community action initiative

Key Messages

For use by the Mental Health and Substance Use Sector when working with Local Governments

These key messages were developed by and in consultation with CAI's Sector Advisory Table. They were also reviewed by people with lived and living experience of substance use and mental illness, and by representatives of the BC Association of Recovery and Addictions Providers.

These messages are not intended to be stated verbatim; rather, they should be used as starting points that can be reworded based on your target audience, your experience, and your community.

The most powerful way to communicate these ideas is through storytelling: a story of lived experience, a story of something you have witnessed in your community, or a story that represents the humanity behind the issue.

These stories should invite understanding and help the person the person you're speaking with see and feel what you felt. Their purpose is not to convince them that they are wrong.

You may feel inclined to reference data and evidence. As you do this, keep your audience in mind, and consider what drivers are most important to them and what they believe is within their jurisdiction (for some insight into how some local government view their jurisdiction, see: B.C. cities say they're on the hook for millions for housing, social issues due to senior gov't 'downloading' | CBC News).

Key message 1: Community Safety

Core message

"When people have access to housing, health care, and connection, we all save in lives and in dollars. The safest communities are those that invest in people, not only enforcement."

- Reframe public safety as a collective wellbeing outcome, not just a policing outcome.
- Consider how to position solutions that respond directly to the mandate of local governments (*"Public safety is one of the critical responsibilities of local government."* —Wayne Price, Mayor, Cranbrook. In speaking about why he is allowing drones to support encampment responses.)

How to use story

- Use short, concrete examples that show impact. For example, "After funding the local recovery housing program, police calls in that area dropped by 40%" "After expanding food services to Saturday and Sunday, weekend shoplifting crime dropped by 80%."
- Pair stories with data to show that safety improves when social conditions improve or social supports expand.
- Acknowledge public concern first. For example, "We know communities are worried about security." Then connect it back to community-based solutions that work.
- Use the language of shared values, such as "as parents," "as neighbours," or "as community members."

Key message 2: Collective Action

Core message

"What feel like separate problems are connected symptoms of the same crisis, and none of us can solve them alone. When we coordinate our efforts and act together—governments, health authorities, non-profits, businesses, and neighbours—we build safer, more dignified communities where everyone belongs."

- Focus on local examples that bring non-profits and governments together to address the problems. Avoid examples that place blame on any one group.
- Collective action gives people a sense of belonging and direction and shows that we are not working in isolation. It reminds us that while the challenges are complex, the values that unite us are simple: care, contribution, and connection.

How to use story

- Use examples of programs where coordinated actions between levels of government, non-profits, health authorities, and other community groups produced measurable results.
- Acknowledge government efforts while reinforcing that policy works best when it supports collaboration.
- Pair human stories with data that shows reduced hospitalizations, fewer overdoses, or improved stability.
- Frame investment as a way of unlocking the capacity already present in communities.

Key message 3: Continuum of Care

Core message

"A strong continuum of care saves lives and resources. Community services provide early intervention before things escalate and support people after they leave care. This reduces pressure on hospitals and helps people maintain recovery over time. These are the investments that allow the system to work."

- Show that investment in community-based care—often provided by non-profit organizations—strengthens the entire system and reduces downstream costs.
- Position non-profit services as the missing entry and exit points for a health care system that is primarily funded for acute care.

How to use story

- Use examples of coordinated preventative care or aftercare that reduced hospital admissions or repeat crises.
- Pair success stories with measurable results, such as sustained housing, aftercare that prevented relapse, youth or recreation programming that created greater community connection, and any/all interventions that reduced emergency service calls.
- Acknowledge progress while emphasizing that stability depends on consistent funding for community programs.
- Frame investment as both compassionate and cost-effective.

Key message 4: Social Determinants of Health (Root Causes)

Core message

"When people have stable housing, good jobs, and supportive communities, everyone benefits. Health improves, costs go down, and neighbourhoods become more connected. Finding solutions to the problems in front of us requires us to take a step back and look more holistically at the root causes. Often called social determinants of health, these root causes require long-term thinking."

- Frame investment in social determinants as both compassionate and strategic.
- When people have the social foundations they need to live with dignity, individual health improves and systems stabilize too.
- Stability and community resilience allows local governments to plan with greater predictability.

How to use story

- Use examples of projects that reduced social inequity by addressing accessibility.
- Tell the stories of programs that address generational needs so that all ages can live cohesively in a community, such as day care services and seniors supports.
- Inspire government officials by helping them contribute to building a system of care that aligns with their values and their desire for the future health and wellbeing of their children and families.
- Highlight examples that show shared benefits such as families reuniting, local businesses being strengthened, or parks getting revitalized.