



# Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy

**Yukon**



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## Minister's message

On January 20, 2022, the Government of Yukon declared a Substance Use Health Emergency in response to the dramatic increase in overdose-related deaths and substance use-related harms in the territory <sup>1</sup>. This declaration was a commitment to respond and a call to action to all governments, communities, organizations, partners and Yukoners to do their part in preventing the next tragedy.

Since the declaration of the Substance Use Health Emergency, our government has worked closely with community partners, First Nations and governments to coordinate our response and advance a range of treatment, harm reduction, prevention, community safety and awareness initiatives.

Despite diligent efforts by government and community partners to expand and improve mental wellness and substance use-related services in the territory, toxic drugs continue to circulate in our communities, and many Yukoners still struggle with substance use.

Therefore, we have been working closely with health system and community partners on the Yukon Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy, a roadmap to guide our ongoing response to many substance use issues in the territory, including those related to alcohol. In addition to harm reduction, community safety, and treatment and aftercare, prevention is one of the strategy's key priorities. Our government is committed to addressing the Substance Use Health Emergency by prioritizing prevention initiatives with a long-term approach. Our focus is on investing in the health and wellbeing of children, youth, families, and communities now, so that future generations of Yukoners can enjoy healthy and fulfilling lives.

We acknowledge and thank many partners for their continued support responding to the Substance Use Health Emergency, including the Council of Yukon First Nations, Blood Ties Four Directions, the RCMP, Yukon Hospitals, and all First Nations, communities and other levels of government. The involvement of many people and organizations in developing this strategy reflects the importance of the health and wellbeing of Yukoners to our communities, and I would like to thank everyone who contributed to shaping it.

By coming together, I am confident that we can address this health emergency and work to improve the underlying factors that contribute to substance use-related harms. We recognize that we still have a long road ahead of us, in which we will need to focus our resources and enhance our partnerships across the Yukon to create a brighter future for the territory.

As the Minister of Health and Social Services, my overarching priority is to fulfill our government's commitment to enhance the long-term wellbeing and quality of life for all. Yukoners deserve a healthcare system that provides wraparound supports at all ages, for all needs, and this is what we will continue to work towards.

As the Minister of Justice, it is my ongoing commitment to advance key community safety planning initiatives and to provide support and help ensure that every community in the Yukon is safe and healthy. Yukoners deserve to feel and be safe, and we know that community safety is complex, context specific, and essential to the wellbeing of all Yukoners. We will continue to work with all governments and partners to develop solutions that are tailored to each community.

**Honourable Tracy-Anne McPhee**

Minister of Health and Social Services, Minister of Justice

## Statement on reconciliation

The development and implementation of the actions in this strategy took place, and will continue to unfold, on the traditional territories of the Indigenous people, represented today by the Carcross/Tagish First Nation, Champagne and Aishihik First Nations, First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, Kluane First Nation, Kwanlin Dün First Nation, Liard First Nation, Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation, Ross River Dena Council, Selkirk First Nation, Ta'an Kwäch'än Council, Teslin Tlingit Council, Trondek Hwech'in Government, Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, White River First Nation, as well as the traditional territories overseen by the Acho Dene Koe First Nation, Dease River First Nation, Gwich'in Tribal Council, Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, Kwadacha Nation, Tahltan Central Government, Taku River Tlingit First Nation, and the Tetlit Gwich'in Council<sup>2</sup>.

In executing the actions detailed in this strategy on these traditional territories, our government acknowledges the profound connection between the land and the health and wellbeing of Indigenous peoples. We recognize that the land extends beyond just the earth. It encompasses the water, air, food, medicines, and all aspects of nature<sup>3</sup>.

The partners involved in this endeavor recognize and value the significance of Indigenous voices in all responses to the Substance Use Health Emergency. We acknowledge the necessity to consider the path to reconciliation, recognizing the ongoing impact of colonization on these lands and their people.

Reconciliation is a continuous journey of learning from the past to understand our present better, which enables us to envision and work towards a healthy future for all Yukoners.

The legacy of residential schools and the persistent effects of intergenerational trauma and colonization have led to significant health disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the Yukon. These disparities, resulting in unjust, avoidable gaps in health outcomes, often stem from systemic injustice<sup>4</sup>. All partners involved in the Yukon Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy commit to leveraging our work and influence to help reduce these gaps.

We recognize and honour the extraordinary resilience of Indigenous people in the Yukon, who have persisted in the face of these disparities and systemic barriers. These strengths form the foundation of improved health for all Yukoners.

The processes of health improvement and reconciliation can reinforce each other. The growth of reconciliation helps to create environments where disparities are reduced, and health and justice can thrive.

## Executive summary

People are losing their lives to substance use across Canada<sup>5</sup>. These losses have a profound impact on individuals, families, and communities, especially given the preventability of these tragedies. Alongside the stark reality of lives lost to drug poisoning, other devastating effects of substance use include the pain endured by families and friends who lose loved ones, the health implications including substance use dependence, hospitalization, and the societal toll taken in the form of lost productivity. Furthermore, there are safety concerns tied to organized crime, infectious diseases commonly associated with substance use, and the psychological trauma borne by first responders<sup>6</sup> and others who witness overdoses. In the Yukon, the situation is reaching a critical stage, characterized by unprecedented numbers of drug toxicity deaths<sup>7</sup>.

The Yukon Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy represents an urgent call to action, aimed at rallying together to address the challenges tied to substance use in the Yukon. The strategy's objective is to encourage and inspire diverse partners across the territory to work together to reduce substance use related harms, foster community safety and support, and enhance the overall health and wellbeing of Yukoners.

Substance use-related harms can be prevented – not just in the immediate term, but over the long haul through the application of evidence-based preventive initiatives<sup>8</sup>. The strategy's recommendations strive to transform the wellness landscape in the Yukon for future generations, aiming to avoid future declarations of a Substance Use Health Emergency.

The “four pillars” approach is recognized internationally as an effective way to reduce the harms associated with substance use<sup>9</sup>. It has been re-envisioned here as “four areas for growth,” to acknowledge the Yukon's continuous progress in these wellness dimensions. Moreover, this terminology underscores the document's dynamic and evolving nature, as opposed to a static or finalized form.

The four areas for growth are:

- 1. Prevention:** strengthen communities across the Yukon, focusing on preventing substance use and related factors, and promoting connection and living well.
- 2. Harm reduction:** address the Substance Use Health Emergency now by keeping people safer with progressive, accessible, and dynamic harm reduction services.
- 3. Treatment and recovery support:** accompany Yukoners wanting to change their relationship with substances and alcohol, ensuring timely and quality access to needed services and support.
- 4. Community safety and wellbeing:** work systemically to support, maintain and increase the safety and wellbeing of Yukon communities.

Initiatives within each of the four areas for growth will collectively drive us towards the following outcomes:

- Delay the age of initiation of substance use
- Minimize substance use across the lifespan
- Keep people safe when using substances
- Reduce the harms of substance use
- Improve the health, safety and wellbeing of Yukoners and Yukon communities

The Yukon Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy serves as a guide to achieving these objectives. It outlines how our government and partners will work together to enhance health and wellness outcomes for Yukoners. Moreover, we must adopt a community-specific approach in countering organized crime and addressing other safety and wellbeing issues across Yukon communities.

This strategy also embodies our commitment to supporting Yukoners in the spirit of reconciliation and partnership. Everyone has a part to play in helping our friends, family members, neighbours, and communities achieve mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical wellbeing, ensuring safety throughout their lives, and enabling them to contribute to wellness in Yukon families, cultures, and communities.

# Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy

## Recommended actions

The implementation of the 43 recommended actions in this strategy will span across multiple years. Some of these actions are currently underway, while others necessitate additional research, analysis, and collaboration with partners for complete implementation.

### Prevention:

1. Implement Planet Youth in Yukon communities
2. Support Yukon communities in creating and implementing community wellness plans
3. Initiate planning for the co-location of child and youth health services
4. Increase funding for substance use and mental wellness education programs for all Yukon youth
5. Increase funding for youth prevention initiatives
6. Continue to invest in and work with partners on initiatives related to Indigenous mental health
7. Expand life promotion (suicide prevention) initiatives
8. Develop and offer training to all health and social service providers in the Yukon that focuses on cultural safety in service provision and the legacy of intergenerational trauma from residential schools
9. Build a lifecycle approach to mental wellness into all health and social services delivered by the Government of Yukon
10. Increase funding for family-based initiatives, particularly those targeting the first five years of life
11. Explore options for the provision of housing and support for parents living with addiction
12. Expand efforts to prevent alcohol-related harms by ensuring that new regulations under the *Liquor Act* balance the needs of businesses and communities.
13. Continue to launch communication and educational campaigns addressing substance use and mental wellness issues
14. Increase support for Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder diagnosis and treatment
15. Continue to explore and implement initiatives and funding models in support of high-quality early learning and child care programs in all Yukon communities

### Harm reduction:

1. Implement a managed alcohol program
2. Expand access to Opioid Treatment Services, including safer supply and Opioid Agonist Therapy
3. Extend the operating hours of Whitehorse's Supervised Consumption Site
4. Expand access to drug checking and harm reduction supplies in line with community wellness plans
5. Increase naloxone availability where people use substances
6. Promote alternative ways to keep people safe while using drugs
7. Open a sobering centre
8. Open a sober shelter



### Treatment and recovery support:

1. Expand options for live-in treatment so that Yukoners can access a full continuum of care
2. Explore in-territory models of youth and family treatment with an aim to develop local programs and services
3. Increase financial accessibility of treatment medications for addiction
4. Ensure the availability of Opioid Agonist Therapy wherever Yukoners seek assistance
5. Explore options for the creation of a rapid access addiction medicine clinic
6. Ensure access to education for Yukon clinicians managing chronic pain and assure greater access to non-opioid pain therapies where suitable
7. Increase housing options in the territory
8. Increase support for Yukon First Nations governments to develop and implement land-based mental health and substance use treatment options
9. Invest in community-based recovery initiatives
10. Develop a central online, accessible substance use treatment option directory

### Community safety and wellbeing:

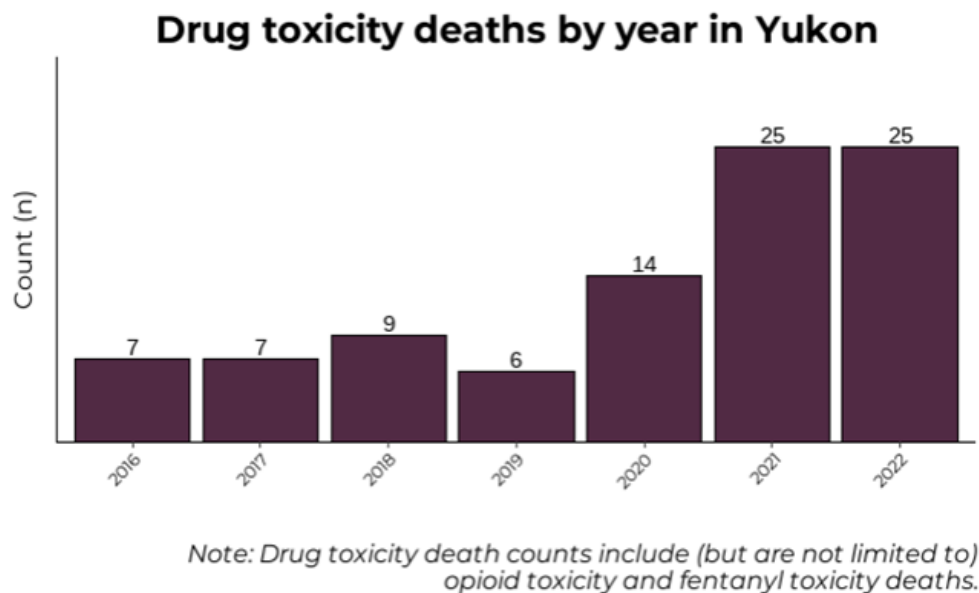
1. Provide funding to Yukon First Nations governments and local governments to increase understanding of community-specific and territory-wide community safety issues, needs, and priorities, and explore options for long-term solutions to implement identified priorities
2. Develop a short-term funding stream to support non-governmental organizations and community groups to implement their own responses to safety and wellbeing issues
3. Invest in preventing gender-based violence and improving services for victims of crime
4. Increase frontline support staffing and create more safe and sober housing options for individuals grappling with substance use issues when transitioning from the criminal justice system back into communities
5. Collaborate with Yukon First Nations governments to expand therapeutic courts and other restorative justice approaches in response to substance use-related treatment needs
6. Support effective and accountable policing and enforcement responsive to community needs and taking into account Yukon's modern treaty environment
7. Expand the capacity of the Mobile Crisis Response Team (Car 867)
8. Increase the Government of Yukon's capacity to investigate and for civil remedies to disrupt the distribution of toxic illicit drugs and organized crime in Yukon communities
9. Gather evidence and consider options for the enforcement of criminal law in the Yukon to allocate limited territorial policing resources to most effectively address violence in communities, the poisoning of illicit drugs sold to vulnerable people, and organized crime
10. Invest in supporting Yukon youth, families, and communities

## Substance use in the Yukon

On January 20, 2022, in response to a surge in drug poisoning deaths, the Yukon officially declared a Substance Use Health Emergency. The territory is grappling with an escalating overdose crisis, brought on by a toxic illicit drug supply. This dangerous situation, mirroring other Canadian jurisdictions, is characterized by an influx of substances like xylazine, benzodiazepines, and various other contaminants in the drug supply that contradict what users anticipate they are purchasing or ingesting<sup>10</sup>. As a result, individuals risk consuming unintended drugs or quantities, leading to severe, potentially fatal, consequences.

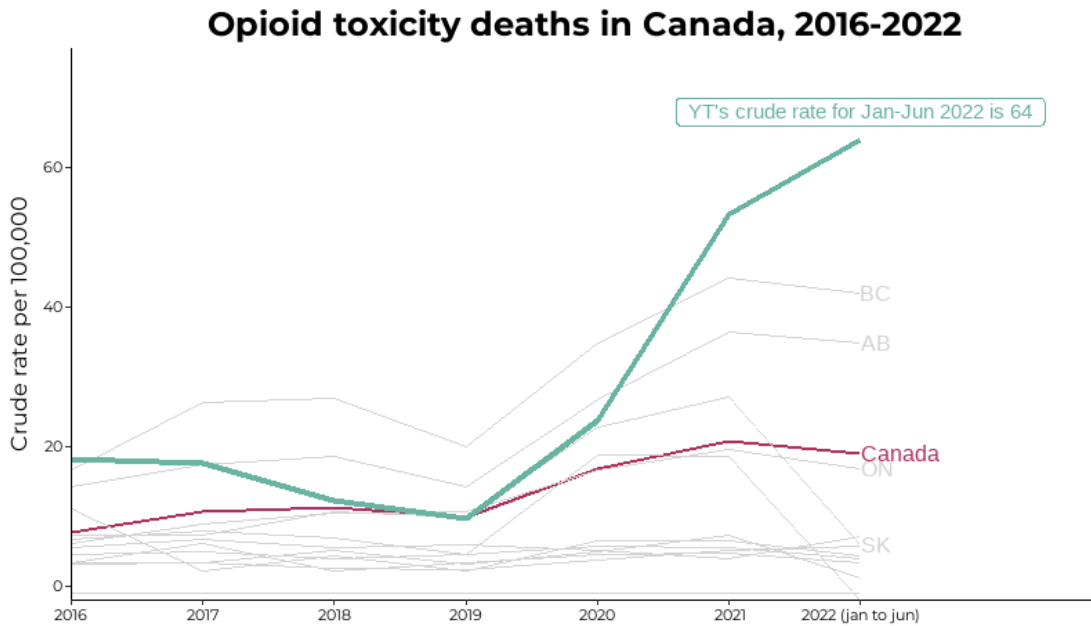
The concept of substance use encompasses the consumption of drugs or alcohol, including substances like tobacco, cannabis, illicit drugs, prescription medications, inhalants, and solvents. Substance use spans a spectrum from beneficial use, such as prescribed medication, consumption of coffee or tea, and ceremonial use of traditional medicines, to chronic dependence or substance use disorder.

Figure 1



The Yukon continues to lead the country in the per-capita rate of opioid toxicity deaths (Figure 2).

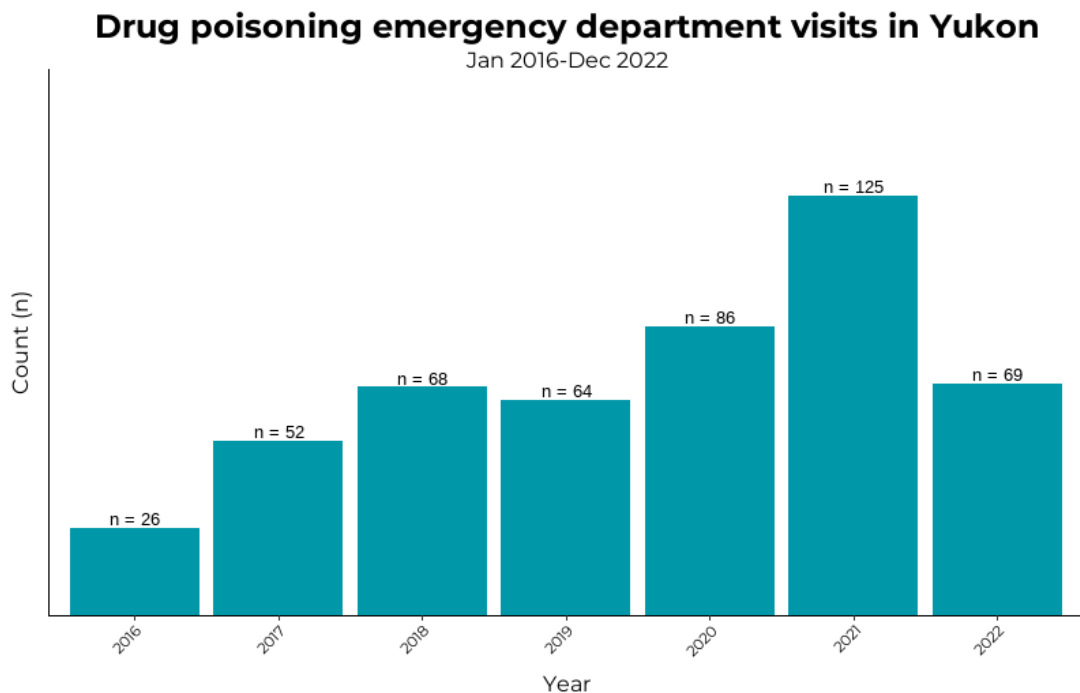
Figure 2



\*note: BC's death rate is for all illicit drugs including, but not limited to, opioids and stimulants

1 Note that while the crude rate considers the rate of deaths per 100,000, Yukon's actual number is lower due to a smaller population than most jurisdictions.

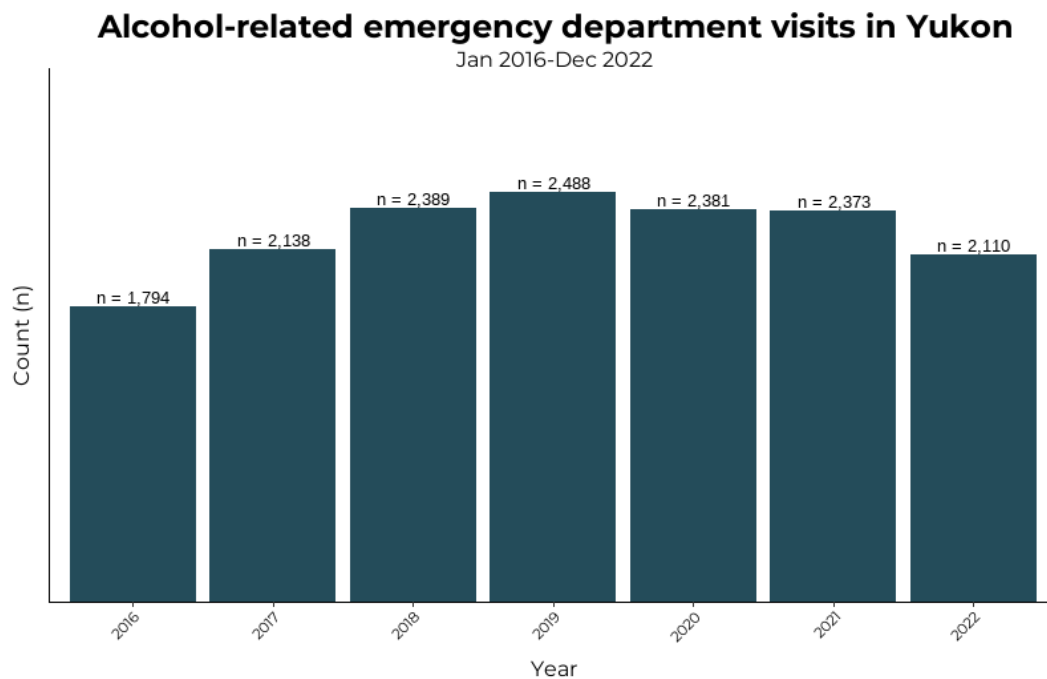
Figure 3



In the Yukon, emergency departments have reported a consistent rise in drug poisoning cases since 2016. Despite a decrease observed in 2022 (data available only up to November), the death toll in 2022 remained alarmingly high, indicating the persistence of the emergency.

As per the Health Status Report 2021<sup>11</sup>, Yukon residents have extraordinarily high rates of alcohol consumption. They outpace nearly all other Canadian jurisdictions in heavy drinking and alcohol sales. This leads to high rates of short- and long-term health harms and social and community impacts, including negative impacts to family and community relationships, unemployment or diminished ability to participate in community activities, and family or community violence.

**Figure 4**



Health outcomes for individuals can be influenced by a multitude of factors, collectively referred to as the social determinants of health<sup>12</sup> (Figure 5). These factors, stemming from systemic issues, can interact to create barriers to preventative measures like education, healthy food and activities, and positive peer groups, while also hindering access to treatments such as health services. It's essential to acknowledge the potential impacts of poverty, inadequate affordable housing, trauma history, racism, and colonization on the accessibility and effectiveness of health-related programs and services. A valuable source of insight on how these intricate factors interplay is the experiences of those utilizing the services or those affected by service gaps. Thus, continual collaboration with individuals with lived and living experience is of utmost importance.

Figure 5



based on work for First Nations Health Authority at Gathering Wisdom VI

Drawing  
change

## Strategic framework

### Vision

Yukoners maintain mental, emotional, spiritual,<sup>13</sup> and physical wellness throughout their lifetimes, thereby contributing to wellness within their families, cultures, and communities.

### Mission

The mission is a collective effort towards implementing innovative, bold, and evidence-based initiatives to reduce substance use-related harms and enhance the health and wellbeing of Yukoners.

### Guiding principles

The following principles will steer the creation and delivery of policies, programs, and services:

- 1. Inclusion and Respect** - Every Yukoner deserves to be involved in their medical and social care, feeling valued for their input.
- 2. Cultural Safety and Honouring Diversity** - All Yukoners should have access to services and providers who recognize and support cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity. This recognition extends to Yukon First Nations' history, culture, governance, the negative impacts of residential schools, in line with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' Final Report.
- 3. Choice and Autonomy** - Yukoners are empowered to make decisions and determine what's best for their own health and wellbeing.
- 4. Accountability** - Actions are based on community discussions, partnerships with Yukoners, and evidence-informed practices. The strategy is designed with built-in accountability, ensuring transparency for Yukoners via an annual progress report.
- 5. Growth and Innovation** - Services and supports evolve to meet changing needs of Yukoners. Community dialogue, research, and development support the implementation of innovative solutions.
- 6. Person-centred (individual, family, community)** - Yukoners, their families, and communities are viewed as interconnected, forming the heart of the health and social service system.
- 7. Compassion** - Services are planned and delivered from a place of compassion as a starting point and as a goal.
- 8. Pragmatism** - As substance use issues can be polarizing, services are built upon a solid research base with a public health approach.
- 9. Restorative Justice** - An alternative rooted in Indigenous practices for conflict resolution and diversion from the conventional justice system, restorative justice encourages understanding, relationship-building, and healing to repair harm collaboratively.

### Public health approach to substance use

The goal of public health is to foster healthy individuals within healthy communities<sup>14</sup>, considering health as more than just the absence of disease or injury. It embraces the complete sense of wellbeing, including physical, mental, emotional, and social health.

Throughout human history, psychoactive substances have been used across many cultures and societies to alter feelings, thoughts, and behavior, and to promote wellbeing. Yet, many substances have the potential to cause harm to both individuals and communities.

A public health approach to substance use prioritizes ensuring people and communities have the necessary resources, knowledge, tools, and support to manage their substance use safely, maximizing benefit and minimizing harm<sup>15</sup>.

This approach acknowledges that some people use substances and will continue to do so, and that substance use will be part of health and wellbeing. Public health interventions support people to increase control over one's own health, whether or not one chooses to incorporate the use of substances.

## Purpose and outcomes

The main objective of this strategy is to provide a plan of action on how the Government of Yukon, in collaboration with partners, can reduce substance use-related harm within the territory. Substance use-related harm can result both directly (e.g. overdose<sup>16</sup>, brain injury<sup>17</sup>, cancers<sup>18</sup>, cirrhosis<sup>19</sup>, accidents<sup>20 21</sup> etc.) and indirectly (e.g. injury or death due to association with gangs or organized crime<sup>22</sup>, suicide secondary to addiction<sup>23</sup>, community safety impacts as a result of organized crime<sup>24</sup>, acquisition of diseases such as HIV, hepatitis, and other blood and saliva borne diseases secondary to addiction<sup>25</sup>, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder<sup>26</sup>, etc.). In the Yukon, every instance of injury or death due to drug poisoning must be considered within the context of closely interconnected communities and family networks. It's also essential to acknowledge that First Nations people have been disproportionately impacted by substance use and the toxic drug supply, within the context of colonization in the Yukon.

## Intended outcomes for this strategy

- Delay the age of initiation of substance use
- Minimize substance use across the lifespan
- Keep people safe when using substances
- Reduce the harms of substance use
- Improve the health, safety and wellbeing of Yukoners and Yukon communities

Substance use-related harms can be prevented, not just in the short-term, but long-term taking an evidence-based prevention approach<sup>27</sup>. The recommended actions in this strategy aim to permanently alter the wellness landscape for future generations, preventing the need to declare a Substance Use Health Emergency again.

## Four areas for growth

The “four pillars” approach, applied within Canada and internationally, has been chosen as it aligns with national strategies and has an international evidence base<sup>28</sup>. This approach has been renamed as “four areas for growth” to reflect the evolving nature of the strategy and Yukon’s ongoing growth in these areas of wellness.

The four areas for growth are:

- 1. Prevention:** strengthen communities across Yukon, focusing on preventing substance use and related factors, and promoting connection and living well.
- 2. Harm reduction:** address the Substance Use Health Emergency now by keeping people safer with progressive, accessible, and dynamic harm reduction services.
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- 4. Community safety and wellbeing:** work systemically to support, maintain and increase the safety and wellbeing of Yukon communities.



## Engagement with partners

The development of this strategy was greatly enriched by the expertise of the government's partners. The Government of Yukon engaged in a comprehensive review of best practices and examined ongoing substance use-related projects at the federal, territorial, and local levels. This, coupled with a deep understanding of the northern context and the diverse needs of Yukoners, significantly shaped the recommendations outlined in this document.

Key engagement activities that informed the strategy included:

- Mental Wellness Summits
- Opioid Treatment Services needs assessment
- Indigenous Community Safety Summit
- Journey maps with clients from Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services
- Thorough consultation with frontline providers such as counsellors, physicians, nurses, nurse practitioners, and social workers, both within and outside the government
- Collaboration with various agencies and organizations including the RCMP, Whitehorse Chamber of Commerce and Association of Yukon Communities
- *The One Death is Too Many: Grappling with the Overdose Epidemic in the Yukon*<sup>29</sup> report
- The Substance Use Health Emergency Project Executive Committee, which included representatives from First Nations, NGOs, and community leaders

Continual engagement with stakeholders and individuals who use substances revealed unique drug use patterns in the Yukon, which differ from other jurisdictions in Canada, including British Columbia:

- Opioids are the drug of choice for a smaller proportion of individuals compared to other jurisdictions, according to current data
- A remarkably high rate of individuals engage in polysubstance use, particularly alcohol and crack-cocaine
- Most individuals consume alcohol prior to and alongside the use of other drugs

These distinct patterns and context in the territory must be factored into the design and implementation of programs and services addressing the Substance Use Health Emergency. It is essential to continue gathering data on substance preference and prevalence to enable appropriate, flexible response to emerging trends within the territory as they arise.

## **Yukon Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy as a living document**

The Yukon Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy is a dynamic, evolving framework developed to address substance use issues in the Yukon. As a living document, it will regularly undergo updates and adjustments to stay relevant and responsive to new evidence, shifting circumstances, emerging needs, and feedback from continuous engagement.

Maintaining ongoing engagement with partners and stakeholders is a fundamental component of this strategy. By involving key partners and stakeholders from diverse sectors such as healthcare providers, community organizations, other governments, and people who use substances, the Government of Yukon aims to foster collaboration and collective ownership over addressing the Substance Use Health Emergency together. This collaborative approach ensures that the recommended actions in the strategy are effectively implemented and incorporate the diverse perspectives and expertise of those involved.

Recognizing the uniqueness of each community and the distinct challenges they face, the strategy endorses a tailored approach. A “one size fits all” solution is not ideal for addressing substance use issues across the entire territory. Instead, the strategy highlights the importance of working closely with communities and First Nations governments to understand their specific needs, aspirations, and cultural contexts. This approach enables the creation of targeted interventions that are more likely to be effective and accepted by the communities they serve.

While providing a framework and general direction, the strategy is not a rigid action plan. This flexibility enables adaptability in its implementation, allowing for adjustments based on feedback, new evidence, and shifting priorities. Maintaining this adaptability ensures the strategy can promptly respond to new challenges, emerging trends, and evolving community needs, thereby ensuring its relevance and effectiveness in addressing substance use over time.

## **Links to other strategies and existing commitments**

- *Putting People First*
- *Yukon’s Mental Wellness Strategy*
- *Yukon FASD Action Plan*
- *Changing the Story to Upholding Dignity and Justice: Yukon’s Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two-spirit+ People Strategy*, and the related reports on priority actions and implementation planning
- *Yukon’s LGBTQ2S+ Inclusion Action Plan*
- *The Housing Action Plan for Yukon*
- *The collaborative work to develop the Pan-Canadian Strategy to Address the Overrepresentation of Indigenous People in the Criminal Justice System*

## History of, and ongoing, colonization of the Yukon

What is today known as North America is often referred to as Turtle Island by many Indigenous groups on this continent, including many First Nations people in the Yukon<sup>30</sup>. The colonization of the region now called the Yukon began in the mid-19th century. Governmental structures established during the gold rush of 1898 solidified colonial presence, although the Hudson's Bay Company had already disrupted some traditional trade routes and relationships by introducing non-Indigenous fur trade posts as early as the 1840s<sup>31</sup>. The Alaska Highway, constructed by the U.S. Army starting in 1942 and opened to the public in 1948, significantly increased colonial activity in the Yukon's southern region. This activity led to overharvesting, the creation of game sanctuaries banning hunting and trapping, a rise in diseases, and increased substance use and violence among Indigenous people, particularly women, due to interactions with the men working at the highway camps<sup>32</sup>.

Canada started establishing residential schools in the Yukon in 1911<sup>33</sup>, and these institutions, primarily run by Anglican, Catholic, and Baptist churches, operated in the territory until the late 1970s<sup>34</sup>. The territory housed three residential schools: Choooutla<sup>35</sup>, Carcross (Anglican, also known as Carcross Indian Residential School), Whitehorse Baptist, Aklavik<sup>36</sup> (Anglican, also known as All Saints), and St Paul's, Dawson City (Anglican<sup>37</sup>). One other residential school was located in Northern British Columbia. This school was attended by many First Nations children whose traditional territory encompasses what is now within the Yukon (Lower Post<sup>38</sup> - Catholic). The schools, funded by the federal Indian Affairs Branch and intended to assimilate Indigenous children into white Canadian society<sup>39</sup>, inflicted severe trauma, including abuse, starvation, lack of medical care, separation from family and culture, and death. Considered as a cultural genocide by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission<sup>40</sup>, this systemic oppression has left a legacy of intergenerational trauma, loss of native languages, disconnection from culture and identity, and more Indigenous children in care today than at the peak of the residential school era.

Through colonization, many people continue to grapple with collective, intergenerational, and individual traumas. Substance use often serves as a coping mechanism, numbing or distracting from the pain of loss of identity, culture, family, and previous traumas. As we tread the path of reconciliation, it is essential to listen to and follow Indigenous wisdom and traditional knowledge to understand the harm inflicted and the road to healing. Of particular importance is centering narratives of strength, including Indigenous stories of survival and resistance. Solutions will emerge from communities and those with lived experience, with many already underway, such as First Nations governments' initiatives on family preservation, on-the-land healing, restorative justice, community safety, and cultural safety and reclamation in healthcare and education.

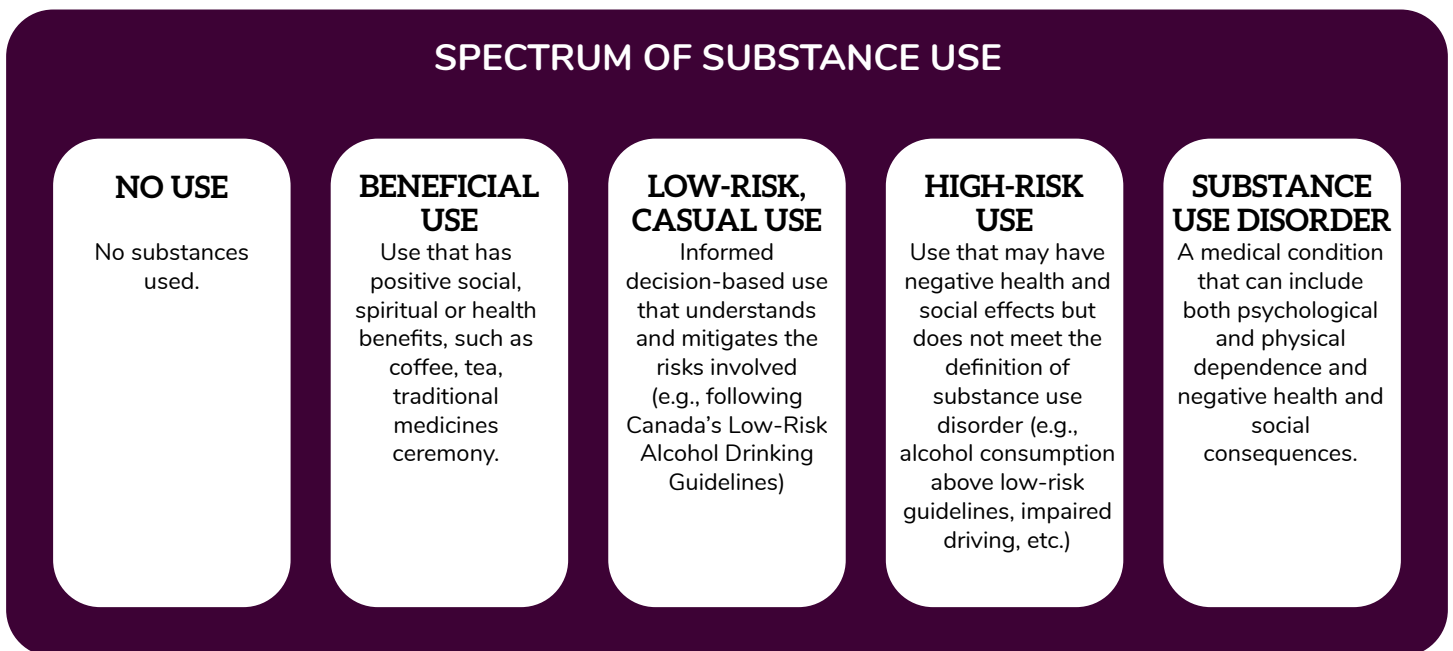
## COVID-19

COVID-19 exacerbated an already challenging substance use situation in the Yukon as the drug supply became less predictable and more likely to cause drug poisonings. The first recorded fentanyl-related death in the Yukon was in 2016. From 2016-2019, there were 29 deaths due to drug toxicity<sup>41 42</sup>. The declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic marked a sharp increase in deaths related to the toxic drug supply, including opioid overdose or poisoning deaths. According to the Yukon Health Status report 2021<sup>43</sup>, 7.7 per cent of Yukoners indicated that their use of illicit drugs had increased, while 4.5 per cent reported a decrease. People aged 15-34 were most likely to report increased consumption, and a higher percentage of males than females reported illicit drug use since the pandemic. Although little local research explains this increase, extensive national and international research suggests why the pandemic would exacerbate the existing toxic drug crisis. Researchers are beginning to untangle how the pandemic and strategies for preventing the spread of the virus, such as stay-at-home orders, may have contributed to this increase in substance use harms, from interruptions to harm reduction programs to isolation and worsening mental health<sup>44</sup>.

## Why do people use substances

Substance use is often perceived negatively, but it exists on a spectrum that includes beneficial use, low-risk use, and a substance use disorder. Understanding these categories helps health service providers and users identify necessary or useful services.

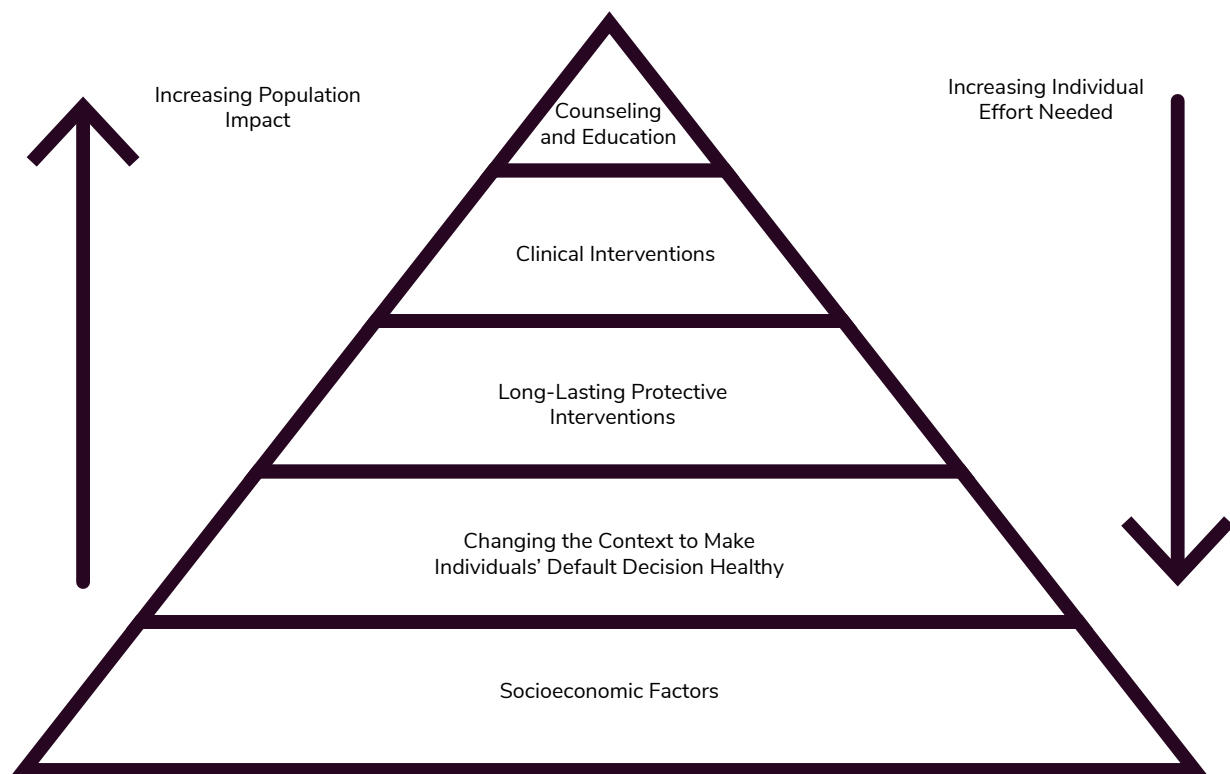
Figure 6: Spectrum of substance use: Heath Canada, 2021<sup>45</sup>



## Substance use through a public health lens

A public health approach to substances can mirror approaches to other risky behaviours like driving or participating in outdoor recreation. This approach acknowledges the reasons people may use substances and the wellness-promoting purpose these behaviors can serve while seeking interventions that can moderate the associated risks. A well-known public health framework is the Health Impact Pyramid, which shows that as interventions become gradually more targeted, they may require more resources per person and have a stronger effect, but also become less impactful across the population<sup>46</sup>. Hence, it is imperative to target interventions with the entire Health Impact Pyramid in mind, aiming to achieve maximum, sustained public health benefit<sup>47</sup>. This is also why implementing substantial prevention measures in a health emergency is essential, even when there may be several years before their impacts are visible.

Figure 7: Health Impact Pyramid



## The social determinants of health

As previously stated, substance use spans across a spectrum (see figure 6), and individuals from all walks of life partake in the consumption of various substances. However, it's important to note that one in ten Canadians struggle with problematic substance use<sup>48</sup>. Social determinants of health often, but not invariably, influence why people choose to use substances, as well as their likelihood of suffering fatal consequences from substance use<sup>49</sup>. Marginalization, limited access to services, and systemic vulnerabilities play substantial roles in this context.

Several social determinants<sup>50</sup> of health include:

- Income and social protection
- Education
- Unemployment and job security
- Food insecurity
- Housing, basic amenities, and the environment
- Early childhood development
- Social inclusion and non-discrimination
- The social construction of gender
- Access to health services

To help illustrate the impact of social determinants of health, consider two individuals with a diagnosed substance use disorder, both using the same stimulant drug. For instance, an individual with a well-paying job and secure housing, using stimulant drugs to enhance work performance may have access to numerous protective factors. These may include affording their drugs without going into debt to drug dealers, insurance coverage that facilitates access to private treatment if they choose, the ability to choose when and where to use their drugs in a safer environment and access to a safer place to use and store them where it is less likely they would be arrested. The protective factors do not guarantee the individual is totally safe when using drugs, but the protective factors can reduce some of the harms associated with that individual's substance use.

On the other hand, an individual without these resources might use stimulants to stay awake due to unsafe living conditions. They may need to avoid certain people due to debts and may refrain from using supervised consumption sites or may choose to use alone because they cannot afford to share their drugs. These conditions can drastically escalate the risk of death if their drugs are toxic. Such circumstances do not mean there are not protective factors, or that there is no hope for this individual, but it may make it more challenging to stay safe or seek treatment, and there may be a higher likelihood of encountering the criminal justice system.

The circumstances surrounding substance use are not a reflection of personal faults, and everyone, regardless of their situation, is equally deserving of healthcare. It is important to be aware of these differences because systems need to compensate for them with other ways to keep people safe, like the National Overdose Response Service, free drug testing available at places people without transportation can easily and confidentially attend (or drug testing that comes to them), and increasing housing options for people who use substances.

Feedback from Yukoners suggests that lack of safe housing, educational system challenges, mental health issues, proximity to peers using substances, early or family substance use, discrimination, inability to access services, and trauma are factors that may compel an individual to use substances. These factors can heighten health risks and pose hurdles in ceasing substance use or using more safely.

## **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)**

Another set of contributors to all health problems including problematic substance use are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs<sup>51</sup>). It has been found that ACEs can predict an earlier age of drinking onset, a higher risk of mental and substance use disorders as an older adult, tobacco use during adulthood, prescription drug use, lifetime illicit drug use, drug dependency and self-reported addiction, suicide attempts, and even pregnancy outcomes<sup>52</sup>.

Examples of ACEs are:

- Physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- Physical or emotional neglect
- Having a parent, caregiver or guardian who has a mental illness or struggles with substance use
- Instability in the home due to incarceration or parental separation
- Death of a parent, caregiver or guardian

The connection between trauma in child and young adulthood and struggles with substance use is well documented<sup>53</sup> in all populations. These traumas can be difficult to treat, because they can inform the way we think about ourselves, others and the world<sup>54</sup>. However, while many people can have a history of several ACEs – and while prevention is the more efficient method for intervention from a population level (see Health Impact Pyramid, Figure 7) – this does not predetermine someone's inability to heal, access treatment, or make changes in their life.

ACEs and challenges with social determinants of health may increase predictive factors but do not guarantee addiction issues. Protective factors, such as good relationships, role models, and connections to community and culture, can mediate these risks<sup>55</sup>, such as having good relationships, role models, and connection to community and culture. Reducing ACEs and increasing protective factors are among the best methods we have to prevent future substance use. This can be achieved through significant investment, long-term planning, community commitment, and support for Indigenous self-determination.

## Chronic pain

Chronic pain treatment often involves prescribing opioid medication<sup>56</sup>, which can contribute to opioid misuse or addiction. During the COVID-19 pandemic, access to outpatient medical services decreased due to isolation protocols and staffing pressures. Many people couldn't access their usual treatments, their mental health declined due to isolation, and alternative therapies for chronic pain weren't available. Additionally, many services for chronic pain treatment, such as regular physiotherapy, psychotherapy for chronic pain treatment like cognitive behavioural therapy, or even gentle exercise, are not accessible due to long waitlists or financial barriers. These factors potentially contributed to an increase in opioid use amongst Yukoners.

### The Iron Law of Prohibition and rising deaths from toxic substances

The Iron Law of Prohibition suggests that the potency of prohibited substances increases as both suppliers and consumers attempt to reduce the bulk of contraband substances<sup>57</sup>. This phenomenon was observed during alcohol prohibition in the 1920s when the production of spirits, and subsequently moonshine, surged dramatically. As a result, people consuming alcohol were more likely to face alcohol poisoning when consuming beverages with a higher alcohol content, as well as a less-regulated supply. Similarly, opioids have evolved from being consumed as opium, then heroin, and now the illegally manufactured synthetic opioids fentanyl and carfentanyl. These synthetic opioids are easier to transport and traffic, but they are also much more dangerous and unpredictable due to their manufacture in unregulated, uncontrolled conditions.



## Prevention: building stronger communities across the Yukon

Prevention initiatives should focus on enhancing connection and living well. This includes providing culturally appropriate and safe child protection services, safe and accessible education for all children, enjoyable and healthy recreation options for young people, as well as healthcare and mental wellness services. Moreover, providing parents and potential parents with access to quality wellness services can be one of the most effective prevention strategies for future generations.

### The link between mental health and substance use

There is a growing consensus internationally and nationally on the importance of addressing mental health and addiction simultaneously. An increasing body of literature has highlighted the impact of mental health and social and health inequities on individual and population substance use. As a result, all levels of government have started to prioritize, support, and fund issues related to substance use and mental health.

Research has shown<sup>58</sup> that people with mental health concerns are at a much higher risk of using substances, often as a form of self-medication. This can lead to a dangerous cycle where substances may worsen mental health concerns or cause brain changes that result in new or more intense symptoms over time.

Prevention strategies aim to prevent or delay substance use and address the root causes of addiction. These strategies may include supporting families to lead healthier and more connected lives, mentoring programs, education to enhance community knowledge and skills related to living well and supporting each other and enhancing access to and involvement in culture. Previous approaches to prevention put all the responsibility on the individual to avoid substance use. For example, the “just say no” approach or youth education on the harms of drug use<sup>59</sup>.

Modern, evidence-based approaches to prevention focus on fostering an environment where children and youth feel a sense of connection, are engaged, and are supported to make choices that support their current and future wellness<sup>60</sup>. It’s crucial that First Nations governments are supported to design, partner in, and lead culturally appropriate prevention strategies that cater to their needs.

Preventative efforts often tackle contributors to substance use that come before a young person even becomes aware of substances. Prevention initiatives focus on supporting children and families to cultivate a lifestyle that maximizes wellness and connection. Living in a safe community where families and youth are honoured, celebrated, and encouraged to reach their full potential promotes health and wellbeing.

### Health behaviours research

The Yukon collaborates with Queens University every four years to conduct the Health Behaviours Study. This study collects data about the wellbeing, activities, and feelings of Yukon's 11 to 15-year-olds. The most recent data available, from 2018, is particularly concerning, especially for girls and youth living in communities.

### Mental health

Since 2010, an escalating number of students across all grades and genders have reported feeling sad or hopeless every day. A third of all youth reported at least one indicator of depression. Notably, 83 per cent of girls in grades 9 and 10 in the communities reported feeling sad or hopeless every day. Only 2 per cent stated they felt confident in themselves. Approximately 60 per cent of youth with a substance use disorder also have a mental health concern<sup>61</sup>, an important link to consider as the Yukon aims to reduce substance use harms.

### Child poverty

Child poverty and hunger persist as significant problems in the Yukon. Many children between grades 6-10 reported that they sometimes go to school or bed hungry due to insufficient food. The issue peaks with girls in grades 9 and 10, with 47.9 per cent reporting this as their situation. As previously mentioned, poverty, a social determinant of health, can profoundly impact a person's health and wellbeing.

### Substance use

Early use of substances is strongly correlated with future engagement in risky behaviors. Alcohol use among Yukon's young people is concerning. Between 13-26 per cent of Grade 9 and 10 students across the Yukon (varying depending on gender and location) reported having five or more drinks more than once in the past month, and 27-48 per cent reported consuming alcohol in the past month. In communities, 41 per cent of girls had smoked tobacco in the past month, compared with 12 per cent of urban girls. Significant cannabis use among young people in grades 9 and 10 (18.9 per cent for urban and 33 per cent for rural) is also concerning.

### Sexual health, teen dating violence, and bullying

Other significant findings from the health behavior report include a substantial proportion of young Yukoners reporting an early age (before 13) of first sexual intercourse, especially for rural girls (41.2 per cent). Additional issues include low condom use and significant physical and emotional violence in dating. Nearly half of all youth reported being bullied at school more than once or twice in the past couple of months, with bullying incidents on the rise. As the health behaviours report indicates, young people who experience bullying are at higher risk of suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts, mental health concerns, becoming bullies themselves, and social isolation. All these factors can contribute to increased and harmful substance use.

### Impaired driving

The Yukon experiences troubling rates of impaired driving. In July 2022, the Government of Yukon, alongside the RCMP and the Canadian Drug and Alcohol Research Team, conducted two roadside surveys in Whitehorse to obtain an estimate of impaired driving frequency. Of all drivers surveyed, 24.3 per cent tested positive for drugs (21.7 per cent), alcohol (4.4 per cent), or both. Cannabis was the most frequently detected drug, making up 80 per cent of all substances found. In the Commercial Vehicle Operator Survey, 19.5 per cent of commercial operators tested positive for psychoactive substances. Alcohol use was extremely rare among commercial operators (only one driver tested positive), but 11.7 per cent of commercial operators tested positive for cannabis, and 7.8 per cent for cocaine.

## Prevention: recommended actions

### 1. Implement Planet Youth in Yukon communities

Planet Youth<sup>62</sup> is a community-based, data-driven approach designed to identify and implement community-based prevention activities for youth. Its objective is to evaluate the current situation, make intervention decisions, apply the intervention, and assess the outcomes within one year. This approach has been successfully adopted in 16 countries, including Ireland, Spain, Lithuania, Scotland, Belgium, Chile, Mexico, New Zealand, and Canada, where it has been implemented by several municipalities. Planet Youth has decades of evidence demonstrating its effectiveness. This model proves that a collaborative effort from front-line providers, social scientists, policy makers, family members, and teachers, can almost entirely reverse entrenched societal substance use. This is accomplished by enhancing the role of families and communities in young people's lives by providing opportunities for positive engagement and activities during their free time.

### 2. Support Yukon communities in creating and implementing community wellness plans

Community wellness represents a shared vision for healthier communities, which in turn yields a healthier population and increased community involvement. Every Yukon community has unique characteristics, needs, resources, and challenges that must be taken into account to effectively address the health and wellness concerns of each community as a whole. A community wellness plan is a strategic framework that outlines the goals, objectives, and actions to promote the overall well-being and health of a community. It is a comprehensive, community-led approach that involves collaboration among community members, First Nations governments, healthcare providers, local government, and other organizations. A community wellness plan typically addresses multiple dimensions of health, including physical, mental, social, and environmental wellbeing. It aims to improve the health outcomes of community members, prevent illness, and promote healthy behaviors and lifestyles.

The Government of Yukon is dedicated to supporting all Yukon communities in enhancing the wellness and health of community members. Financial support will be offered to Yukon communities to develop and implement their own community wellness plans, tailored to the specific needs of each community.

### 3. Initiate planning for the co-location of child and youth health services

Integrated Youth Services proposes a service delivery model offering a singular access point for children and youth in need of help. The model removes the burden of navigating through and connecting various services from families because all services are co-located. This arrangement includes integrated services like mental health and substance use counseling, peer support, primary care, and social supports. By locating all these services together, providers can communicate and operate as one team supporting a young person and their family, saving both time and resources for the client and providers alike.

#### 4. Increase funding for substance use and mental wellness education programs for all Yukon youth

Traditional prevention efforts for youth have typically relied on admonishment and knowledge transfer, despite evidence suggesting the ineffectiveness of such methods. Effective prevention requires a comprehensive understanding of what works, what does not, and the commonalities between various forms of risky behavior. For instance, the prevention portfolio model applies strategies from several fields like behavioral economics and public health to devise strengths-based frameworks for addressing violence, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, and related problems. Youth need effective and relevant substance use and mental wellness education. Youth education, a long-term solution, aims to investigate the most pressing issues for youth today and equip them with essential future skills. These skills encompass substance use and mental wellness education, confidence building, leadership, cultural awareness, and community consciousness.

#### 5. Increase funding for youth prevention initiatives

Boosting the capacity for community-led youth development is a proven strategy in preventing substance use among Yukon youth. Funding for youth prevention initiatives should be offered as three-year transfer payment agreements instead of short-term grants or pilot projects, providing successful programs the financial stability to continue, build momentum, and retain staff. While funding for new or innovative prevention programs is important, many communities already have effective strategies in place. Redirecting efforts from rewriting grant applications to fit changing criteria or new pilot funding can detract from valuable program delivery hours. Instead, funds need to sustainably support activities that have proven successful, as evidenced by community and client feedback, community support letters, and tangible outcomes. The evaluation outcomes for these activities will align with the Yukon's 40 *Developmental Assets to Positive Youth Development*<sup>63</sup>, representing the characteristics, values, and experiences crucial for young people to thrive.

#### 6. Continue to invest in and work with partners on initiatives related to Indigenous mental health

Indigenous populations have been disproportionately impacted by the Substance Use Health Emergency. The Government of Yukon pledges to maintain its collaboration with First Nations governments and Indigenous organizations to understand, fund, and implement initiatives that centre Indigenous views of wellness and healing across health, education, social, and justice sectors.

#### 7. Expand life promotion (suicide prevention) initiatives

Currently delivered in Dawson City through a partnership between the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Wellness Department, Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services, and the Mental Health Commission of Canada, the Roots of Hope<sup>64</sup> project leverages community expertise to deliver life promotion interventions tailored to local context. Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services plans to build upon these achievements and partner with other interested First Nations governments and communities to extend community-led life promotion initiatives across the territory.

## **8. Develop and offer training to all health and social service providers in the Yukon that focuses on cultural safety in service provision and the legacy of intergenerational trauma from residential schools**

Indigenous people in Canada have generally worse health outcomes compared to non-Indigenous people<sup>65</sup>. Many interactions between Indigenous individuals and service providers are ineffective or even harmful due to systemic and interpersonal racism. This racism in health and social service care can lead to Indigenous people not receiving service or treatment, services being unavailable due to system gaps, Indigenous people feeling that the service is not culturally appropriate or intended for them and consequently not returning, or even active perpetration of harm, whether intended or not<sup>66</sup>. Training that addresses cultural safety and humility is needed at all levels<sup>67</sup> to ensure that services are being delivered in a culturally safe manner for all Yukon residents.

## **9. Build a lifecycle approach to mental wellness into all health and social services delivered by the Government of Yukon**

A strong connection exists between the mental health of children and their parents<sup>68</sup>. All services should take into account that most individuals are part of a family and fulfill important roles within that system. These roles can include being a parent, partner, sibling, child, grandparent, caregiver, guardian, carer, and often more than one role simultaneously. Services should be designed and delivered while considering the roles Yukoners play within their families. This could involve factors like the content delivered, location of service provision, availability of childcare, or the timing of services.

For example, as nearly a quarter of new mothers<sup>69</sup> and one in ten new fathers<sup>70</sup> experience perinatal mental health issues, services should aim to help parents and caregivers succeed by encouraging them to adopt healthy behaviors and normalizing the seeking of help when needed. This could involve providing information about perinatal mental health issues and support services early in prenatal classes. Such an approach is not only beneficial for future parents but also considers the wellbeing of the child, as supporting a parent or caregiver's mental health significantly contributes to a child's mental health.

## **10. Increase funding for family-based initiatives, particularly those targeting the first five years of life**

The environment in which a child is raised forms the foundation for emotional regulation and resilience. One key social determinant of health is early childhood education. It comes with numerous benefits, especially for families that are living in poverty and are socially excluded<sup>71</sup>. Parenting and caregiver support plays a crucial role in preventing substance use. Supporting initiatives like the Council of Yukon First Nations Family Preservation Unit and the Early Years program with the Yukon First Nation Education Directorate, which provide cultural and community-based programming for Indigenous youth and families, may contribute to better long-term health and social outcomes. These initiatives aim to connect participants to language and culture, instilling a sense of pride in their identity. Such investments will build capacity for all Yukoners, reducing reliance on substance use as a coping mechanism for stress or trauma, and pre-emptively addressing conditions that contributed to the current health emergency.

## 11. Explore options for the provision of housing and support for parents living with addiction

Plans will be developed for a staffed residence dedicated to parents and expecting individuals living with addiction. This approach serves both as treatment and prevention, as the residence would offer a range of wraparound services catering to an individual's immediate needs and supporting parents as they acquire skills and knowledge to create a stable life for their children. Furthermore, potential harm to the fetus due to substance use would be minimized or even eliminated.

### Taking a public health approach to alcohol consumption

Taking a public health approach implies viewing alcohol use, like other substances with addiction potential, as a health rather than a criminal concern. The emphasis is on reducing health inequities for individuals, families, communities, and societies. Consequently, health should be the primary consideration in alcohol policy, with secondary factors, such as revenue generation, arranged to promote positive health outcomes. Currently, in Canada, there is a shift in alcohol consumption guidelines towards a low risk drinking culture due to health concerns. Risks such as cancer, heart disease, and accident rates significantly increase in people who consume more than two drinks per week<sup>72</sup>.

## 12. Expand efforts to prevent alcohol-related harms by ensuring that new regulations under the *Liquor Act* balance the needs of businesses and communities

Based on growing evidence, we know that drinking less reduces alcohol-related harms. There is an opportunity to incorporate what we learn from communities and the research into legislation and policies to prevent the detrimental effects of alcohol consumption. Collaboration with our partners and engagement will be integral components of this work.

## 13. Continue communication and educational campaigns addressing substance use and mental wellness issues

Direct communication with the public about public health information, including risks, healthcare initiatives, and other community concerns, is crucial. In an era rife with misinformation and disinformation, the role of evidence-based communication from trusted sources becomes even more essential. Communication campaigns will be rolled out as new supports and services emerge and as the situation evolves during this public health emergency. The communication materials will cover a broad range of digital and print media, ensuring that the information is readily accessible to all Yukon residents.

## 14. Increase support for Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder diagnosis and treatment

The connection between attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and addictions is well established<sup>73,74</sup>. It's clear that when properly managed, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder does not pose a risk factor for substance use. However, if mismanaged or undiagnosed, the risk factors for substance use and other co-occurring conditions surge. Ensuring Yukoners have access to early detection, validated therapies (both pharmaceutical and psychological), and necessary educational support will deter many young individuals from resorting to illicit substances for self-medication, and aid numerous others who have already suffered from addiction to embark on a path of harm reduction or even sobriety.

## 15. Continue to explore and implement initiatives and funding models in support of high-quality early learning and child care programs in all Yukon communities

Reliable, affordable, and high-quality early learning and child care programming in all communities are essential for a variety of reasons. As stated in the Putting People First<sup>75</sup> report, early learning programs decrease the likelihood of poor physical and mental health outcomes for children. Numerous Canadian studies show that the economic benefits from investing in early childhood education ranges from \$1.60 to \$5.80 in reward for every \$1.00 spent, so investments in this area have a true evidence base of payoff for communities<sup>76</sup>.

From a workforce perspective, when there is a lack of early learning and child care options for families in rural communities it may mean that when a person who provides essential services to a community (such as a nurse, social worker, counsellor, support worker, teacher or First Nations government employee) has child care needs, they may have to leave a position they enjoy in a rural community. Lack of consistent child care may render them unable to participate fully in the workforce, contributing both to understaffing and also instability as essential relationships are lost every time there is staffing turnover.

It is nearly impossible to attract families to work in rural communities without these supports, creating a cycle where communities may not have access to the services they require.

It is essential for positive health and social outcomes that continued collaboration between the Yukon government, local municipalities, First Nations governments, and the Yukon First Nation Education Directorate prioritize and support licensed early learning and child care initiatives throughout the Yukon.

**Harm reduction: address the Substance Use Health Emergency now by keeping people safer with progressive, accessible, and dynamic harm reduction services.**

Harm reduction is a philosophy founded on dignity, respect, human rights, pragmatism, and compassion. Individuals must be alive to contribute to their communities, participate in their families, or even engage in treatment. Harm reduction initiatives help keep people alive and minimize the negative consequences of substance use. It's important to remember that individuals who use substances are people first, deserving the same consideration for wellbeing and dignity as anyone else.

### Understanding harm reduction

Every day, citizens engage in harm reduction practices. For instance, when driving a car, we fasten our seatbelts. Seat belts are proven to halve the likelihood of fatality in a car accident. Driving or being a passenger in a car is dangerous – in fact, car accidents are a leading cause of death in Canada year over year. As a society, we've mandated seatbelt use to mitigate this risk, even as we continue this hazardous activity. Many argue that driving is an unavoidable part of their lives – required for commuting to work, attending important appointments, or meeting family needs. Equally, people who use substances often face circumstances where substance use is necessary, at least in the short-term, while others may use substances recreationally or for pleasure. Most would agree that even someone who drove their car for a simple, nonessential, or pleasurable errand, such as buying coffee, deserves protection from grave outcomes like death.

## Harm reduction: recommended actions

### Understanding a managed alcohol program

A managed alcohol program is a harm reduction strategy designed to mitigate some of the adverse effects of severe alcohol dependence, often targeting people experiencing chronic homelessness or housing instability.

In a managed alcohol program, medically prescribed quantities of beverage alcohol are supplied to participants to decrease harms related to alcohol use and replace non-beverage alcohol (e.g., mouthwash or hand sanitizer) use. These controlled portions of alcohol are typically distributed to participants at regular intervals throughout the day. By offering smaller doses of beverage alcohol, managed alcohol program participants have the chance to safely stabilize or reduce their alcohol consumption and substitute non-beverage alcohol with less harmful beverage alcohol.

In Canada, most managed alcohol programs are integrated into residential programs such as shelters, supportive housing, and long-term or residential care. Recently, managed alcohol programs have been introduced in non-residential settings, including drop-in centres and hospitals<sup>77</sup>.



## 1. Implement a managed alcohol program

The Government of Yukon will establish a residential managed alcohol program in Whitehorse and consider a phased implementation of smaller or drop-in managed alcohol programs in other communities as needed. These programs have been shown to result in substantial reductions in consumption of both beverage and non-beverage alcohol, interactions with law enforcement and criminal activities related to subsistence crimes (like break-ins to obtain items for resale to purchase drugs and alcohol), and decreased homelessness (as clients reside within the managed alcohol program). Evidence also suggests that managed alcohol programs enhance clients' ability to connect with cultural and spiritual supports<sup>78</sup>, create a sense of safety and feeling of "home"<sup>79</sup> – which is critical for clients to feel relaxed and mitigate ongoing trauma – and improve overall stability<sup>80</sup>.

### Differentiating safer supply and Opioid Agonist Therapy

In the Yukon, safer supply is a prescription of a controlled substance provided as a substitute for the use of an illicit substance to prevent people who use substances from using street drugs, which might be toxic and lead to a drug overdose. People who utilize safer supply regularly consult with a medical team to devise the best treatment plan for them and are connected to wraparound supports and other substance use treatments. Safer supply, a harm reduction strategy, can be incorporated as part of a broader treatment plan for people who use substances.

Opioid Agonist Therapy involves prescribing a medication that prevents individuals from experiencing withdrawal from opiate drug use and aids in managing cravings, thereby reducing the likelihood of ongoing opiate drug use. These medications can include Suboxone, Kadian, Methadone, and Sublocade. Like those accessing safer supply, people who are prescribed Opioid Agonist Therapy medications maintain regular contact with their medical team and have access to the same wraparound services. Opioid Agonist Therapy is a treatment option that can be incorporated into a larger treatment plan.

## 2. Expand access to Opioid Treatment Services, including safer supply and Opioid Agonist Therapy

Every Yukoner should have the opportunity to access evidence-based, life-saving therapeutic strategies, which include versatile harm reduction options such as Opioid Agonist Therapy and safer supply medications, along with a range of other treatment options aiding those who use substances towards health and wellness. For some individuals, such as those with mobility challenges, daily visits to a pharmacy to obtain medication can pose a significant obstacle to continuous treatment. Providing an option for Opioid Agonist Therapy or safer supply medications to be delivered to Opioid Treatment Services clients could significantly increase their success in meeting their treatment goals. Furthermore, Opioid Treatment Services will be expanded across Yukon communities, through community health centres, ensuring all Yukoners have equal access to harm reduction and treatment services.

### 3. Extend the operating hours of Whitehorse's Supervised Consumption Site

Upgrades enabling inhalation as a mode of consumption at Whitehorse's Supervised Consumption Site were completed in May 2022. Since then, the number of site users has significantly increased. To cater more effectively to the needs of users, the operating hours will be extended to seven days a week, inclusive of statutory holidays.

### 4. Expand access to drug checking and harm reduction supplies in line with community wellness plans

Drug checking has become an essential instrument for both monitoring the drug supply by providing information about the types of illicit drugs in circulation, and for people who use substances to understand the composition of the drug supply, promoting safer usage. By expanding the service of drug testing to rural communities and increasing availability in Whitehorse, law enforcement and healthcare professionals can respond more dynamically to protect Yukoners through data gathering and sharing, while also enabling safer drug use. This expansion can encompass point-of-care drug testing, such as with a mass spectrometer, as well as take-home kits.

Investments and planning will be initiated to expand harm reduction options in Yukon communities based on community preferences and needs. Some communities might benefit from having a mass spectrometer in the community with staff trained on its use, while others might prefer access to a mail-in or pick-up drug testing kits. Community wellness plans, developed in collaboration with municipalities and First Nations governments, will guide the necessary harm reduction supports for each community.

### 5. Increase naloxone availability where people use substances

"Knock for Naloxone" is an awareness campaign launched by Blood Ties Four Directions in partnership with community partners, aiming to raise awareness about the toxic drug supply and reduce stigma. Businesses, community members, and organizations can show their concern for people who use substances by undergoing brief training, receiving a Naloxone supply, and displaying a poster to signal to the community that Naloxone kits are available to respond to potential overdoses. This campaign, along with others of similar nature, will be broadened to incorporate additional measures designed to ensure the safety of people who use drugs in public spaces, including the provision of Naloxone kits in wider contexts such as hotel rooms, short-term rentals, government and university accommodations, aiming to normalize the usage of readily accessible harm reduction materials. Consideration will be given to increasing access to intranasal Naloxone, as research demonstrates that intranasal Naloxone can be administered more swiftly and effectively than intramuscular injection Naloxone in a simulated overdose scenario<sup>81</sup>.

## 6. Promote alternative ways to keep people safe while using drugs

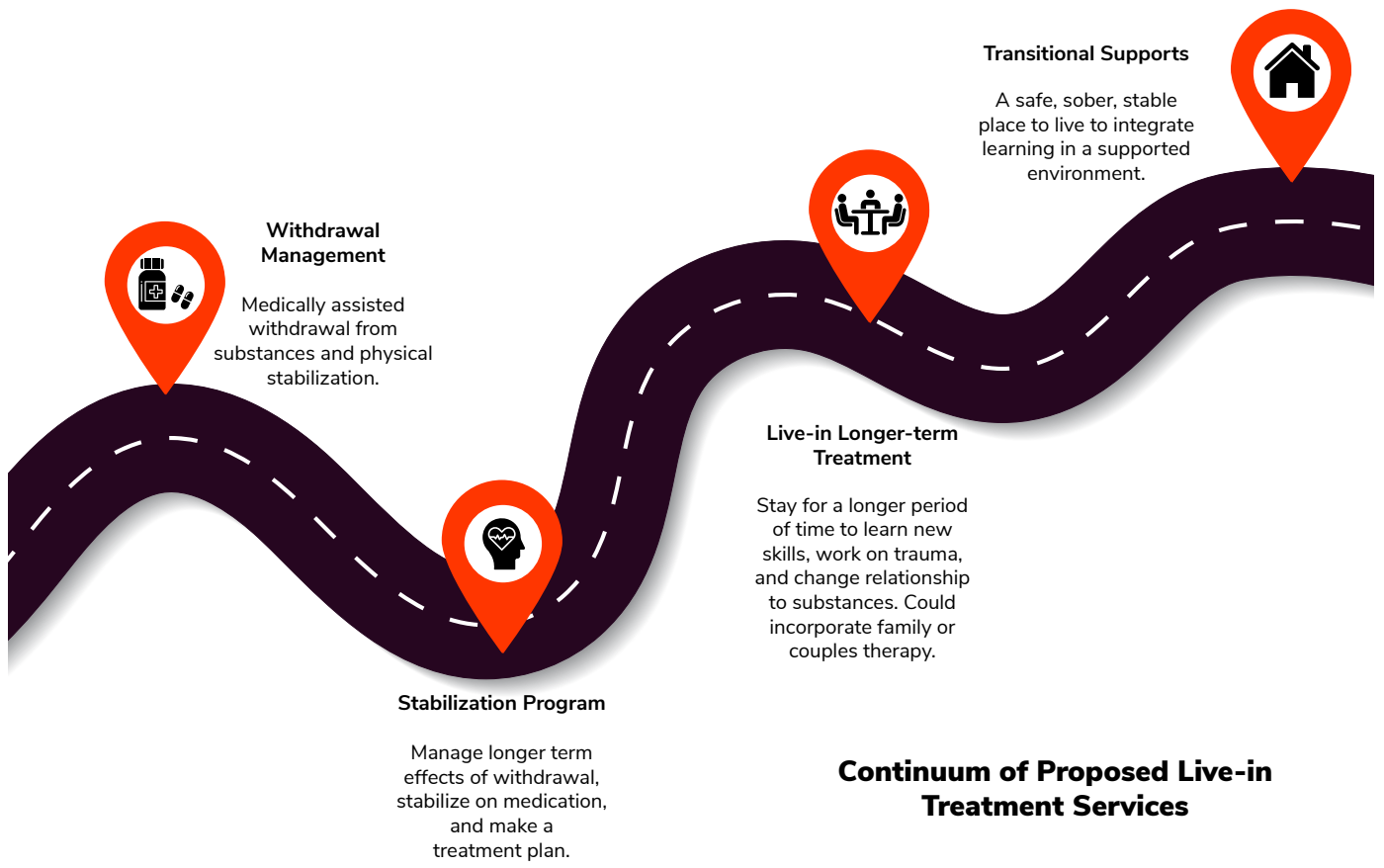
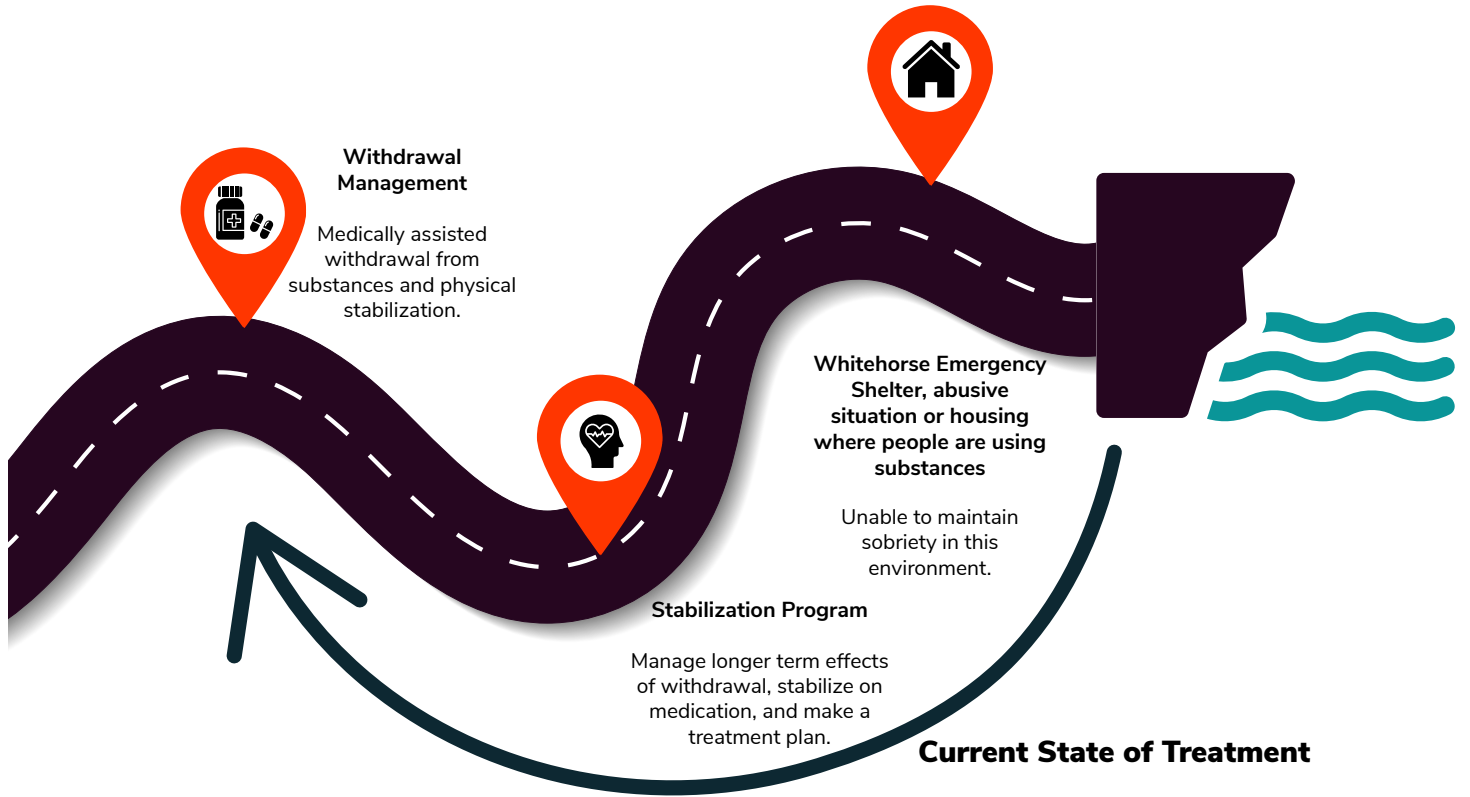
The National Overdose Response Service, an overdose prevention hotline available to all Canadians, provides supportive, confidential, nonjudgmental assistance for people who use substances, anytime and anywhere drugs might be used. An awareness campaign and training will be rolled out to promote “spotting,”<sup>82</sup> an evidence-based service led by peers and communities, where friends, family members, and peers monitor each other virtually while an individual uses drugs. Spotting is a community-driven response intended to provide a safer, less isolating environment for people to consume substances that could potentially lead to a drug overdose.

## 7. Open a sobering centre

A sobering centre serves as a safe haven for people to recover from the immediate effects of acute drug and alcohol intoxication. It is designed for individuals who may not be seeking to medically withdraw from or alter their relationship with substances through a treatment plan, yet for whom a safe location to rest and recuperate is important. These facilities are generally staffed by a medical professional who conducts medical checks and provides comfort measures, making them an ideal harm reduction shelter choice for people who use substances.

## 8. Open a sober shelter

Providing safe spaces for everyone to sleep is essential. Currently, people who are homeless or insecurely housed but striving to maintain sobriety lack suitable accommodation. An alternative shelter, catering to individuals actively seeking to maintain a sober lifestyle and are not intoxicated at the time of service provision, will be established to assist those who require sober emergency housing.



**Treatment and recovery support: walking alongside Yukoners who want to change their relationship with substances and alcohol through timely and quality access to the services and support they need.**

The third area for growth is treatment and recovery support. Numerous organizations across the Yukon have already broadened access to both medical and psychological treatment for substance use, yet there are many more facets that can be expanded and improved upon. Harm reduction initiatives remain essential to preserving the health and wellbeing of people while they engage in substance use, including drugs and alcohol. When Yukoners decide to alter their relationship with substances, it is important that the necessary resources for this transition, both in terms of quality and quantity, are accessible, ensuring individuals are primed for success.

## **Treatment and recovery support: recommended actions**

### **1. Expand options for live-in treatment so that Yukoners can access a full continuum of care**

Choosing to change one's relationship with substances is a long and complex journey. At present, Yukoners can access withdrawal management and one type of short-term live-in treatment in the Yukon. However, aftercare or flexibility in live-in treatment is limited. Furthermore, many individuals opt for treatment outside the Yukon for various reasons but may encounter difficulties when attempting to reintegrate into their lives post-treatment. The significant transformations people aim to make require time and the support of skilled professionals. Additionally, the current location of the treatment facility is not conducive to the type of changes people are striving to make due to the prevalence of drug use and access to substances. A more favorable treatment facility would be located outside of the downtown core.

A reimagined treatment model should incorporate phases of medical and emotional stability, readiness for treatment and preparation, staged live-in options, and an extended period of post-treatment stabilization and skills development. This approach is crucial for an effective model that aids people in making the necessary changes to achieve wellness. Relocating live-in treatment to an area outside the downtown core of Whitehorse will provide better support for those seeking significant change to concentrate on their wellness journey.

Moreover, at least one new sober live-in facility for discharge from treatment or withdrawal management for those intending to maintain sobriety will be established in Whitehorse. This is essential, as the current supported living options, which permit substance use, are unsuitable transitional or second-stage housing options for people intending to alter their substance use. This facility will employ strict, trauma-informed rules regarding substance use, support worker staffing, and a peer-led model to enable clients to evolve into community leaders. Reallocating resources to reimagine aftercare, including significant components of recreational and occupational therapy, will help individuals learn new skills for time management and community contribution, facilitating reintegration into communities.

Finally, the supportive circle around a person aiming for sobriety is critical. However, families and other important individuals often find themselves uncertain about where to turn to or what steps to take. A family support and education group will be initiated as part of the new treatment model to aid families in establishing a supportive community and provide education on what to expect when a loved one is grappling with substance use and undergoing treatment.

## **2. Explore in-territory models of youth and family treatment with an aim to develop local programs and services**

Mental wellness and substance use issues rarely occur in isolation. Accessing treatment within the territory, while staying connected to supports, not only reduces financial barriers but also promotes local capacity. Furthermore, treatment teams working with the entire family unit can dismantle silos, ensuring that all family members are considered when treatment plans are formulated and implemented.

Providing comprehensive and effective treatment for youth within the territory has proven to be a challenging task. Collaborating with partners and integrated youth care models to explore various models and options is an essential process to ensure that investments are directed toward services that will be accessible, suitable, and successful.

## **3. Increase financial accessibility of treatment medications for addiction**

All diagnosable forms of addiction will be incorporated into Yukon's Chronic Conditions Support Program. This not only helps individuals comprehend addiction as a medical issue rather than a moral failing, but it also assists those living with addiction afford life-saving medications, such as Naltrexone, Suboxone, Sublocade, among others. These medications aid in managing addiction or reducing or halting substance use.

## **4. Ensure the availability of Opioid Agonist Therapy wherever Yukoners seek assistance**

The implementation of Opioid Agonist Therapy will be expanded to introduce a protocol for initiation within Withdrawal Management Services, as well as at the Yukon Hospitals' Emergency departments. Research has demonstrated that the commencement of Opioid Agonist Therapy at points of care like these significantly increase continued engagement with a treatment pathway. Moreover, Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services will continue to expand the physical locations and outreach hours of physicians and nurse practitioners to meet clients where they are, thereby decreasing barriers for clients to access life-saving Opioid Agonist Therapies, medications for alcohol use disorder, and other care to treat both direct and indirect health implications of substance use. The Government of Yukon will support continuity of care for individuals prescribed Opioid Agonist Therapy while in custody at the Whitehorse Correctional Centre and who need support transitioning back into communities. To greatly increase outreach and mobile care options, a new mobile clinic van will be procured for the Referred Care Clinic.

## **5. Explore options for the creation of a rapid access addiction medicine clinic**

A rapid access addiction medicine clinic serves as a walk-in clinic for individuals struggling with substance use issues. The primary purpose of a rapid access clinic is to offer immediate access to addiction services without requiring a referral or appointment. These clinics typically function on a first-come, first-served basis and provide clients with brief counselling and referrals to community services. A rapid access addiction clinic could be launched from the existing Referred Care Clinic, thereby allowing people who use drugs to access addiction specialists on a more expansive, walk-in basis, irrespective of whether they already have access to a family doctor. Measures will be taken to explore possibilities for expanding virtual addiction medicine to communities as the necessary infrastructure becomes available.

## **6. Ensure access to education for Yukon clinicians managing chronic pain and assure greater access to non-opioid pain therapies where suitable**

Accessible training and funding for both acute and chronic pain management for all Yukon prescribers will ensure that Yukoners have access to the most current advice and treatment for their chronic pain conditions. In conjunction with this, new funding streams will ensure that non-pharmacological chronic pain treatment (such as physiotherapy and occupational therapy) is available by medical referral to all Yukoners suffering from chronic pain, irrespective of their financial capability. Consequently, fewer Yukoners will need to rely on opiate medication for pain control, and more Yukoners will return to employment, engage in fulfilling leisure activities, and participate fully in their communities, cultures, and families.

## **7. Increase housing options in the territory**

Access to a spectrum of safe housing is a critical component when it comes to individuals being able to make healthy changes in their lives. Capital planning and investments are required to ensure that safe housing is available for all Yukoners. The Government of Yukon will continue to collaborate with the federal government, non-governmental organizations, First Nations governments, and municipal partners to formulate a capital plan and investments for both long-term supported living for Yukoners who need a structured and supportive environment, as well as an improved stock of affordable safe housing, which is integrated into various neighbourhoods and communities for Yukoners for whom independent living is appropriate.

## **8. Increase support for First Nations governments to develop and implement land-based mental health and substance use treatment options**

Land-based healing is an important part of mental wellness in the Yukon. The Government of Yukon will increase support for First Nations governments' land-based healing initiatives. In addition, the Government of Yukon will partner with the Council of Yukon First Nations and the federal government to establish a land-based treatment centre. This facility will provide culturally appropriate, Indigenous-led treatment options within the Yukon. These partners will also work together

to address the current deficiency in land-based aftercare options, facilitating individuals to incorporate their healing relationship with the land into their aftercare plan seamlessly, without hindrances such as transportation or financial constraints.

### **9. Invest in community-based recovery initiatives**

The capacity of rural communities to welcome back their members and foster their wellbeing post-treatment is a vital aspect of ensuring healthy and integrated communities. Allocating funds specifically for community-building or development projects, such as peer mentoring or leadership recognition initiatives, in communities outside of Whitehorse will help to increase an individual's capability to reintegrate back into their community after treatment safely. These initiatives will not only augment the success of individuals on a healing journey but also equip communities with resources to build a support base centered around wellness and hope.

The communities should manage these programs themselves, enabling them to financially support and acknowledge their wellness and culture leaders (Elders, volunteers, community leaders) for their ongoing work and the roles they will grow into. This is particularly important for community members who may struggle financially and are currently unable to contribute time to their community because of other employment commitments or lack of means for childcare.

### **10. Develop a central online, accessible substance use treatment option directory**

Navigating treatment and aftercare options, especially in rural communities, can be a daunting task. The consolidation of data and the upkeep of a regularly updated resource accessible to both clients and service providers could be a valuable tool for everyone involved. Potential measures could include expanding platforms like the "Support is here for you" initiative or a social media page, with provisions for setting up reminders and facilitating easy updates by multiple agencies. Furthermore, a system where First Nations governments can submit data directly to the platform, could be considered.



## **Community safety and wellbeing: working systemically to support, maintain and increase safety and wellbeing of Yukon communities**

Community safety and wellbeing are broad concepts that, in the context of Yukon's substance use health emergency, intersect with many actions already included in this strategy's other pillars. As the fourth pillar in the Yukon Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy, the recommended actions in this section are intended to complement and build on the previous sections, while also including specific actions that relate to law enforcement and the justice system as part of the Government of Yukon's comprehensive response to supporting community safety and wellbeing.

Each individual community in the Yukon has its own unique history, landscape, social fabric, and has in many ways experienced local, territory-wide, national, and global issues differently. Communities experience crime and other community safety issues uniquely, have different resources and strengths to build community resilience to cope with the consequences, and have different priorities for pursuing solutions tailored to their community's circumstances.

Community safety in the Yukon must therefore be considered with a community-specific lens. However, the evolution of the substance use health emergency in the Yukon has compelled all communities to confront the impact of organized crime and other safety issues that are closely related to the territory's alarming substance use trends.

The Department of Justice has heard clear concerns about crime in communities and the associated unease among Yukoners due to the criminal activities tied to drug trafficking. All Yukoners deserve to feel safe in their homes, their communities, and on the roads.

Enforcement related to the substance use health emergency occurs in the context of a clear desire to bring a public health lens to the government's policy approach and a recognition that while policing and enforcement are a part of the puzzle, they are not the answer to the harms of substance use. Criminality is a major component of stigmatizing drug use, creating a barrier to individuals receiving social support from loved ones, or accessing life-saving treatment services and supports. This situation presents a tension between the immediate desire for communities to feel safe and the exploration of long-term measures to address the systemic factors contributing to this crisis. Building resilience and enhancing community capacity for healing are critical aspects to consider as we navigate this path.

The actions within this community safety pillar will be led by the Department of Justice, in close collaboration with the Department of Health and Social Services and other Yukon government departments, First Nations governments, local governments, the RCMP, and other important partners across the territory.

Immediate action is required to tackle an urgent problem that is claiming far too many lives, and we must start from where we are. At the same time, a long-term, collaborative approach working closely with First Nations governments and other partners is essential to focus on community-specific solutions, which are necessary to achieve meaningful progress on the complex and interconnected social issues underlying the substance use health emergency.

This strategy is a living document. As the landscape of crime and community safety concerns evolve, we must evolve along with it and adapt. Like any living thing, the

strategic approach to addressing the substance use crisis will grow best when it is fed and nurtured by the ingredients it needs to be successful. In living this strategy, the Department of Justice will seek:

- Continuous learning and basing our actions on the best available evidence - including local and Traditional Knowledge;
- An open and sincere dialogue with First Nations governments to foster positive government-to-government relationships and effective collaboration that must underlie the continual refinement and implementation of this strategy if it is to be successful;
- The courage to invest in the design and implementation of Yukon-specific solutions, and the willingness to learn from our successes and failures;
- Providing resources to build community-level capacity and making substantial investments acknowledging the scale and gravity of the substance use emergency, and the impact of toxic illicit drugs on community safety and wellbeing.

## **Community safety and wellbeing: recommended actions**

### **1. Provide funding to Yukon First Nations governments and local governments to increase understanding of community-specific and territory-wide community safety issues, needs, and priorities, and explore options for long-term solutions to implement identified priorities**

The Department of Justice is currently implementing Phase 1 of the Community Safety Planning Program, which makes up to \$200,000 available to each Yukon First Nations government to support community safety planning and related implementation costs. In 2023, the Department of Justice will begin engagement on Phase 2 to expand community safety planning funding to municipalities.

These conversations, along with the planning processes themselves, must adapt to the evolving landscape of community safety and substance use-related harms, including violence and organized crime. This funding supports community safety planning processes, which include assessing safety needs, identifying strengths and assets, understanding risks, and prioritizing actions. Recognizing that community safety is unique to each community, the development of the community safety plans and initiatives should reflect the community's culture and may involve Traditional Knowledge in the planning process. The program is therefore designed to be flexible, allowing each community to define what community safety means to them.

To ensure sustained action on priorities identified through community safety planning, the Government of Yukon will explore options to provide long-term support to communities to implement community-level actions to improve safety and wellbeing.

## 2. Develop a short-term funding stream to support non-governmental organizations and community groups to implement their own responses to safety and wellbeing issues

Empowering community-led responses to the substance use health emergency involves making funding directly available to NGOs and community groups. Beyond the geographically defined communities across the Yukon, including towns, villages, cities, and other communities, there are identity-based communities that may be spread out across the territory facing similar safety concerns, such as the queer community in the Yukon.

This short-term funding will be designed to help non-government applicants respond to their own needs and visions for prevention, harm reduction, treatment-oriented, or community safety responses, particularly where those needs are not addressed elsewhere in the Yukon Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy.

## 3. Invest in preventing gender-based violence and improving services for victims of crime

Relationships between violence and substance use are complex, and it is important not to make assumptions about an individual's substance use or history with violence based on demographic information. Gender-based violence is a significant safety issue for many Yukoners. A 2018 report by Statistics Canada on gender-based violence in the territories found that, besides the overall higher rates of violence, women and 2SLGBTQIA+ people – especially those who are also Indigenous and/or have disabilities – were much more likely than men to have been victims of sexualized assault. Men were more likely to have experienced physical assault. Women who experienced sexual or physical assault since the age of 15 “were about three times more likely to report having poor mental health and having used alcohol in a problematic way.”<sup>83</sup>

During recent public engagements in the Yukon with people who use substances, experiences of violence and other trauma were identified as impacting people's mental health and overall wellbeing, and as a potential factor in their relationship with substances<sup>84</sup>. A rising concern is the potential for sexual exploitation of vulnerable individuals relying on connections with organized crime for access to substances they are addicted to or find hard to cope without. Several First Nations governments have voiced concerns about potential victims of human trafficking in communities associated with organized crime and drug trafficking.

The Government of Yukon acknowledges that preventing gender-based violence, improving support for victims, and providing treatment options for those caught in cycles of violence are important safety needs for people in all Yukon communities. The Government of Yukon is supporting engagements to expand Sexualized Assault Response Team (SART) services to Yukon communities and exploring other ways to better serve victims across the territory, taking into account the context of the substance use crisis in program design and implementation. The Government of Yukon will also receive new federal funding under Canada's National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence<sup>85</sup> to increase efforts to prevent gender-based violence and better support victims of such violence when it does occur. This will include identifying criteria and processes to enable Yukon and National organizations to deliver training initiatives for youth, parents, educators, community members, on boundaries, consent, preventing sexualized violence and supporting victims after a disclosure.

The Department of Justice is also working with the RCMP to examine ways to provide better enforcement tools and response mechanisms related to reports of sexual exploitation, human trafficking, and organized crime.

#### **4. Increase frontline support staffing and create more safe and sober housing options for individuals grappling with substance use issues when transitioning from the corrections system back into communities**

Many people involved in the corrections system struggle with substance use<sup>86</sup> and require suitable care and support both during their time in a correctional facility and when reintegrating into Yukon communities. An individual's safety can be compromised when the mental health and substance use management supports available while incarcerated are suddenly inaccessible post-release. This problem can be particularly acute if they do not have secure housing and must seek refuge at a low-barrier shelter, where high levels of substance use might significantly undermine their recovery goals. For individuals with a history of violent offences or involvement in drug trafficking, their reintegration into a community setting may also raise considerable safety concerns for other community members.

The Department of Justice is working to improve supportive programming in the corrections system, including cultural programming, access to mental health and substance use treatment services at the Whitehorse Correctional Centre, and means to better support reintegration into communities and individual aftercare needs post-custody. In response to the current Substance Use Health Emergency and recent community safety concerns, the Department of Justice is actively exploring options for reform of the bail system. This includes adding community corrections support and outreach positions, and improving access to safe and sober housing options and community connections for individuals transitioning out of the corrections system. New investments will provide improved supports for both low-risk and high-risk clients (for example, through housing, substance use recovery, and employment supports, and through increased capacity for supervision of clients with court-imposed orders and conditions). This will also include specialized supports in recognition of the high rates of victimization and trauma often experienced by groups such as women, 2SLGBTQIA+ people, and Indigenous people, supporting Action 2.4 of Yukon's MMIWG2S+ Strategy<sup>87</sup>.

#### **5. Collaborate with First Nations governments to expand therapeutic courts and other restorative justice approaches in response to substance use-related treatment needs**

The Department of Justice is working with federal and First Nations governments to increase treatment and healing-oriented supports for justice-involved clients and, where appropriate, address crime through restorative justice processes and therapeutic court processes instead of the mainstream criminal justice system. Yukon's existing restorative justice resources and therapeutic courts (Community Wellness and Domestic Violence Treatment court) options share a common goal of repairing harm to victims and communities, promoting offender accountability and learning, and supporting healing to mitigate the likelihood of future harms. Current initiatives in these areas include specialized programming for impaired driving offences, substance use treatment, trauma recovery, intimate partner violence work

for men, restorative conferences, Elder-supported aftercare, men's and women's healing camps at Jackson Lake, and community-led programming development are occurring in partnerships with Indigenous organizations and Yukon First Nations governments.

Additionally, initiatives for pre- and post-charge restorative justice court diversion programs (such as Liard First Nation's Dene Keh Justice and Government of Yukon's Integrated Restorative Justice pilot projects) and Indigenous-led, community-based Therapeutic Court programs (such as Liard First Nation's Dena Keh Justice and the Government of Yukon's Justice Wellness Centre pilot project) offer Indigenous responses to justice-related issues from the community perspective and encourage alternative models to services for justice-involved clients.

This work is grounded in the goal of improved community safety and is deeply integrated with direct supports for substance use management and recovery where needed. As part of the Yukon Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy, the Department of Justice will expand program availability to more communities and underserved populations, and augment capacity for treatment-oriented and restorative justice-related service delivery models.

### **Policing in the Yukon**

The RCMP provides contracted policing services in the Yukon under the Territorial Police Service Agreement and is responsible for investigations and enforcement of criminal law in the Yukon. The RCMP leads all criminal investigations into organized crime, drug trafficking and other violations of the *Criminal Code of Canada* and other federal legislation such as the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act*.

The Crime Reduction Unit of the Yukon RCMP "M" Division was created in 2020 and is mandated to investigate drug trafficking, illegal firearms and organized crime. The Government of Yukon has provided some additional temporary positions to increase the capacity of the Crime Reduction Unit to advance its mandate.

In 2022, there were a minimum of five organized crime networks operating in the Yukon. The Yukon RCMP are members of the Criminal Intelligence Service of British Columbia and Yukon and partner regionally and nationally to gather and share intelligence to support an evidence-based approach to organized crime detection, prevention, investigation and disruption.

## **6. Support effective and accountable enforcement and policing that is responsive to community needs while taking into account the Yukon's modern treaty environment**

A holistic and comprehensive response to community safety in the context of the Substance Use Health Emergency requires policing and law enforcement that is effective, adequately resourced, and culturally-informed law enforcement and policing. The Department of Justice will engage with First Nations governments, Yukon communities, the RCMP, and other stakeholders to discuss community safety, enforcement and policing, and administration of justice. The Government of Yukon will seek to better understand the unique needs, challenges, desired outcomes, and visions for the future of Yukon communities.

The Government of Canada, in partnership with the Government of Yukon, provides funding for Community Tripartite Agreements (CTAs) through the First Nation and Inuit Policing Program. These CTAs support RCMP officers that work in most Yukon communities. The program is intended to promote responsible, accountable policing and foster partnerships with First Nations communities based on trust, mutual respect, and participation in decision-making. The Government of Yukon is working with First Nations governments so that the communities that want CTAs have them, and to work with communities that have CTAs in place to ensure that relationships are strengthened between the RCMP and the communities. The RCMP also works to forge stronger relationships with Yukon communities outside of the CTA processes. The Government of Yukon will explore opportunities to ensure sufficient resourcing for community policing and support the RCMP's Crime Reduction Unit in their efforts to respond to drug trafficking in the Yukon and to support effective, professional, and adequately resourced policing in the Yukon.

The Government of Yukon and the RCMP will continue to work together to determine a strategic approach for enhancing and expanding the current community policing initiatives that will provide further opportunities for positive and proactive public interaction with police officers, cultivate community partnerships, and support crime prevention.

The RCMP will continue to work towards reducing the toxic illicit drug supply in the Yukon, and increase their participation in harm reduction programs with a goal to reduce the harm to vulnerable individuals. End-users of illicit substances will not be targeted for their addictions, and referrals to available supportive programs and services will be provided.

## 7. Expand the capacity of the Mobile Crisis Response Team (Car 867)

The Whitehorse Mobile Crisis Response Team, also known as "Car 867," is a collaborative initiative between the Whitehorse RCMP and Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services. This partnership pairs trained RCMP members with clinical nurses with the goal of providing real-time assessments and referrals to additional services that are not readily available to the RCMP.

Operating as a pilot project in Whitehorse, the team offers a range of services, including mental health and suicide assessments. If necessary, they can directly connect individuals with a physician and fast-track access to services, especially in cases requiring hospital visits. The service diversifies the response options available for the RCMP, enabling them to offer trauma-informed and client-centred support for mental health-related calls received by emergency services in Whitehorse. Upon responding to a call, the team carries out a risk assessment through the officer on the scene to ensure the safety of the environment before involving the clinician who assists the individual(s). This comprehensive approach aims to improve the overall safety and wellbeing of those in need. The program is also designed to divert vulnerable individuals from involvement with the court and corrections systems, where appropriate, and instead connect them with important health services.

The Government of Yukon will continue to collaborate with the RCMP to provide sustained support to increase the team's capacity, evaluate the two-year pilot project based in Whitehorse, and explore opportunities to sustainably fund the expansion of the approach, if proven successful.

## 8. Increase the Government of Yukon's capacity to investigate and for civil remedies to disrupt the distribution of toxic illicit drugs and organized crime in Yukon communities

### Safer Communities and Neighbourhoods (SCAN) Unit

The Safer Communities and Neighbourhoods (SCAN) Unit is a complaint-driven, territorial law enforcement agency that supports community safety by investigating and responding to illegal activity occurring habitually at or originating from a property. Yukon citizens who are concerned about specific illicit activities undermining community safety can confidentially report a complaint to the SCAN Unit. The Unit operates across the Yukon and can investigate six specified uses under the *Safer Communities and Neighbourhoods Act*, including drug trafficking and organized crime.

The SCAN Unit has signed protocols with 10 First Nations governments regarding the implementation of the SCAN legislation in their communities. These protocols support First Nations community safety through the SCAN Act and to support the SCAN Unit in working with the First Nations to pursue resolution to complaints through community conferences, peace-making circles, or other restorative justice practices. The agreements underline the importance of collaborative work to safeguard the public safety of First Nations' most vulnerable citizens, including those grappling with substance use challenges.

The SCAN Unit conducts civil investigations under specific legislation intended to reduce the harm to Yukon communities from habitual occurrences of illegal activities at specific properties. This is different from the RCMP's criminal investigations. However, the SCAN Unit will continue to share information with the RCMP as appropriate to support the RCMP's criminal investigations into organized crime in the territory.

The *Safer Communities and Neighbourhoods Act* is currently under review. This review will take into account the evolving nature of organized crime and drug trafficking in the Yukon. The SCAN legislation enables the SCAN Unit to investigate the possession and use of drugs. However, consistent with the policy approaches described in this strategy, the SCAN Unit by policy does not pursue investigations related solely to possession and use. The SCAN Unit focuses primarily on investigating property-specific complaints relating to negative impacts on community safety from the operation of organized crime, particularly trafficking of toxic illicit drugs.

The Government of Yukon plans to increase the SCAN Unit's capacity, enabling a better response to the evolving landscape of organized crime and supporting collaboration with First Nations governments to address community safety concerns within the SCAN legislation's scope.

## 9. Gather evidence and consider options for the enforcement of criminal law in the Yukon to allocate limited territorial policing resources to most effectively address violence in communities, the poisoning of illicit drugs sold to vulnerable people, and organized crime

The stigma associated with criminalized behaviour presents a significant barrier to accessing care that can sometimes be lifesaving. The fact that drug possession and use is currently criminalized can also deter individuals from calling for emergency medical services or seeking police assistance for fear of becoming involved with the criminal justice system as a result of possessing or using drugs themselves.

The Department of Justice will work collaboratively with the Department of Health and Social Services to monitor the effectiveness of decriminalization currently being implemented in British Columbia and gather other evidence that becomes available over the next several years from other jurisdictions grappling with drug toxicity and organized crime, each employing diverse policy solutions.

- Acknowledging that drug use occurs now and will occur in the future, find ways to reduce the proportion of drugs consumed by Yukoners that are toxic or poisoned with substances that users may not even know they are consuming, and which have a significantly increased risk of harming or killing users than drugs from a safe supply.
- Prioritize the allocation of limited policing resources to address community safety issues that would offer the most benefit for communities and individuals.

It is essential to ensure this policy work is driven by high-quality evidence, considering the potential unintended consequences and necessary supporting policy changes and investments required to safely pursue any policy adjustments.

Evidence is being collected and lessons are being learned from the current decriminalization policy in British Columbia, as well as from other jurisdictions grappling with drug toxicity and organized crime, each employing different policy solutions.

Decriminalizing possession of certain amounts of some drugs is being done in some other jurisdictions and would remove the risk of criminal penalties for individuals using drugs, but would still require those individuals to obtain drugs from criminal trafficking networks. Legalization of drugs is a different approach from decriminalization that would establish a framework for the legal sale of some drugs through a regulated and closely monitored supply chain as is now done with alcohol and cannabis. Different approaches will require different levels of support from the Government of Canada, which is responsible for the *Criminal Code of Canada* and the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* and how those federal laws may be applied in the Yukon.



The Government of Yukon will not approach this work with preconceived notions of the correct policy approach to take, but will gather evidence and evaluate the available options. Recognizing the significant risks of getting such decisions wrong, the Government of Yukon will gather evidence and open conversations with the many interested and affected parties starting from a place of curiosity and being open to learning from new evidence and understanding Yukoners' perspectives. The status quo is not working, and we should not be afraid to work together to build creative solutions that are designed by and for the Yukon.

## **10. Invest in supporting Yukon youth, families and communities**

The Government of Yukon will continue to invest in community programs aimed at preventing and deterring youth from becoming involved in criminal activities and at reducing reliance on organized criminal networks as sources of support for vulnerable people. The Department of Justice will explore options to develop a program to support individuals wishing to extract themselves from involvement with organized crime in the Yukon.

Existing initiatives include funding programs through the Boys and Girls Club Yukon, such as their youth drop-in program, the backpack program (which addresses food security and crime prevention), and the newly developing satellite program in Haines Junction, supported by the Champagne Aishihik First Nations and the municipality. The Government of Yukon will look for new opportunities to strengthen the support provided to youth and families. This includes increasing the availability of preventative, upstream programs and services for youth at risk of substance use, those less engaged with family and community, or those with lower levels of adult supervision.

## Implementation and reporting

This document outlines a comprehensive strategy to address the multiple challenges posed by the ongoing Substance Use Health Emergency, driven by a vision of Yukoners maintaining mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical wellbeing and safety throughout their lives, contributing to wellness in their families, cultures, and communities.

With ongoing data collection and monitoring, we will report annually on the progress of the recommended actions. This report will be transparent and will inform future iterations of this living document.

Achieving the vision and goals set forth in this strategy requires the commitment of many individuals across the health, social, and justice sectors. It requires collaboration with NGOs, governments, communities, people who use substances, and their support networks. This strategy embodies a shared vision for the future, and its success hinges on our ability to work together. The implementation of these actions will depend on skilled leadership, strong partnerships, and active participation.

A critical element for the implementation of this strategy is the creation of a Yukon Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy coordinator role. This individual will collaborate with various partners, including those with lived and living experience, to ensure actions are taken and relevant data is gathered to align with the commitments made in this document for accountability and evaluation. The coordinator will also oversee the production of the reports.

To advance this strategy, we must collectively:

- Bridge the gap among the various stakeholders involved
- Create an interagency stakeholder group for project implementation
- Prioritize those actions expected to yield the greatest impact
- Establish tracking indicators to gauge the strategy's impact
- Propose necessary strategy revisions
- Provide an annual progress report

As we proceed with the implementation, we will continually engage with stakeholders and individuals with lived and living experience and adjust the strategy as necessary.

We will also engage with other government levels and First Nations governments to discuss our progress.

Finally, we will publicly release an annual report on the Yukon Substance Use Strategy's progress.

## **Next steps**

The strategy offers a clear path forward, fostering hope and participation to ensure that all Yukoners have access to the support they need. This strategy also reflects our commitment to the health and wellbeing of Yukon youth, promoting healthy life skills and coping mechanisms from a young age.

The implementation of the Yukon Substance Use Health Emergency Strategy will demand a collective effort involving citizens, First Nations partners, partner organizations, government departments, and service providers on a continual basis. As we proceed with implementation, we will remain responsive to emerging service delivery needs and shifts in knowledge and practice. We pledge to address this public health emergency through innovative, culturally informed, and evidence-based approaches.

We look forward to advancing this strategy in collaboration with Yukoners and our partners.

## Endnotes

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- 11 [https://yukon.ca/sites/yukon.ca/files/hss/hss-yukon-health-status-report-2021\\_0.pdf](https://yukon.ca/sites/yukon.ca/files/hss/hss-yukon-health-status-report-2021_0.pdf)
- 12 <https://yukon.ca/sites/yukon.ca/files/hss/hss-putting-people-first-final-report-comprehensive-review-yukons-health-social-programs-services.pdf>
- 13 Spiritual health refers to finding and creating meaning and connection. Including spiritual health as a component of health does not mean to imply that the many secular people in the Yukon are not or cannot be healthy. There are many ways to find meaning and live a life worth living and to live by principles that allow us all to treat each other with compassion.
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