincial health officer declared a public health emergency on April 14, 2016 and in the intervening 243 days not only has this emergency state not been lifted, but a number of concerned citizens and organizers—so frustrated by the glaring absence of substantive action—have felt compelled to undertake unilateral actions in the face of this crisis. Though unsanctioned, I commend the courage and dedication of those who initiated the pop-up tents in our community as an effort to save lives.

For nearly two decades I along with so many others advocated hard to see a supervised injection site opened in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Now, more than a decade later, and without a single overdose fatality, we know that Insite has been a powerful tool in an evidence-based approach to harm reduction. There is no question that Insite saves lives.

The roadblocks the Harper government threw up to delay the opening of new supervised injection sites have been widely condemned. I have repeatedly written to Minister Philpott, who has indicated on public record that she would interpret the provisions in Bill C-2 liberally, to urge her to instead to repeal this dangerous, ideological relic of the Harper years. And until this week the government had only taken small steps to address this crisis, none of which addressed this main roadblock to saving lives.

This past Monday, however, Minister Philpott finally announced a series of legislative changes that would, effectively, repeal and replace the 26 conditions implemented in C-2 with five new “benchmarks.” I welcome this move insofar as it will increase access to supervised injection; however, I remain very worried that, in addition to the incredible delays we have already seen in the lead-up to the Minister’s announcement, this Bill will have to make its way first through the House of Commons, then Committee, and then the Senate. This is why my colleague MP Don Davies, Critic for Health, attempted yesterday to move an emergency motion in the House of Commons to have the Bill pass all stages of the proceedings without amendment. Unfortunately this move was rejected. Sadly, as a result, more lives will be lost.

In this battle nurses, frontline workers, first responders, and family members are carrying so much of the burden. Please know that your efforts, professionalism, and selflessness are recognized and valued by many in this community and communities across the country. I thank you and support you in your work on the frontlines of this public health crisis. To that end, I have already written to Minister Philpott asking what action the Federal government will undertake to ensure that you are properly supported in your efforts.

Thank you again for the invitation. I look forward to receiving the information that will come out of this morning’s discussions, deliberations, and planning.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jenny Kwan', written in a cursive style.

Jenny Kwan
Member of Parliament for Vancouver East
NDP Critic for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship