

OAT (Opioid Agonist Therapy) Outreach & Support – ANKORS & Rise Clinic

Year End Report March 2020 – May 2021

By Erin Thomson



2020 was undoubtedly a challenging and momentous year. I had the amazing opportunity to jump right into frontline work as an OAT/Safer Supply outreach support worker, which was a new job role I stepped to. March of 2020 was declared a public health emergency due to the Covid-19 pandemic, prompting immediate action from front line services in our community to protect the public. All the while, the opioid epidemic continued to ensue in our nation. Two intersecting public health emergencies fast tracked ANKORS staff and other community social service agencies to take prompt action to respond to the imminent needs of the people in whom we serve.

The Pandemic Prescription Risk Mitigation guidelines rolled out by the College of Physicians and Surgeons in April 2020 which permitted practitioners to practice a safer supply of prescriptions for B.C. residents, offering folks an alternative to seeking the illicit drug market within the pending threat of Covid-19. Prior to the Pandemic Risk Mitigation guidelines, it was a rare situation where people would be assigned stimulant replacements (dexamphetamine/Ritalin) or hydromorphone for opioid use. Moreover, the Rise Clinic's nurse practitioner, Zak Matieschyn, agreed to work with the pandemic prescription practice. Through a grant from the Fentanyl Task Force initiated through the Community Action Initiative (CAI), I was able to have the works hours to facilitate safer supply outreach.

The Reaching Home Project, (the Street Outreach and Nelson's Committee of Homelessness emergency response strategy), made it possible that Nelson's homeless and street culture community would have a central camp location or hotel units (funded through BC Housing) so that folks could be supported to self-isolate while being provided essential services through the pandemic. This central camp location included the pilot project of the pop-up OAT/Safe Supply Clinic. We set up a pop up clinic in front of Nelson's Civic Recreation Centre door, operating once a week, Wednesday mornings, from April to June 2021. I recall having a palpable sense that this is what it means to be a front-line worker during the initial days of the Covid-19 public health emergency. The Civic parking lot was quiet like a ghost town, so the nature of the pandemic was allowing for the space to have an outdoor clinic in a public area.

There were several shifts and changes to the Pop-Up Pandemic/Safer Supply Clinic. With the Civic encampment ending in June, I maintained the safer supply outreach through being available at the ANKORS location in Nelson, doing outreach on the streets, as well as working from home. In October 2020, the Mental Health and Substance Use Team offered their MHSU Clubhouse, which is located right beside the Stepping Stones Homeless Shelter. With support from IH's Clubhouse and the outreach supports of Nelson's Street Outreach team, I continued to operate the safer supply/OAT clinic during the pandemic from October 2020 to February 2021. It was so fantastic to have a steady and safe clinic space for folks to access their safer supply prescriptions and supports.

In December, the Reaching Home project and grant was continued and the Nelson Committee of Homelessness was able to create a central service hub location called the Warming Centre, where multi agency services were offered to Nelson's homeless population, street culture folks and vulnerable communities . Within the Warming Centre project, I was able to do the safer supply/OAT outreach and supports for folks wanting to access the safer supply and OAT program. By the end of March 2021, The Rise Clinic's practitioner and prescriber integrated many folks from the safer supply program to the efficacious and stabilizing prescriptions of Opioid Agonist therapies. Many of our pandemic prescription clients have been grand-mothered into the Rise Clinic, whilst maintaining stimulant replacement therapies, but very few hydromorphone prescriptions continue; most folks have been supported to be stabilized on OAT such as methadone, kadian or suboxone.

As of June 2021, we are awaiting to hear of the College of Surgeons and Physicians new mitigation guideline called Prescription Alternatives. Importantly, I have seen many successes for folks who have accessed the safer supply program, offering them an alternative to the toxic and unpredictable market. I am advocating progressive policy change that offers people in our community safer alternatives to the toxic illicit drug market that perpetuates the opioid epidemic. Saving lives through safe supply is harm reduction in action!

Some Stats:

April to June 2020 - 16 people engaged in the pandemic prescription, 1 FN male, with 3 women.

June to October 2020 – 14 people engaged with the pandemic prescription program, 3 women

October 2020 to March 2021-

18 people accessed the Safe Supply program (8 female/10 male, 1 FN male)

13 people accessed the OAT program, 8 men, 1 FN male, 5 women)

2 people completed the OAT Program, 1 completed the Safe Supply Program.

2 males who accessed the clinic died of fatal overdoses.