

2025-2026 Program Report:

Rural Empowered Drug Users Network

For REDUN, as for many PWLLE groups and harm reduction programs, this past year has been one of change, with our group experiencing both growth and destabilization, simultaneously.

Collaboration

We have continued to offer 6 peer meetings monthly (2 in each of Nelson, Trail, and Castlegar) ranging from 3 to 30 people. These meetings provide peer support, community education, and collective advocacy opportunities for people with lived and living experience of unregulated substance use. This year, we have had many allies interested in participating at meetings, and this has largely been overwhelmingly positive for all involved. Simultaneously, we make an effort to engage oppositional leadership in positive ways, such as inviting a city councillor to a meeting to raise concerns about motions they propose which would cause harm to people who use drugs. While unsuccessful in persuading this person to rescind their motions, it was informative to better understand their stance and empowering to articulate collective needs in assertive ways on solid ground. Usually, however, our engagement with guests is much less contentious with service provider allies representing the majority of those we collaborate with. Family members are another growing cohort attending meetings. While REDUN has always been open to allies, these relationships are increasingly necessary and valuable to us as we face the systematic erosion of harm reduction and the organized abandonment of people who use drugs.

In June 2025, REDUN hosted Heather Spence, a peer leader from KANDU. Joining all 3 meetings during her time in the region, Heather shared about developments at KANDU, Indigenous harm reduction, and community building. She worked closely with one of REDUN's Indigenous peer leaders, providing mentorship and inspiration as well as guidance and support. We continue to prioritize empowering Indigenous leadership, and continue to consider how best to Indigenize our existing programming and explore developing a more structured offering to meet the needs of our Indigenous membership.

September 2025 the BC Coalition by and for Organizations of People Who Use Drugs and REDUN participated in a one-day *We Are Somebody* workshop in Trail BC. The focus on disentangling the causes and consequences of prohibition, examining the underlying power structures, and collectively envisioning an alternate approach to drug policy provided clarity and cohesive analysis for our regional leadership. Importantly, these opportunities to collaborate with drug user activists from beyond the Kootenays are extremely validating and empowering. There are currently plans in development to host an in-person meeting and public education event in Nelson in late summer or early fall 2026.

In May 2025, 2 REDUN leaders and a peer leader from the East Kootenays travelled to the Okanagan for an Interior-region peer convergence hosted by Community Action Initiative. Drug

user groups funded through the provincial peer network gathered for some capacity building and networking activities, and it was here that we first received official confirmation that no further funding had been approved by the Ministry of Health. Though we had suspected this, based on recent policy shifts and the political context of recent years, this announcement was nonetheless disappointing. In early 2026, this news was confirmed in writing, following which a small meeting with Ministry representatives was offered. In spite of stated recognition of the value of peer work, nothing other than platitudes were offered and REDUN continues to search for workable funding solutions, while also discussing ways to restructure the program and redistribute some of the activities such that we may survive this current wave of backlash. (More on this later).

A capacity building grant application to CAI was amended to collaborate with Penticton Overdose Prevention Site, and eventually came to fruition late April 2026 with a 2 day event focused on growing regional capacity and fostering connections to support our groups going forward.

Grief

Medetomidine has drastically impacted people who use unregulated opioids as well as first responders and the health care system broadly. Framed by recent policy erosion - specifically recriminalization, restrictions to prescribed safe supply, and austerity across health and social service systems - this new adulterant is really having a devastating impact on people who use drugs, and, by association, our organizational capacity.

The Trail Community Action Team worked with REDUN to determine a location and develop messaging to engrave on a memorial bench which they purchased and arranged for the city to install.

REDUN participated in events in Trail, Nelson, and Castlegar to commemorate International Overdose Awareness Day.

As in past years, we lost too many members this year. All life is special, and every preventable death a tragedy, but some of the losses in our communities have felt acutely difficult this past year. Our collective grief continues to grow, year over year, with no end in sight. Defeating as this is, it also makes solidarity and community immensely meaningful and, while many have passed, those who remain grow closer and more determined to keep each other alive.

Rage

Despite exhaustive advocacy, excessive research, and years of tenuous partnership, recent years have revealed the persistent fact that governments will always follow public opinion - even when it contradicts the data, even when it silences the experts, even when it is crafted by media selling a right-wing agenda, even when it runs contrary to their own goals, commitments, and stated values. The hasty decision to recriminalize people who use drugs, while locally does not appear (yet) to have had much impact, signifies a broader trend of abandonment by government which claim to have our interests in mind.

Recriminalization and the restrictions imposed on prescribed safe supply were announced without the level of engagement with people who use drugs that we had become accustomed to in recent years. This return to exclusionary policy decision making processes confirmed the longstanding fear that our voices are not meaningfully included nor are our needs prioritized in the development of policies that impact us. These decisions represent a marked diversion from the policy direction laid out by the provincial government. More opinion-driven than evidence-based, lacking procedural equity, and revealing the core devaluation of people who use drugs, these policy shifts not only return the structure to its traditional harmful shape but they also contribute to social stigma. This validation of stigmatizing views of people who use drugs has tangible impacts on people's daily realities beyond police interactions or pharmaceutical options.

Evolution

We have had many opportunities to invest in emerging peer leaders, and this has been encouraging and strengthening. Early in the year, we had a peer leader in Nelson and one in Trail who were beginning to take on more responsibility in the organization. Changing life circumstances, however, prevented further advancement. Shortly thereafter, we hired a new peer coordinator to support Trail and Castlegar meetings. This person brings a wealth of lived experience, a stable base on their recovery, and has worked at the local withdrawal management facility for many years. In the months they have been facilitating and hosting meetings, they have demonstrated deep compassion, consistency, and commitment to this organization and the people we serve. Having another coordinator in the mix has added skills, perspective, and support to the team and the network as a whole. We have also been working to develop leadership skills and capacity with 4 active and eager members. This has extended the reach of our programming, sustained existing staff, enhanced confidence for those individuals, and, we hope, may inspire others in our network. The growth feels hopeful, and necessary, especially as our longstanding leadership and existing staff are also evolving, with each taking on new roles - both in the field of community service and academia. The strength and skills developed in working with REDUN have supported these new individual ventures, and I believe, the perspective and commitment we bring to these new settings expands our advocacy, benefitting people who use drugs in ways we are unable to reach otherwise.

At the request of members, we offered a one-day NonViolent Communications workshop with Holly Hume in May 2025. The event was well-attended and attuned to the needs of our membership. With changes to programming looming, we will be exploring capacity building opportunities and will likely include another NVC workshop as part of that initiative.

A United Way grant has provided an opportunity for East-West collaboration to support work placement opportunities in Cranbrook, Nelson, Trail, and Grand Forks. REDUN nominated a few peers to participate in this short-term program, provided some supervision, and supplemented the honoraria to meet peer payment standards. This contract required some advocacy and extensions to accommodate the needs of participants to successfully complete the hours available to them. A reapplication for this project was successful and will commence shortly.

Lastly, the looming challenge currently destabilizing REDUN is a clear example of the recent desertion of harm reduction and disavowal of people who use drugs. After multiple cycles of funding which supported the expansion of a provincial network of drug user groups, the recent decision to close this funding stream can be seen as yet another indication of the broader trend of abandonment by government. We have applied for temporary bridge funding, intended to support the transition away from Ministry of Health resources. It is proving challenging, in the current climate where demand far exceeds supply, to secure even small grants to support the continuation of our programming. Nonetheless, we will continue to creatively persevere. We are experts at adapting to unfavorable circumstances and will, regardless of resources, ensure that people who use drugs in the Kootenay region are supported, represented, and empowered.