

Where Communities Lead, Better Health Follows.

We are Community Action Initiative (CAI), a nonprofit organization transforming mental health and substance use support across B.C.



The CAI office is located on the unceded and traditional territories of the Coast Salish peoples—xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), sḵwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and sel̓ílwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. Our work, meanwhile, extends across the ceded, unceded, and sovereign territories of Nations across what is referred to as British Columbia.

Below: Dr. Elder Roberta Price opening CAI's 2025 CAT Convening.



Executive Message

Where community leads, better health follows.

The 2024/2025 year was a time of movement and change, and many lessons. Renowned trauma specialist Andrew Hübl captures the experience many of us have had in periods of increased stress and how we are drawn to easier answers, “When I cannot swim in complexity, I need to simplify it.” He goes on to say that when we simplify, we can fail to see the humanity in one another, and this can lead to polarization.

This feels like an important perspective during a period in which we experienced continued death due to a toxic drug supply, political and economic instability, escalating international conflicts, and never-ending climate emergencies. For many of us in the mental health and substance use sectors, this represented a significant challenge; we were facing an increasingly challenging context and more complex clients.

Like many other non-profits in BC, our team has navigated these challenges and has tried to stay focused on our purpose of supporting community-led interventions that enhance connection across the mental health and substance use sector. Over the last year, we brought together organizations and leaders to have meaningful conversations and build new skills, and we listened for common themes.

We heard about the unending grief that continues to permeate our space and the exhaustion of front line service providers; we heard about the gaps in support for people leaving recovery and treatment programs; we heard about the insecurity many people and organizations exist within but still show up for work and one another each day.

We also heard about people’s desire for connection, dialogue and improvements, and we ended the year with lower deaths due to the toxic drug poisoning crisis than expected. Although the exact causes of the decrease are not known, we know that the interventions put forward by peers, people with lived and living experience, to ensure people are not using drugs alone have made an impact. CAI’s Provincial Peer Network continues to support drug users across BC and bring forward innovative interventions to keep people alive. Meanwhile our Community Action Tables across BC continue to promote and deliver community learning opportunities to reduce stigma and increase access to care.



4 Community Action Initiative

As a result of our learnings and engagement with people with lived and living experience, we leaned heavily into experts in bereavement care to better understand the intersection of loss and mental health. This culminated in a new grant, the Youth Wellness Grant, that funds 12 organizations across BC for 3 years to support youth who have lost a parent due to a toxic drug death. This is the first grant of its kind in BC, and potentially Canada, and starts to build a new foundation of interventions to respond to the ripple effects of loss we have seen and will continue to see for generations.

The Youth Wellness Grant is also our first foray in many years in supporting youth. Until now, our counselling grants, which we were pleased to see extended for another year, have supported adults across BC to access low cost or free counselling. The impact of the counselling grants for people across BC cannot be overstated. Often, counselling is a first point of access into the mental health system of care; it's exactly the kind of voluntary care advocates across BC are calling to enhance. Since the grant's start in 2019, **72,000 people** accessed counselling for the first time.

To support improved care for Indigenous community members leaving recovery, CAI worked alongside the Province to set up a new Advisory Council. This Council will provide expertise towards a new curriculum for Indigenous Aftercare and will provide grants to agencies across the Province to implement and integrate these teachings.

Throughout all of these touchpoints with community, CAI is growing our understanding about how we can be a catalyst for change and move closer to achieving our mandate of an integrated community mental health and substance use sector. Over this last year, CAI fully established itself as an independent non-profit. We developed our human resource

and finance capacity, we invested in a new online granting platform; and we are putting together a team that has the tools and skills we need to show up for our sector. We were supported by a board of directors with the deep and far-reaching expertise we need to achieve CAI's potential.

Julia Kaisla

Executive Director



Left to right: Joanna Gislason, Board Member, CAI; Julia Kaisla, Executive Director, CAI; The Honourable Josie Osborne, Minister of Health, British Columbia; Vanessa Wideski, Board Chair, CAI.

Photo next page: Central Interior Native Health Society team members gathered during the Letting Go Ceremony, an Indigenous practice held to honor and remember clients who have transitioned to the spirit world.

Where Communities Lead, Better Health Follows

We believe lasting change starts with listening to communities and fostering a more community-centred approach to 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 addressing the mental health and substance use crisis. 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.



Our Projects

Community Action Teams (CATs)

CATs were created to help bring together health authorities, public health, non-profit organizations, government representatives, peer groups, and others to develop partnerships to provide focused, action-oriented strategies tailored to local community substance use needs. CAI supports capacity building for these teams and leads a community of practice for the CATs.

Youth Wellness Grant (YWG)

The YWG is designed to support youth in BC who are grieving the loss of loved ones to toxic drug poisoning. It supports community-based organizations across the province with multi-year funding to create and implement bereavement programs, with a focus on restoring emotional health and wellness for youth and families affected by drug-related deaths.

Provincial Peer Network (PPN)

A key priority of the PPN is to strengthen collaboration and information sharing between drug user-led organizations by developing a network. Through regional and provincial capacity building, it works to ensure that the provincial overdose response is more effective in saving lives and connecting people to harm reduction, treatment, and recovery.

Community Counselling Fund (CCF)

Since 2019, CAI has stewarded the CCF, which supports community-based organizations to deliver free/low cost, culturally relevant mental health care. These organizations are situated in every health authority in both urban and rural communities. Our equity-focused approach ensures that adults from all walks of life can access quality mental health supports.

Photo below: International Overdose Awareness Day.



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

This year, we provided a one-time funding opportunity of up to \$25,000 for 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. In total, eleven First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and urban Indigenous-led organizations in British Columbia received this grant.

Local Leaders Network (LLN)

LLN is a project that aims to support local governments, particularly elected officials, with the work communities are already doing to respond to the toxic drug poisoning crisis. LLN hosts trainings and presents at conferences and municipal events.

Photo right: CAI staff Zavi Swain and Sam Young visiting Wilp Si'Satxw Community Healing Centre, where they were welcomed into the Centre's healing space for cultural programming. Wilp Si'Satxw is a recipient of CAI's 2024 Capacity Building Grant for First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Urban Indigenous-led Support Recovery Operators, delivered through our Support Recovery Program.



Staff and Board of Directors

Staff

Julia Kaisla—Executive Director

Patrick McDougall—Director of Engagement

Mira Abou Farrage—Program Manager,
Grants & Community Funding

Zavi Swain—Project Manager, Strategic
Grants

Peter Hoong—Project Manager, Community
Action Teams

Samantha Young—Project Manager, Support
Recovery

Adrienne Yeung—Community Grants
Manager, Community Counselling

Anna Harcourt—Manager, Grants &
Community Initiatives

Adejoke Adeyemi—Executive Assistant

Board of Directors

Vanessa Wideski—Board Chair

Noallan Naicker—Treasurer

Ahmad Soleiman Panah

Kamaldeep Parmar

Joanna Gislason

Sandra Martin Harris

*Photo below: CAI staff at CAI's 2025 CAT
Convening (not pictured: Anna Harcourt).*



Supporting Community-led Responses to the Toxic Drug Crisis

When communities lead, systems learn and lives are saved. Across B.C., Community Action Teams (CATs), the Provincial Peer Network (PPN), and the Youth Wellness Grant are turning lived and local expertise into practical and innovative action.

Community Action Teams (CATs)

CATs are locally led tables that rally partners to develop action plans, strengthen multi-sector collaboration, and remove barriers in real time.

In the Cowichan Valley, cross-organizational partnerships—spanning health, media, businesses, neighbours, and local government—came together through the **Cowichan CAT** to drive life-saving initiatives like The Village and Building Bridges. The team started by listening deeply and naming immediate priorities community members identified—basic bathroom access and a safe place to sleep. A centerpiece of this collaboration is The Village—opened in March 2022—which provides 34 temporary homes along with meals, skills training, and help navigating the housing system, interrupting

the cycle of homelessness for community members. At the same time, the Cowichan CAT's Building Bridges approach with RCMP reduced conflict interactions by 10%, showing how coordinated, relationship-based work can make public spaces safer and more supportive for everyone.

CAI funds and connects all the 36 CATs in BC in a network to learn from one another. This year, CAI worked with communications experts to create a CAT Community Engagement Toolkit, a simple playbook to support CATs to set SMART objectives, build a “messaging house,” and use the right mix of direct outreach to raise awareness, reduce stigma, and mobilize action at the community level.

Photo below. CAI's 2025 CAT Convening.



Provincial Peer Network (PPN)

The PPN is a province-wide network of 20 peer-led groups funded through low-barrier, trauma-informed grants to ensure overdose response is shaped by those most affected. In 2024, 111 peers were hired for wage positions, 146 for shift work, and 1,739 for same-day cash work across the 22 PPN groups, totaling 44,421 hours. These opportunities build peer capacity to engage with government policy and provide low barrier services to enhance community safety.

Here are two stories that highlight the impact of PPN groups:

- In Port Alberni, weekly “Bridging the Gap” gatherings now pair food, clothing and naloxone with on-site income-assistance and nursing supports, turning a simple drop-in into a stigma-busting hub.

- In Grand Forks, HOPE partnered with Interior Health to host mobile anti-stigma pop-ups and permanent drug-checking at its drop-in centre—bridging clinical care and peer support under one roof. The pop-ups are breaking down service barriers and drawing new allies from local businesses and government.

Photo below: CAI's 2025 CAT Convening.

Photo next page: CMHA Shuswap/Revelstoke in partnership with Rise Up Indigenous Wellness is leading the Youth Wellness Grant funded program Land is Medicine: Culture Heals to support youth and families dealing with grief and loss related to the toxic drug crisis. As part of their outreach for this culturally rooted, youth-focused program, they have created “hope bundles” to reduce isolation and connect recipients to healing communities. Included is: A blanket, locally sourced honey, journal, locally made candle, jam made through a food security initiative, lavender/chamomile tea, bath salts, and information about upcoming programming.



Youth Wellness Grant (YWG): Supporting Grieving Youth Impacted by the Toxic Drug Crisis

Almost a decade after the toxic drug crisis was declared a public health emergency in BC, youth across the province continue to be deeply affected by the deaths of loved ones in their families and communities. The Youth Wellness Grant, launched in 2024 by CAI with funding from the BC Ministry of Health through the Overdose Emergency Response Centre, is a bold, community-centred response to the urgent need to support bereaved youth.

This three-year grant program supports 12 community-led, culturally grounded, and trauma-informed programs that address the unique grief and mental health needs of youth and families who have lost a loved one to drug poisoning.

Learn about the Community-Engaged Grant Process CAI led for this project at caibc.ca/resources/community-engaged-grant-process/



Here are some voices highlighting the importance of the Youth Wellness Grant:

“

The toxic drug crisis continues to have a devastating impact on communities and families across the province, and it can be especially difficult for young people who are struggling with the loss of a loved one, family member or friend. Providing community-based bereavement grants helps provide the support youth need and deserve during a difficult time in their life. This is just one way our government is expanding and enhancing supports so that everyone, including young people, can access a seamless system of mental health and addictions care where and when they need it.”

—The Honourable Josie Osborne,
Minister of Health, British Columbia

“

Thousands of families across British Columbia have suffered the loss of a loved one to toxic drug poisoning. The grief and loss felt by children and adolescents who've lost loved ones is overwhelming and heartbreaking. Carrier Sekani Family Services plans to support children and youth impacted by the opioid crisis by offering culturally sensitive, trauma informed grief and loss programming, with funding provided by Community Action Initiative.”

—Grant recipient: Mary Teegee-Gray,
Executive Director, Carrier Sekani Family Services

Care Through Culture

This year, CAI and BC's Ministry of Health, in collaboration with our Aftercare Advisory Committee, began developing a series of BC-specific online knowledge-sharing modules based on the seasons. These modules are designed to promote and integrate culture-based aftercare approaches to better support First Nations, Métis and Inuit community members.

The Advisory Committee includes Elders, Knowledge Keepers, community members, and service providers from diverse regions and organizations.

Attendees who access the modules will be able to apply tools/wise practices, tailor aftercare to First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and urban Indigenous needs, create culturally competent approaches supporting long-term healing for clients and families, understand variability across providers, and strengthen relationships with community resources and the provincial system of care.

Additionally, in 2024, CAI awarded **\$275,000** in Capacity Building Grants to **11** First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and urban Indigenous-led

organizations to strengthen bed-based treatment and recovery (e.g., culture/wellness programming, policy/process development, staff training, admin capacity, vehicles for client transport, and facility/tech upgrades).

The grant supports the development and implementation of strategies aligned with the Provincial Standards for Registered Assisted Supportive Recovery Services or the Community Care and Assisted Living Act Residential Care Regulation.

Wilp Si'Satxw Community Healing Centre used its grant to purchase technology equipment, moving from paper-based files to a digital system. This increased efficiency, improved file management, and allowed staff to focus more on client care.

Photo below: Central Interior Native Health Society team members gathered during the Letting Go Ceremony, an Indigenous practice held to honor and remember clients who have transitioned to the spirit world.



Counselling that Fits the Community

The free and low cost adult counselling services offered through this grant became cornerstones of support in diverse communities across BC. Their focus on serving specific communities broke down barriers that have historically prevented people from getting the mental health care they need.

Most common mental health needs*

70	anxiety
60	depression
60	trauma
53	addictions & substance use
53	family & relationships
47	grief and loss
38	complex & diagnosed conditions
30	isolation
28	economic hardship
26	abuse & violence
21	anger

Many needs, many approaches*

- Individuals, couples and family counselling
- Group counselling and psychoeducational workshops
- Outreach counselling
- Art therapy
- Peer counselling
- Intern counselling
- EMDR (trauma therapy)
- CBT and DBT
- Indigenous cultural approaches
- Addictions counselling
- Land-based activities
- Systems navigation

Top referral sources*

- Health Authorities
- Primary care
- MCFD
- Other non-profit organizations
- Corrections
- Internal organizational programs
- Schools
- RCMP Victim Services
- Hospitals and clinics
- Shelters

Since 2019, grantees have provided more than 362,000 counselling sessions, with over 72,000 people accessing counselling for the first time.

* Based on data from 47 semi-annual and quarterly reports submitted in March 2025

The impact of counselling is felt most at the individual level. This story from one of our grantees speaks to that impact:

“

Alexandria, an Indigenous woman in her mid-thirties with three school-aged children, experienced a series of deaths, several of which were quite traumatic in nature. She sought counselling after each subsequent loss, eventually completing three rounds of services, each eight sessions in length. Rather than attempting to 'move past' the grief, Alexandria instead found her own ways of maintaining meaningful relationships with the deceased. She described herself as being frozen and so collected herbs in the forest so she could thaw herself with tea. She saw the pain etched on her hands, so she cleaned them in the lake. She felt overwhelmed, so she cried and let others cry with her. She felt shame, so now shares her experiences with her children so shame can't have the same hold on them.” —Cariboo Family Enrichment Centre

Local Leaders Network

As part of this initiative, CAI hosted in-person and online events and engaged multiple local governments.

Our goal has been to move communities to a whole community overdose response and our trainings often involved inviting local community organizations, health authority partners, first responder communities and others to come together to discuss ways to move forward together.

Photo below: City of Duncan Mayor Michelle Staples at CAI's 2025 CAT Convening.

Two of our key learnings are:

- There's a need to work with elected officials and local governments to more clearly understand their role in responding to a toxic drug crisis.
- Elected officials and city staff need support with stories of what is working to counter simplified and sometimes harmful narratives about people who use substances and their families.





Top left: CAI staff and a Tri-Cities Community Action Team representative at an International Overdose Awareness Day event.



Middle left: Men's Mental Health Awareness Day at the Central Interior Native Health Society.

Below: Central Interior Native Health Society team on Orange Shirt Day.



Photos of CAI's 2025 CAT Convening throughout this report by Adrienne Yeung.



Visit caibc.ca to access our
2024–25 Audited Financial
Statements.