



Summary of Interviews with People Who Use Substances

November 2021

Cowichan Tribes’ Opioid Crisis Response Working Group has been tasked with engaging community members to inform the development of recommendations to address the crisis of addiction and drug poisonings. To support this, **Cowichan Tribes’ frontline outreach and harm reduction staff interviewed 30 community members who use substances**, all of whom struggle with addiction and most of whom are street-entrenched or face housing insecurity.

Participants interviewed are among the most vulnerable members of our community, and among the most in need of support to heal from addiction. This summary report presents the findings of this community-based research.

This community engagement was collaboratively planned and carried out with a trauma-informed, culturally safe approach. The project team includes frontline harm reduction and outreach workers, and a Registered Clinical Counselor with strong experience treating trauma and addiction. Undertaking these 30 interviews in a safe and effective way was possible thanks to the strong relationships and trust between Cowichan Tribes’ staff and at-risk community members.

In each section, the needs and findings identified are generally listed in descending order of the frequency with which they were mentioned by participants.

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What Do At-Risk People Struggling With Addiction Need To Get Well?

1. Housing. Access to safe housing was the need mentioned the most by participants. The lack of access to safe, stable, affordable housing is a main barrier to healing and recovery from addiction. The types of housing needed include:

- **Increased affordable housing options in the community**, including subsidized housing for people with low incomes, and more housing for single people.
- **Low-barrier temporary housing (i.e. pod housing) and shelter.**
- **Emergency housing and shelter, including sober site options.**
- **Long-term supportive housing**, with a sober, structured environment.
- **A safe place to gather** for street-entrenched individuals that is free from harassment.

A number of potential improvements to current pod housing were identified including: more food and snacks; an indoor gathering/community area; better showers; and secure storage to prevent theft.

“Living here has been helpful. Got me off the streets. Helped me slow down.”

“It is somewhere warm to sleep.”

“More sober and clean since living here.”

- *Pod housing residents*

2. Detox, Treatment & Recovery Services and Supports. Access to detox, treatment, and recovery services and support was the second most mentioned need. Supports needed include:

- **Treatment programs**, including programs offered in the community, twelve step programs, and classes and courses.
- **Detox & treatment centres.**
- **Rapid access to detox and treatment**, instead of long waitlists which are a major barrier.
- **Support navigating access to services.**
- **Supportive, respectful, non-judgemental services.**

3. Support & Connection from Family, Friends, Community. Family support and connection was the third most-mentioned need. Participants also mentioned the need for support and connection from friends and community. Several participants mentioned the impact of the crisis on families, including trauma from having kids taken away and from being ostracized and cut off from their families. A number of the interview participants and residents in pod housing have children.



4. Activities & Programs. Participants stated there is a need to enhance access to activities and programming, including:

- **Cultural, creative, educational, and physical activities.**
- **Life skills programs**, including planning, organization, and employment skills.

5. Mental Health & Counselling Supports. Participants stated there is a need to **improve access to mental health and counselling supports**, including prevention supports for youth.

6. Accessible Safe Supply of Substances & Medication. Participants stated there is a need to improve access to safe supply of substances and medication. A participant noted that having to make daily trips to access medication is a barrier.

7. Other Needs and Findings. Other needs and findings identified by participants include:

- **Enhanced frontline supports.** More outreach workers, frontline supports, and night-time (24hr) outreach support.
- **Youth supports**, including prevention and mental health supports.
- **Improved food and water security.**
- **Help navigating and accessing services.**
- **Ending stigma, judgement, and discrimination.**

Several participants stated that they have a **strong desire to heal and get well**, and stressed the importance of staying hopeful, positive, and supportive.

**“We need more opportunities like counselling.
Help understand why people struggle with addictions.”**
- Community member struggling with addiction

What Services Are Most Helpful?

Participants identified the following services and supports which are most helpful to them, as well as several barriers and gaps. Many participants spoke highly of the staff delivering services and supports.

1. Overdose Prevention Site (OPS). The OPS was the service mentioned the most, with half of participants saying they visit. Several noted that they feel safe at the OPS, and a few noted they access primary healthcare there.

2. Outreach & Harm Reduction. Outreach and harm reduction services were the second most-mentioned service. Several noted that harm reduction and outreach staff are helpful and supportive. **Naloxone distribution** was noted by two participants; and Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) from Island health was also mentioned.



3. Friendship House. Several participants mentioned Friendship House, including the breakfast and lunch programs.

4. Other Services & Supports. Other helpful services and supports were mentioned by participants, including: services available at the Mound; accessible primary health care, including the doctor and nurses who visit the pod housing site; safe supply & medication; Substance Use Integrated Team (SUIT) (Island Health); WAVA; Warmland House Shelter; food bank.

5. Barriers & Gaps and Opportunities for Improvement. Participants identified the following barriers and issues with current services:

- **Overdose Prevention Site.**
 - **Primary Health Care.** Two participants noted that it is difficult to get an appointment with the doctor at the OPS due to long wait lists.
 - **Limited Hours.** A participant noted that the OPS's hours should be expanded.
 - **Stigma & Shame.** A participant worried that his family members would see them going into the OPS, and felt ashamed to be struggling with addiction.
- **Warmland House Shelter.** Two participants stated that the shelter is not welcoming and not accessible for people who use substances. Two others stated they don't use the shelter, one because they don't go to that part of town.
- **Counselling Services.** A participant stated there is a need for accessible, safe counselling services that offer members a long-term relationship with a dedicated counsellor they feel comfortable with, rather than on-call counselors who they don't know well.

What Are the Impacts of Low-Barrier Pod Housing?

Participants stated that access to low-barrier pod housing and the related supports has been very beneficial and has helped them in several ways. A few gaps and barriers were also identified.

- 1. Improved Access to Safe, Stable, Accessible Housing.** Many participants stated that access to pod housing has given them a safe, stable, warm place to stay, and got them off the streets.
- 2. Improved Safety & Security.** Many participants including women said they feel far safer living in pod housing than camping outdoors or being in and out of shelters. A female participant noted that before living in pod housing she would be followed to places where she slept. Additionally, secure storage has reduced theft of important personal possessions including identity documents.

"Feel safer in my own room"
- Pod housing resident



- 3. Improved Food & Water Security.** Several participants noted that living in pod housing has significantly improved their access to food and water. A participant noted that access to nutritious meals everyday has helped them reduce their substance use.
- 4. Improved Mental, Emotional, and Physical Health.** Access to pod housing has improved the physical, mental, and emotional health of many participants. Participants stated they are feeling healthier, more hopeful and positive, and more stable and secure.
- 5. Improved Sense of Connection, Belonging, and Enfranchisement.** Many participants also noted that living in pod housing has given them a sense of connection to others, belonging, and enfranchisement, which have improved their mental and emotional health, and made them feel more positive and hopeful.
- 6. Improved Ability to Get Well & Decreased Substance Use.** Participants noted that having access to safe, stable pod housing and related support services has improved their access to a variety of health and support services, improved their attitude and outlook toward getting well, and helped them stabilize and begin to heal. Three participants specifically noted that they are using substances less now that they have safe, stable housing.
- 7. Barriers and Gaps.** Participants noted a few barriers and gaps with current pod housing, including:
 - **Ongoing lack of low-barrier housing.** Current supply of low-barrier pod housing and shelter space is not adequate, forcing many to sleep outside in unsafe conditions.
 - **Peer support workers.** A participant noted that peer support workers are needed.
 - **Improved water and shower access.**
 - Laundry.
 - **Increased substance use.** One participant noted that they are using substances more frequently since living in pod housing. Another stated they started using substances after moving into pod housing.
 - **Stigma.** A participant said they feel a sense of stigma and judgement living in low-barrier pod housing.

“It is easier being here to envision going forward.”

“Getting two meals – means I use less.”

“I stay warm and dry. No worries about rain.”

- Pod housing residents



How Should Cowichan Tribes Operate Detox & Treatment Centres?

Participants were asked how Cowichan Tribes should operate its own detox and treatment centres to meet the needs of people struggling with addiction, and some highlights are noted below. Several participants also reiterated their support for Cowichan Tribes-run detox and treatment centres.

- 1. Non-Judgemental, Humble, Kind, Caring, Supportive, and Confidential.** Participants stated that detox and treatment services must be delivered in a non-judgemental way based on humility, kindness, respect, trust, and confidentiality. All managers and staff should be caring and supportive.
- 2. Peer workers.** Several participants stated that detox and treatment services should include peer workers, in other words people with lived-experience of struggling with addiction.
- 3. Enable Connection & Prevent Isolation.** Several Participants stated that detox and treatment programs should enable connections with family and friends, allow visitors, and not isolate or lock people down.
- 4. Rapid Access & No Waitlist.** Services should be easily accessible immediately when they are needed, with no waitlist.
- 5. Long-Term Healing & Wrap-Around Supports.** Cowichan Tribes approach to treatment should support long-term healing and recovery, and provide long-term wrap-around supports **including housing.**
- 6. Reunite Families.** Reuniting families, including children who have been taken away, is integral to the healing process. Disconnection from family, particularly children being taken away, is a major source of trauma which fuels addiction.
- 7. Other Findings.** Participants noted several other considerations for how Cowichan Tribes should operate its own detox and treatment centres, including:
 - **Culture.** Ensure treatment is grounded in culture.
 - **Service options.** Provide a range of service options to meet different needs.
 - **Holistic.** Use a holistic, well-rounded approach to treatment.
 - **Root causes.** Address root causes of addiction including trauma, disconnection, and mental health disorders.
 - **Local.** Ensure detox and treatment services are local.
 - **Transportation.** Provide transportation to access services.



Additional Comments

At the end of their interviews, participants shared a number of additional comments, often reiterating what they feel is most needed to address the crisis of addiction and drug poisonings.

1. **Housing.** Two participants reiterated the vital importance of housing in addressing the crisis.
2. **Safe Supply & Medication.** Three participants emphasized the importance of access to safe supply of substances and medication.
3. **Increase Supports.** Several participants reiterated that supports must be enhanced, including:
 - **Youth supports**
 - **Accessible counselling**
 - **Peer workers**
4. **Improvements to Pod Housing.** Participants noted a number of potential improvements to current pod housing including improved security, better showers, a phone, and transportation supports for residents.
5. **Desire To Heal & Get Well.** Two participants also noted their desire to heal and get well.

“Just be really supportive; that is really what is needed.”

- *Community member struggling with addiction*

