

# **Compassionate Municipal Actions Amidst Community Crisis**

# ***Walk With Me: Compassionate Municipal Actions Amid Community Crisis***



Photo: Nadine Bariteau

**Sharon Karsten** – *Walk With Me*, Vancouver Island University

**Christopher Hauschildt** - *Walk With Me*, Royal Roads University

**Trevor Wideman** - *Walk With Me*, Vancouver Island University

**Susie Saunders** – Director of Recreation, Culture and Community Services, City of Courtenay

# BC cities are grappling with overlapping health and social crises

**Toxic drug poisoning crisis:** ~17,000 deaths since public health emergency was declared in 2016 (BC Coroner's Service, 2025).

**Housing crisis:** Housing increasingly unaffordable and inaccessible for many, rise in homelessness and encampments (Whitzman, 2024).

**Smaller cities are not immune to these crises!** (Bardwell & Lappalainen, 2021; Dej et.al, 2025)

**Crises have been incredibly divisive.** Rather than being brought together to find solutions, communities are being pitted against each other.






# How cities address these crises, matters

- Municipalities are limited in the actions they can take in relation to crisis.
- Some cities have chosen pathways that have negative consequences on those most affected.
- There is not enough connection between those making policy, and those most impacted





**Co-creation:** “Engaging diverse [actors], including marginalized populations, in collaborative problem-solving to enhance engagement and develop contextually appropriate solutions.”

(Agnello et.al., 2025)

# There is a strong need for holistic, *co-created* solutions to community crises

- In addressing the crises facing our communities, we need more than just citizen consultation, or even collaboration between key actors.
- We need intentional processes of **co-creation** that break down siloes through collective visioning.
- This is what our project, ***Walk With Me*** does.

# About Walk With Me





# WALK WITH ME

uncovering the human dimensions of the overuse crisis  
30 September - 1 November 2020 / Wednesdays + Saturdays

events + sharing  
story walks / 1

CVAG CVAG





Photo: Kyle Little





Photo: Nadine Bariteau



## Comox Valley Art Gallery exercise tackles toxic drug crisis

Scott Stanfield  
Dec 1, 2021 5:00 PM



*Some of the Nov. 28 Walk With Me participants, from left: Courtenay Mayor Bob Wells, Comox Coun. Ken Grant, Comox Mayor Russ Arnott, Cumberland Mayor Leslie Baird, Cumberland Coun. Jesse Ketler and Walk With Me team member Sam Franey. Scott Stanfield photo*

A number of Comox Valley politicians took part in a exercise that illustrates the devastating effects of the toxic drug poisoning crisis, Sunday, Nov. 28 at the Comox Valley Art Gallery. Dubbed Walk With Me, the politicians and other participants listened to stories from individuals

## Minister of mental health and addictions among participants at Walk With Me event



[Terry Farrell](#)  
Nov 26, 2022 3:30 PM



1 / 3 Mental Health and Addictions Minister Sheila Malcolmson was among the nearly three dozen participants at Saturday's (Nov. 26) Walk With Me event in Courtenay. Photo by Terry Farrell

Mental Health and Addictions Minister Sheila Malcolmson, as well as Comox Valley-Strathcona-North Island Medical Health Officer Dr. Charmaine Enns, were among the 30 participants at Saturday's (Nov. 26) Walk With Me event in Courtenay.

The Walk With Me project involves a 45-minute group walk while listening to audio stories



## Duncan Walk with Me gives voice to vulnerable populations

[Chadd Cawson](#)

Jun 20, 2024 5:45 AM



3 / 6 The 'Walk with Me' event that was held in Duncan on June 11, gave community members who took part, the opportunity to walk the streets where many of our most vulnerable population resides while listening to first-hand stories of those with lived experience, leaving all in attendance a lot to reflect on. | Chadd Cawson/Citizen

[Listen to this article](#)

00:06:53

Sometimes the best, and only way to walk in another person's shoes is to just listen to their story — we all have one.

The Walk with Me community action project was first formed in 2019 in response to the toxic

## How a Comox Valley Project Is Confronting the Toxic Drug Crisis

By centering community expertise, 'Walk with Me' is offering solutions from the ground up.



**Dustin Godfrey** / 10 May 2023 TheTyee.ca

Dustin Godfrey is a freelance journalist based in New Westminster. They are interested in justice and its many intersections.



Christopher Hauschildt, left, leads a group through False Creek as part of the Walk with Me project, an initiative based in the Comox Valley that aims to share the realities of the toxic drug crisis through the voices of those with lived experience. Photo by Dustin Godfrey for The Tyee.

















# SAFE

Holding space for lived experiences and safer ways of being amidst the Toxic Drug Poisoning Crisis.

ART OPENING + ARTIST TALKS: Saturday, October 5, 2024 | 1:00pm – 3:00pm

FACILITATED COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS: Thursdays, October 10 + 17, 2024 | 1:00pm – 3:00pm

EXHIBITION + COMMUNITY DROP-IN STATIONS: Wednesdays – Saturdays, October 9 – 19, 2024 | 10:00am – 5:00pm



CVAG

COMOX VALLEY ART GALLERY

580 DUNCAN AVE COURTENAY  
COMOXVALLEYARTGALLERY.COM





CONNECT  
EDUCATE  
GROW  
RESPOND

COMMUNITY SUBSTANCE USE STRATEGY

# PHASE TWO REPORT

PREPARED BY:  
COMOX VALLEY COMMUNITY SUBSTANCE USE STRATEGY COMMITTEE



## WALKING TOGETHER

TOWARDS A STRONGER, MORE  
INTEGRATED SUBSTANCE USE SUPPORT  
NETWORK IN THE COMOX VALLEY

Gaps and Strengths Analysis

MARCH 2023





City of  
Courtenay

# Community Amid Crisis

Presented by:  
Susie Saunders, Director of Recreation, Culture  
and Community Services  
September 23, 2025, UBCM







## Comox Valley Homelessness Doubled

- Increased from 132 in 2020 to 272 in 2023
- Higher than Burnaby, New Westminster, and Richmond
- Approximately the 10th highest in the province

**Since the toxic drug crisis was declared,  
220 community members have died**

- The annual average deaths more than doubled after COVID

**Homelessness is the number one issue for residents.**



# Community Responses





# City Staff Engagement

---

To address staff safety concerns and reduce stigma, we collaborated with **Walk with Me:**

- Hosted walks for employees
- Tailored circle dialogues to gather insights from staff
- Created safe spaces for difficult discussions with the goal of reducing division





# City Circles

## Barriers & Gaps

- Improve policy and procedures
- Increase staff capacity
- Better equip staff with tools and training
- Address public stigma

## Supports

- Establish outreach positions
- Cultivate harm reduction partnerships
- Foster learning opportunities
- Strengthen staff mental health support

# Next Steps

## Walk with Me

- Host Story Walks and Circles for staff
- Confirm and adjust key insights
- Bring staff together to co-create next steps

## Community Engagement

- Incorporating circle dialogues in shelter planning
- Applying concepts to shelters with a community integration lens
- Culture Connects Us: Strategic Cultural Plan emphasizes the role arts and culture plays in belonging & inclusion, addressing complex social issues and supporting community healing.





A new way of walking  
together.

---

**What do compassionate conversations look like in  
your community?**



# References

- Agnello, D. M., Anand-Kumar, V., An, Q., De Boer, J., Delfmann, L. R., Longworth, G. R., Loisel, Q., McCaffrey, L., Steiner, A., & Chastin, S. (2025). Co-creation methods for public health research – characteristics, benefits, and challenges: A Health CASCADE scoping review. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 25(1), 60. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-025-02514-4>
- Ali, F., Law, J., Russell, C., Crépault, J.-F., Goulão, J. C.-B., Lock, K., & Rehm, J. (2024). Navigating the nexus between British Columbia's public consumption and decriminalization policies of illegal drugs. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 22(1), 60. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12961-024-01150-6>
- Bardwell, G., & Lappalainen, L. (2021). The need to prioritize research, policy, and practice to address the overdose epidemic in smaller settings in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 112(4), 733–736. <https://doi.org/10.17269/s41997-021-00504-9>
- British Columbia Coroners Service. (2025). Unregulated Drug Deaths in B.C.: Dashboard. <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoizThmOTkxMzgtZWUzNS00ODk1LWJiZjltYzMyMTFjNmY0MzJiliwidCI6IjZmZGI1MjAwLTNkMGQtNGE4YS1iMDM2LWQzNig1ZTM1OWFkYyJ9>
- Cawson, C. (2024, June 20). Duncan Walk with Me gives voice to vulnerable populations. *Cowichan Valley Citizen*. <https://www.cowichanvalleycitizen.com/community/duncan-walk-with-me-gives-voice-to-vulnerable-populations-7383542>
- Chavez, M., Evans, T., Shapton, C., Flynn, A., Sylvestre, M.-E., & Blomley, N. (2024). Life in the 'Hum': Belongings and Everyday Dispossession. *International Journal on Homelessness*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.5206/ijoh.2023.3.16988>
- Dej, E., Braimoh, J., & Sanders, C. B. (2025). “They’re Not From Here”: Homelessness as a Contestation of Community Identity for Mid-Size Cities. *International Journal on Homelessness*, 5(1), 132–151. <https://doi.org/10.5206/ijoh.2023.3.17065>
- Farrell, T. (2022, November 26). Minister of mental health and addictions among participants at Walk With Me event. *Westerly News*. <https://www.westerlynews.ca/news/minister-of-mental-health-and-addictions-among-participants-at-walk-with-me-event-1355454>
- Godfrey, D. (2023, October 5). How a Comox Valley Project Is Confronting the Toxic Drug Crisis. *The Tyee*. <https://thetyee.ca/News/2023/05/10/Walk-With-Me-Lifts-People-Up/>
- Stanfield, S. (2021, January 11). Comox Valley Art Gallery exercise tackles toxic drug crisis. *Comox Valley Record*. <https://www.comoxvalleyrecord.com/news/comox-valley-art-gallery-exercise-tackles-toxic-drug-crisis-1625936>
- Taylor, Z. T., & Dobson, A. (2020). Power and purpose: Canadian municipal law in transition. Institute on Municipal Finance & Governance.
- Valverde, M. (2021). Games of Jurisdiction: How Local Governance Realities Challenge the “Creatures of the Province” Doctrine. *Journal of Law and Social Policy*, 34, 21–38.
- Whitzman, C. (2024). Home Truths: Fixing Canada’s Housing Crisis. On Point Press.