



UNION OF BC INDIAN CHIEFS

OUR LAND IS OUR FUTURE

News Release

January 15, 2026

UBCIC Deeply Disappointed with B.C.'s Decision to End Decriminalization Pilot and Calls for Return to a Public Health Approach

(x^wməθk^wəy^əm (Musqueam), Sk^wxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwətał (Tsleil Waututh)/ Vancouver, B.C. – January 15, 2026) The Union of BC Indian Chiefs (UBCIC) is extremely concerned with the Province of British Columbia's (B.C.) decision to end its three-year drug decriminalization pilot project, allowing the federal exemption to expire on January 31, 2026.

The pilot, launched in January 2023, was intended to shift the Province's response to substance use away from criminalization and towards a public-health model. Instead of strengthening and fully resourcing the initiative, the Province weakened it through policy rollbacks in 2023 and again in May 2024, including recriminalizing possession in public spaces, and failing to implement the comprehensive supports required for success. This decision directly contradicts UBCIC Resolution 2022-61, which recognizes that criminalization does not address the root causes of addiction, that First Nations people are disproportionately harmed by the toxic drug crisis, and that decriminalization is one of many necessary steps to reduce overdose deaths, drug related harms, and the overrepresentation of First Nations people in the criminal justice system.

UBCIC has consistently maintained that decriminalization must be one of the central pillars of a coordinated public-health response to the toxic drug crisis, alongside prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and recovery supports. As affirmed by Resolution 2022-61, decriminalization is a positive step, but it must be part of a system-wide effort to end the overdose and toxic drug crisis, increase access to treatment and other services, and address the root causes of addiction. By failing to adequately resource a holistic, culturally safe system of care and instead retreating from decriminalization altogether, B.C. is once again treating a public-health emergency as a criminal issue, a shift that will disproportionately have negative impact on First Nations.

Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, UBCIC President, stated "By ending the decriminalization pilot, the Province is failing to treat addiction as a public-health issue, not a criminal one, and is doubling down on policies that have already caused immense harm to First Nations. Arresting and criminalizing individuals who need care and support will not save lives, it will only deepen trauma,

Kamloops Office

209 - 345 Chief Alex Thomas Way
Kamloops, BC, V2H-1H1
Phone: 250-828-9746
Fax: 250-828-0319

Vancouver Office

Suite 401 - 312 Main Street
Vancouver, BC, V6A-2T2
Phone: 604-684-0231 or toll free: 800-793-9701
Fax: 604-684-5726

www.ubcic.bc.ca



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reinforce systemic racism in policing, and widen the disproportionate gaps in health and justice outcomes for First Nations. We call on the Province to immediately recommit to a public health approach, to work in full partnership with First Nations and to invest in the prevention, harm reduction, treatment and recovery supports our people need, and to renew the federal exemption while launching a fully developed and comprehensive decriminalization initiative.”

Chief Marilyn Slett, UBCIC Secretary-Treasurer, concluded “UBCIC has long advocated for a compassionate, evidence-based response to substance use that reflects our values and advances community-led solutions. Our Chiefs-in-Assembly were clear in Resolution 2022-61: criminalization does not address the root causes of addiction, and decriminalization must be paired with strong investments to advance the work needed. The Province failed to meaningfully implement these recommendations and instead weakened the pilot at critical moments. Ending it altogether now would be a serious lapse in judgement and a decision that places the most vulnerable people in this crisis at greater risk.”

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Media inquiries:

Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, President, 250-490-5314

Chief Marilyn Slett, Secretary-Treasurer, 250-957-7721

UBCIC is an NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

For more information, please visit www.ubcic.bc.ca

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Kamloops, BC, V2H-1H1
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