

community action initiative

Annual Report

2025–2026

caibc.ca

The CAI office is located on the unceded and traditional territories of the Coast Salish peoples—xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and sel̓íl̓witulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. Our work, meanwhile, extends across the ceded, unceded, and sovereign territories of Nations across what is referred to as British Columbia.

Cover photo (left to right): Elder Sandra Martin Harris (Witsuwit'en First Nation), CAI Board member and Elder Mahara Allbrett (Tsleil-Waututh Nation) at the Youth Wellness Grant and Community Counselling Fund Grantee Convening 2025. Photo credit: Elicea Andrews Photography

Message from the Executive Director

Three years ago, when I joined Community Action Initiative (CAI), we worked to redefine our mission in action and clarify our values. What emerged from this work was a tagline that I carry with me as a call to action—*where communities lead, better health follows.*

As a foundational tenet of Community Action Initiative (CAI), my takeaway was to support my team to find new ways to listen and deeply engage. Many of them had already built structures within their grant streams to build robust relationships. These included site visits, check-ins, convenings and communities of practice. In these cases, it was a question of sustaining this good work. What we were sometimes missing, however, was how the different groups on the ground were connected and how people in the community were feeling.

The siloed nature of our work, as well as the divisions that exist between organizations that serve community, can sometimes limit our vantage point. The opportunity, therefore, was to look across grant programs and relationships in order to identify and integrate all the different touchpoints into a community. The point was not just to confirm what we knew, but also to figure out what we don't know or understand.

This is a never-ending process of asking questions and being curious about the many British Columbians who care deeply about mental health and substance use and to find out what communities think we should be doing about these intersecting crises.

What we continue to learn is:

- So many people in B.C. want those with lived experience to feel less shame and feel more supported
- The division between those with lived experience and ourselves is a false dichotomy—we are all living with deep connections to those who are struggling with substance use and mental health challenges
- We all want to feel safe in our communities
- Everything and everyone is connected and we need each other.

We also learned that:

- Safety and discomfort are not the same
- People have different priorities and that these become even more apparent when resources are limited
- We need leaders at all levels who lean away from fear and anger to make space for nuance, balance, and compromise—including me!

Patience has never been my strong point, but I am learning about the importance of slowing down to do things in a good way. Over the past year, our team worked diligently to create new structures for grant programs that included detailed project charters, logic models, and new contracts. We took the time to build integrated granting models that were clear about the kind of impact we are trying to support and, sometimes, this meant saying no to how things were done before. In most cases, so long as we took the time to explain our reasoning and the benefit to community and to the collective, grantees were

supportive. They modelled, over and over again, how they could manage discomfort and uncertainty and they showed up with integrity and care.

In the year ahead, we will continue to work through the details of our systems and structures to ensure they are accessible and responsive. We will continue to make time to listen to communities and ask about what we don't yet understand. We will make spaces for groups to come together and work through issues collectively and we will invite the experts in to show us a new way forward.

I'm really proud of our team's desire to understand and reflect. I'm also proud that they are willing to have difficult conversations when they need to, especially when choosing a new path is better for the community.

I want to thank the community mental health and substance use sector and the endless number of leaders who have shown up at our sector advisory trainings with humility and openness. It has been a real blessing for me to work alongside so many visionary and compassionate people.

Lastly, I want to thank the long list of Indigenous partners, board members, and friends who have given so much to me and our team over the past year. I know we have a long path ahead and that the road will be filled with mistakes and assumptions that cause harm. I have learned so much about how to move forward with love and grace from the Indigenous knowledge keepers in our work, and I am deeply thankful.

Julia Kaisla
Executive Director, CAI



Photo (left to right): Sandra Martin Harris, CAI Board member, Rae Alcock CAI Board Chair, and Julia Kaisla, CAI Executive Director

Message from the Board Chair

The Board of Directors and I have come together over the last year to enhance our policies and governance models to ensure that we find the right balance between support and accountability. We have grown our governance policies and launched a new committee of the board focused on People and Governance. This year, we also transitioned our Board Chair. Vanessa Wideski, winner of the YWCA Woman of Distinction award and non profit champion, stepped down as the board chair and I stepped into this role. Thankfully, Vanessa, Kam, Mike, Noallan, Ahmad, Jo and Sandra have all stayed with us through this change, and have created a solid structure to enable CAI's success. I would like to thank the team at CAI, and the amazing Humanity and Thrivity teams, that have allowed CAI to manage transitions in funding and a rapidly transforming political environment.

Rae Alcock
Board Chair, CAI

About Community Action Initiative (CAI)

CAI funds and supports up to 300 community organizations and local leaders to improve mental health and substance use responses across B.C. Through grants, capacity building, and networks, CAI supports community-driven responses that reflect local needs, strengths, and priorities.

We believe lasting change starts with listening to communities and fostering a more community-centred approach to Mental Health and Substance Use (MHSU) support.

At our core, we're connectors between grassroots organizations and government. Our role is to nurture community-led efforts, helping align their needs with broader provincial objectives while prioritizing unique local contexts.

Our approach is rooted in capacity building, trust-based granting, and creating strong relationships with the communities we engage. That's how we ensure that local wisdom and lived experiences actively shape MHSU programming and resource allocation.

Our funding areas are inclusive of activities across the mental health and substance use response continuum, and we aim to achieve a balanced representation across demographic groups and geographic areas in the province.

Transforming Local Wisdom into Provincial Health Action

We offer a range of projects and initiatives designed to support local communities in the area of mental health and substance use. Our projects aim to empower local governments, elected officials, and community partners with the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to develop effective responses to complex issues.



Photo: CAI Project Manager Arpan Pandher (left) at Abbotsford International Overdose Awareness Day 2026 event with members of Moms Stop the Harm

Our Projects

Community Action Teams (CATs)

Bring together health authorities, public health, non-profits, government, and peer groups to create local, action-focused strategies addressing community substance use needs.

In 2025–26, 38 CATs were funded across five Regional Health Authorities.

Community Counselling Grants (CCG)

Support community-based organizations to deliver free/low cost, culturally relevant clinical counselling for adults.

In 2025–26, 38 organizations were funded under the initiative.

Lived and Living Experience Employment Grant (LLEEG)

Provides B.C. community organizations with the opportunity to create meaningful employment for people with lived experience of mental illness and/or substance use.

17 organizations were selected to receive funding for 2026–28.

Youth Wellness Grant (YWG)

Supports community-based organizations across B.C. to create and implement bereavement programs, with a focus on restoring emotional health and wellness for youth and families affected by drug-related deaths.

12 organizations were funded for 2025–28.

Local Leaders Network (LLN)

Supports local governments with closed group educational opportunities and resources so that elected officials and staff can learn more about mental health and substance use issues.

Over 100 local elected officials and staff are in the network.



Photo: CAI Executive Director Julia Kaisla at Sunshine Coast International Overdose Awareness Day 2026 event with Minister of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship, Randene Neil (left) and Sunshine Coast CAT Coordinator Chris Hergesheimer (right)

Provincial Peer Network (PPN)

Improves local overdose response and connects people to harm reduction, treatment, and recovery.

19 PPN groups were funded from 2025–26.

Sector Advisory Table and Training

Builds the skill and capacity of non-profit leaders to engage with local governments in a more collaborative way.

CAI trained 77 non-profit leaders on municipal local government relations in 2025–26.

Walking the Healing Path: A B.C. Indigenous-Specific Approach to Addictions Aftercare

A culturally grounded online learning course that supports Indigenous-led aftercare approaches, community healing, and the integration of Indigenous worldviews and practices into recovery and wellness supports.

Projected to launch in Fall 2026.

Capacity Building for First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Urban Indigenous-led Bed-based Treatment & Recovery Operators

Supports Indigenous-led organizations in developing and/or implementing strategies to strengthen their capacity within their programs.

15 organizations received this grant in 2025–26.





Photos: CAI staff visiting community grantees

Staff and Board of Directors

Staff

- Julia Kaisla, Executive Director
- Patrick McDougall, Director of Engagement
- Courtney Aarif, Project Manager, Community Counselling Grants*
- Adejoke Adeyemi, Executive Assistant
- Mira Abou Farrage, Program Manager - Grants & Community Funding
- Anna Harcourt, Manager, Grants & Community Initiatives
- Peter Hoong, Project Manager - Community Action Teams
- Arpan Pandher, Project Manager*
- Donna Panitow, Communications Specialist
- Chantel Spade, Project Manager
- Zavi Swain, Project Manager, Strategic Grants
- Adrienne Yeung, Community Grants Manager - Community Counselling
- Sam Young, Project Manager, Indigenous Support Recovery

** Started with CAI in June 2026*

Board of Directors

- Vanessa Wideski, Board Chair through February 2026
- Rae Alcock, Board Chair from February 2026
- Noallan Naicker, Treasurer
- Joanna Gislason
- Sandra Martin Harris
- Kam Parmar
- Michael Brian Roberts
- Ahmad Soleiman-Panah

Photo (left to right): Chantel Spade, Adejoke Adeyemi, Adrienne Yeung, Patrick McDougall, Julia Kaisla, Sam Young, Mira Farrage, Peter Hoong, Zavi Swain, Donna Panito. Photo credit: Elicea Andrews Photography



Youth Wellness Grant

Over the past year, 12 grant-funded organizations supported 545 youth and 614 family and community members through grief-focused programs including counselling, peer support, cultural healing, art therapy, outreach, and land-based practices. These programs were designed specifically for youth grieving toxic drug-related loss, an area of care that has often been overlooked despite the profound impact of the crisis on young people and families.

Programs reached both rural and urban youth, primarily supporting teens and transition-age young adults (approximately ages 12–24), with some extending supports up to age 30, and in certain cases also including younger children and young parents. Two-thirds of youth participants had experienced loss related to toxic drug deaths, with others joining due to other types of complex grief. Half of the funded organizations were Indigenous-led, and 8 organizations primarily served Indigenous youth, reinforcing the importance of supporting culturally grounded, community-led healing and self-determined care.

In 2025, CAI provided NaloxHome with a 2-year directed grant to support the development and delivery of a B.C. provincial table of young leaders advising on initiatives in the MHSU sector, with a particular focus on addressing the toxic drug crisis. The youth council will provide leadership opportunities for B.C. youth, particularly those with lived experience of substance use or loss related to substance use. It will bring together diverse youth delegates across B.C. to share perspectives, voice concerns, advocate, and provide representation for youth with a focus on health promotion and prevention.

Youth Wellness Grant and Community Counselling Fund Grantee Convening 2025

In November 2025, CAI hosted a two-day provincial convening in Vancouver around the theme "Grounded in Care: Community-Led Responses to Grief, Wellness, and Mental Health." It brought together YWG recipients alongside CAI's Community Counselling Fund recipients. The event convened 139 participants from 67 organizations, including 27 representatives from all 12 YWG-funded groups and supported shared learning on youth bereavement, low-barrier counselling and compassionate care, with expert speakers and an Elders panel.







Photos: participants at the YWG and CCF Grantee Convening 2025. Photo credit: Elicea Andrews Photography

Community Counselling Grants

The Community Counselling Grants entered their sixth year, with funded organizations delivering counselling in more than 30 languages, helping to strengthen services that reflect the diverse needs of communities across B.C.

Grants continued to support culturally responsive approaches to care, recognizing the importance of services that reflect the diverse identities, cultures, and communities being served.

In 2025–26, 55,141 counselling sessions were delivered to 22,552 clients, including 9,396 new clients.

Community Action Teams

Community Action Teams (CATs) across B.C. continued to demonstrate the power of community-led responses to the toxic drug crisis. Through funding strategic projects, building capacity, and strengthening community partnerships, CATs advanced local initiatives that reflected the unique needs, strengths, and priorities of their communities while contributing to broader provincial goals.

In 2026, the Province of B.C. recognized the important value CATs bring to community, as well as the importance of investing in civic engagement. They committed to 3 years of funding for the CAT Network through 2029, providing communities with greater stability and the ability to focus on long-term planning and impact. This investment reflects the strength of the network, the dedication of local partners, and the demonstrated value of collaborating to reduce substance use related harms.

An example of this work is the regional collaboration between the Nelson/Castlegar and Grand Forks CATs and the Trail CATs, who put on a Community Conversation event, pulling together 170 people from the West Kootenays, including local elected officials to discuss current issues in the toxic drug crisis.



Photo: Attendees of the 2026 CAT Convening

Provincial Peer Network

The PPN aims to strengthen collaborations and community-based responses to the toxic drug crisis and along the way has helped individuals access the supports they need, while also providing the opportunity to join community outreach initiatives.

Many community members who have been supported by the PPNs have gone on to work with their local PPN groups, some have gone on to share their experiences with others at events and meetings, and many have taken leadership roles within their communities.

PPNs help provide access to resources but also work to build connections and confidence among peers to not only access the supports they need but also become active members in their community outreach initiatives to help those with similar and shared experiences.

Lived and Living Experience Employment Grant

Led by CAI with funding from the Vancouver Foundation and the Province of B.C., the Lived and Living Experience Employment Grant is an opportunity for community-based organizations in B.C. to create meaningful employment opportunities for people with lived exprience of mental illness and/or substance use.

The grant aims to build organizational readiness and recognize lived experience as workplace expertise. It supports expanding PWLLE roles beyond mental health and substance use into broader non-profit sectors, while funding capacity-building and a Community of Practice to foster inclusive, accessible workplaces.

Meaningful employment for PWLLE of mental illness and/or substance use can build confidence and empowerment, provide financial stability, strengthen professional skills, and expand social networks. It also supports overall health and well-being.

In 2026, CAI received 149 applications for the grant and went through a multi-phased adjudication process that included external stakeholders and peers. 17 organizations were selected to receive $60,000 annual funding for a two-year term through the grant.

Sector Advisory Table and Training

The MHSU Sector Advisory Table is comprised of a diverse group of leaders representing some of the province's most trusted organizations. It aims to bring the sector together to advance long-term, high-impact solutions that improve quality of life and community well-being.

The Table was created following a series of interviews conducted by CAI with key MHSU stakeholders. Participants expressed a strong desire to build relationships and develop collective impact frameworks, and expressed support for CAI's role as a convenor.

In 2025–26, the Table focused on equipping non-profit leaders with skills to engage effectively with municipal elected officials and staff to support continued collaboration with other non-profits in their region.

A series of four full-day government relations training sessions were planned for early 2026, with key leaders of organizations in the MHSU sector identified as essential voices in shaping the future of community-based advocacy. The Table developed shared key messaging to provide a framework for engagement with municipal elected officials and the public. These key messages were refined with feedback from people with lived experience of substance use and mental illness as well as leaders connected to the B.C. Association of Recovery and Addictions providers (BCARA).

Attendance included 77 trainees from 75 unique organizations, 13 attendances by Table members, and CAI hosts.

Photos: Participants at MHSU training sessions





Municipal Leaders Engagement

CAI plays a backbone role in B.C.'s local MHSU response by connecting the people, tables, and tools that communities need to act together.

The Local Leaders Network (LLN) supports local governments, particularly elected officials, with the work communities are doing to respond to MHSU issues. Activities in 2025–26 included:

- Media training in advance of International Overdose Awareness Day with Nadine Nakagawa, City Councillor for New Westminster.
- Guy Felicella, an internationally renowned speaker, told his compelling story of addiction and recovery.
- Dr. Jennifer Charlesworth, Representative for Children and Youth, presented on the impact of the toxic drug crisis on children and youth.
- Dr. Seonaid Nolan, Physician Lead for Road to Recovery, presented on an innovative program designed to strengthen connections between services to make it easier for people to start and stay on their recovery journey.

This work complements the work of the CATs which support local communities to address mental health and substance use issues through civic engagement and collective action.

Walking the Healing Path: A B.C. Indigenous Specific Approach to Addictions Aftercare

Walking the Healing Path is a collaborative initiative between CAI and the Ministry of Health to develop a culturally grounded aftercare learning resource for Indigenous-led treatment and recovery operators, service providers, and communities across B.C.

Aftercare services play a vital role in the substance use continuum of care. They help provide continuity of support, strengthen community connections, and reduce the risk of relapse and other harms for individuals who may be transitioning from structured treatment or recovery programs, relocating to a new community, or working to maintain their recovery.

For Indigenous peoples, culture-based aftercare approaches support wholistic wellness across physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, while also recognizing the importance of family and community in healing. Despite their importance, culture-based aftercare supports are often siloed within

the broader substance use system of care, which can create challenges in maintaining coordination and continuity as individuals transition from bed-based services back into their communities.

The online course reflects Indigenous ways of knowing and explores wholistic wellness through short, flexible, and accessible modules. Integrated videos and storytelling support a circular learning process.

The course has been developed through a collaborative and relationship-based approach with guidance from the Aftercare Advisory Council, the First Nations Health Authority, Indigenous treatment and recovery operators, community service providers, and community members across B.C. It is anticipated to launch in Fall 2026.

Photos: Walking the Healing Path course filming







Capacity Building for First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Urban Indigenous-led Bed-based Treatment & Recovery Operators

In 2025–26, CAI extended its one-time funding opportunity of up to $25,000 for another year to support First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and urban Indigenous-led organizations providing bed-based treatment and recovery services. The funding supported these organizations in developing and/or implementing strategies to strengthen their capacity within their programs. Fifteen organizations in B.C. received this grant.



Sam Young, CAI Project Manager, Indigenous Support Recovery (left) and Courtney Aarif, CAI Project Manager, Community Counselling Grants (second from left), at Squamish International Overdose Awareness Day 2026 with members of the Squamish Helping Hands team and Sea to Sky Community Action Team



Chantel Spade, CAI Project Manager, Lived Experience Employment Grant (second from right), at Port Alberni International Overdose Awareness Day 2026 with members of the Alberni Valley Hospice Society and the Port Alberni Community Action Team



Peter Hoong, CAI Project Manager, Community Action Teams (left), at the Tri-Cities Community Action Team inaugural Men's Health Collective

community action initiative

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Audited Financial Statements.

2026