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Mental Health and Addictions Symposium

Symposium Overview

A diverse group of professionals, advocates, and thought leaders in the field of mental health and addictions convened for the inaugural **Mental Health and Addictions Symposium**, held on November 13 and 14, 2024, in Prince George. Through knowledge-sharing, collaborative discussions, and shared learning, the event fostered a collective effort to drive meaningful change in mental health and addictions outcomes across communities in Northern and Central BC.

The Symposium spotlighted community-driven solutions, showcased innovative projects and tools, and facilitated relationship building. Participants explored collaborative strategies to align efforts with regionally shared visions and goals, further strengthening partnerships and coordination.



NCLGA

Representing over 240 elected officials in over 42 local and First Nations governments.

Established in 1955, The NCLGA is a non-profit, non-partisan association comprised of local government elected officials in North Central BC.



The event attracted over 300 participants, including representatives from mental health and addictions service organizations, health authorities, law enforcement, school districts, Indigenous leaders, and elected officials. Notably, 40 elected local government officials from the NCLGA operating area were in attendance, underscoring the significance of local government engagement in addressing these critical issues.

Tradeshow booths in the main hall provided a valuable platform for local organizations and agencies to showcase their work, exchange ideas, and establish connections with Symposium participants, enhancing the event's impact.

NCLGA **President Judy Greenaway** led the proceedings throughout the two-day event, which was also streamed virtually for the 57 virtual attendees. The support from the co-hosts and the contributions of various NCLGA board members, who took on roles as session moderators, were greatly appreciated and instrumental to the events success.

The Numbers

303 Registered Participants

08 Plenary Panel Addresses

06 Concurrent Panel Sessions

14 Tradeshow Booths

30 Accord Signatories



The Symposium co-hosts – **Councillor Crystal Gibbs** from Lheidli T'enneh, **Chair Lara Beckett** from the Regional District of Fraser Fort George, and **Mayor Simon Yu** from the City of Prince George – offered heartfelt opening statements, warmly welcoming all participants and setting a collaborative tone for the event. Their remarks emphasised the importance of uniting diverse perspectives to address the complex challenges of mental health and addictions across the region.

Todd Doherty, Member of Parliament for Cariboo-Prince George and Shadow Minister for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, followed with opening comments. Drawing on his experiences and commitments to mental health advocacy, he reflected on the pressing need for collective action on mental health and addictions.

Sheila Boehm, Past NCLGA President, provided an overview of the Symposium's objectives. She highlighted the collaborative efforts and strategic planning that had been undertaken to bring the event to fruition. Her remarks underscored the Symposium's role as a catalyst for meaningful dialogue, knowledge-sharing, and the development of actionable strategies to improve mental health and addictions outcomes in the region.



Plenary Panel Addresses

The following presentations were held in plenary:

(Note: Presentation slides can be accessed in the shared folder [here](#).)

Prevention and Early Intervention – Andrea Derban and Janine Stevenson, Community Action Initiative / Melissa Bloodoff, Intersect Youth and Family Services

Breaking Down Silos: Collaboration Across the Region – Laura Honey and Julia Hintermeister, Saplings Mental Health / Chris Kinch, Connective Support Society

Resources: Mental Health – Mike Skrypnek, Stigma-Free Mental Health Society / Graham Hall, Mental Health and Substance Use, Northern Health

Resources: Treatment Centre – Isaac Hernandez, North Wind Wellness Centre

Local Response to Mental Health and Addiction Crisis – Emily Christensen-Sweeney (La Fleur), PG CAT Central Interior Native Health Society / Ruth Calduch and Jordan Stewart, POUNDS Project Society

Self-Care for Leaders – Mike Skrypnek, Stigma-Free Mental Health Society

Building a Foundation for a Safer Tomorrow: How Recovery-Informed Workplaces Can Strengthen Construction and Local Communities – Dr. Paul Farnan, University of British Columbia, and Simon Fraser University

| To contact the speakers directly, please refer to the [Speaker contact list](#).





Key Themes

The Symposium featured broad discussions and interactive information sharing sessions. Key themes that emerged repeatedly throughout the event included:

- **The Value of Connection and Community Support:** Emphasizing the critical role of peer support, social networks, and community or online support groups in fostering mental health and well-being
- **Breaking Down Stigma:** Highlighting the need to challenge stereotypes and reduce stigma surrounding mental health and addictions
- **Trauma-Informed and Culturally-Informed Practices:** Stressing the importance of increased trauma healing solutions and integrating culturally-informed approaches tailored for communities in Northern and Central BC
- **Shared Understanding and Language:** Advocating for clarity in terminologies and addressing harmful language, such as distinguishing between “safe supply” and “harm reduction”
- **Investment in Preventative Measures:** Calling for greater investment in accessible community-level support and recovery-oriented care to prevent mental health crises
- **Collaboration Across Governments:** Recognizing the importance of active participation and collaboration among local, provincial, Indigenous, and federal officials to develop and implement actionable solutions
- **Self-Care for Leaders:** Highlighting the need for leaders to prioritize self-care and foster emotional intelligence to better integrate experiences and create healthy support systems
- **Commitment to the Accord:** Encouraging leaders to endorse the Accord as a guiding framework for future collaborative efforts among agencies and governments to achieve a shared vision
- **Urgency of Action:** Emphasizing that the time to act is now, with a proactive approach to addressing community challenges
- **Sharing Local Success Stories and Challenges:** Highlighting the importance of exchanging local insights to build a stronger regional understanding of both the successes and the work that lies ahead.





Data

To frame and ground the discussions in shared realities, and to emphasize the gravity of the mental health and addictions crisis in local communities, presenters shared compelling data:

<p>Rising Suicide Rates</p> <p>Adult suicide rates in Canada have doubled between 2019 and 2022, highlighting the urgent need for targeted intervention and support</p>	<p>Youth Mental Health Crisis</p> <p>Between 15-25% of Canadian youth experience at least one mental health challenge before the age of 19, underscoring the vulnerability of young people during formative years</p>	<p>At-Risk Age Group</p> <p>Young people aged 15-24 are the demographic most likely to experience mental health challenges, indicating a critical need for age-specific programs and preventative measures</p>
<p>Gender Disparity</p> <p>Mental health and addictions challenges disproportionately affect men, with over 75% of suicides involving male individuals; this stark statistic calls for tailored strategies to support men's mental health and address stigma around seeking help</p>	<p>Co-Occurrence of Mental Health and Substance Use</p> <p>Individuals with a mental illness are twice as likely to misuse substances, revealing the intertwined nature of mental health and addictions; addressing these issues holistically is crucial to improving outcomes</p>	<p>Economic Impact</p> <p>Mental health challenges cost the Canadian economy an estimated \$50 billion annually, reflecting the significant strain on healthcare systems, workplaces, and communities</p>

These statistics provided a sobering backdrop for the discussions, driving home the urgent need for coordinated, community-driven solutions to address the multifaceted challenges of mental health and addictions.

Prevention, Early Intervention, and Recovery-Oriented Treatment

- **Foundations of Wellness:** Preventative mental health care starts with the basics—adequate sleep, proper nutrition, regular exercise, feeling seen, heard, and understood, and fostering social connections. These foundational elements begin at home, within communities, and in schools.
- **The Power of Peer Support:** One of the most effective interventions for individuals in recovery is building a connection with someone else who is also in recovery. Peer support plays a critical role in fostering hope and sustained recovery.
- **Social Integration and Community Support:** Social integration and strong community support systems are essential for addiction prevention and recovery.
- **Recovery-Oriented Treatment:** There is an urgent need to enhance the focus on recovery-oriented treatments, ensuring they complement existing crisis-oriented care, to support long-term wellness and stability.

Keynote Speaker: Corey Hirsch, former NHL goaltender, coach and Olympic Games silver medalist



Corey Hirsch delivered a powerful and deeply personal keynote presentation on mental health, sharing his journey through challenges, recovery, and growth. Drawing from his lived experience, Corey highlighted the importance of breaking the silence surrounding mental health struggles and the need for genuine connection and support.

One of his key messages, **“We need to get into people’s business!”**, emphasized the critical role of proactive engagement—reaching out, asking questions, and offering support to those who may be struggling. His candid and heartfelt insights served as a call to action for participants, reminding everyone of the profound impact that compassion, awareness, and shared responsibility can have in transforming mental health outcomes.

Resources

Please follow the links to:

- Access [Symposium presentations and presenter contact information](#)
- Watch the 0:52 minute [VIDEO](#) of interviews conducted by Auroara Leigh, for Simply Thriving in the North, which airs biweekly on Shaw TV and Rogers TV community channels from Williams Lake to Fort St. John, reaching across Northern BC.

Interviewees include:

- Mayor Simon Yu – City of Prince George
- Tiego Santos, Mental Health Case Manager, Connective Prince George
- Kyle Sam, Community Relations Coordinator, Dudes Club
- Melissa Bloodoff, Supervisor, Intersect Youth & Family Services
- Mike Skrypnek, Stigma-Free Mental Health Society
- Leah Martin, Emotional Success Coach



Quotes

*"Good job stringing together **multiple lenses and perspectives**"*

*"Schedule was packed with **valuable presentations** and high quality, relevant information for mental health professionals and local politicians alike"*

*"The speakers and **presenters were knowledgeable** about the topic, excellent and very caring"*

*"...**provided education** in areas that are needed"*

*"The service providers did a **great job of sharing experiences, gaps and lived experiences** to help guide/shape possibilities in communities"*

*"It was a good **representation of the issues of today in our communities**. Interesting to see just how many organizations are out there trying to help"*

*"First time I have seen so many **people from all different positions and walks of life** gathered together and sharing knowledge"*

*"Excited for the next Symposium! It's a very **important and worthwhile event** that needs to happen annually"*

*"It was very **positive to have so many communities join together**"*

This valuable input will guide future Symposium planning to ensure it continues to meet the needs of its participants while driving meaningful change in mental health and addictions outcomes.

Highlights from Survey Results - 2024 Mental Health and Addictions Symposium

Following the Symposium, a survey was distributed to all participants on November 27, 2024. A total of 49 participant responses were received, offering a diverse range of perspectives on the impact and overall experience of the event. The feedback reflected the richness and variety of voices presented at the Symposium, encompassing words of appreciation, thoughtful reflections, and numerous practical suggestions for improvement in future iterations.

Key Themes from the Feedback

- **Appreciation for Content and Format:** Many participants expressed gratitude for the knowledge-sharing, collaborative discussions, and innovative tools presented during the Symposium
- **Calls for Enhanced Accessibility:** Suggestions included broader online access, more regional representation, and resources to enable greater participation from underrepresented groups
- **Desire for More Interactive Sessions:** Participants valued opportunities for dialogue and emphasized the importance of including more hands-on workshops and smaller group discussions
- **Focus on Practical Outcomes:** Attendees appreciated actionable takeaways and advocated for an even stronger focus on practical solutions and implementation strategies in future events
- **Broader Representation:** There was feedback to further diversify representation, particularly from grassroots organizations, youth, and marginalized communities





Suggested Areas of Improvement

Participants offered thoughtful suggestions to enhance future iterations of the Symposium:

- **Increased Breaks and Networking Time:** Incorporate more unstructured time for participants to process information, build trust, and connect with others
- **Self-Care and Emotional Support:** Allow for debriefing and rest periods to address the emotional weight of the content. Sessions covered heavy and, at times, triggering topics, necessitating additional care for participants' well-being
- **Mindful Messaging and Language:** Be more intentional about the use of terminology and messaging to reduce stigma-inducing language and foster an inclusive environment
- **Learning from Collective Wisdom:** Provide more opportunities to engage with the expertise and experiences of attendees, moving beyond traditional podium presentations
- **Interactive and Collaborative Formats:** Introduce roundtable discussions and workshops to encourage cross-sector collaboration, solution-building, and breaking down silos among participants
- **Celebration of Recovery:** Include more speakers who share lived experiences of recovery and thriving post-addiction or with mental health challenges. Highlight success stories and effective programs to inspire hope and learning
- **Trauma-Informed Approach:** Avoid "trauma dumping" by including trigger warnings and ensuring there is adequate support for participants. Shift the focus toward healing, cultural practices, and constructive solutions
- **Action-Oriented Discussions:** Dedicate time to exploring practical next steps, such as collaborative efforts, shared limitations in current work, and unified calls to government for policy and funding changes

These suggestions reflect a desire for a more inclusive, supportive, and action-focused event that balances the gravity of the issues with the hope and solutions necessary to inspire change.

Mental Health and Addictions Accord

Overview

A significant highlight of the Symposium was the signing of the Mental Health and Addictions Accord, an event that celebrated the commitment of organizations and local governments to addressing mental health and addictions challenges collaboratively. The signing ceremony at the Symposium recognized the 25 initial signatories, many of whom were represented in-person at the event.

Since the Symposium, five additional signatories have joined this collective effort: the District of Fort St. James, the District of Kitimat, the City of Quesnel, the North Coast Regional District, and the Regional District of Kitimat-Stikine.

We are thrilled to report that, with this milestone, every Regional District within the NCLGA operating area has now endorsed the Accord, demonstrating a unified and region-wide commitment to improving mental health and addictions outcomes.

| To learn more on the Accord Purpose and Vision, and Review Process, [click here](#)



Living Document and Next Iteration in 2025

The **Mental Health and Addictions Accord** is designed as a living document, providing a framework of shared principles and actions to guide meaningful improvements in mental health and addictions services across Central and Northern British Columbia. It reflects a commitment to adaptability and responsiveness, recognizing the importance of engaging diverse communities and organizations to address evolving needs.

The Accord is scheduled for review and an **update in mid-2025** to ensure it remains relevant and impactful and aligns more broadly with the needs and perspectives of a greater number of agencies and local governments.

Upcoming Meeting of Accord Signatories

We are pleased to announce that a meeting of the Mental Health and Addictions Accord signatories is being planned for early 2025. This meeting will serve as an important opportunity for signatories to discuss shared advocacy strategies, explore collaborative actions, and align efforts to drive meaningful improvements in mental health and addictions outcomes across the region.

These efforts reflect our shared commitment to collaboration and continuous improvement in addressing mental health and addictions challenges in Central and Northern British Columbia. Further details about the meeting and review process will be shared in the coming weeks.

We invite all NCLGA members to consider endorsing and adopting the Mental Health and Addictions Accord in their communities.

If your organization or local government would like to participate in the early 2025 meeting or contribute to the 2025 review process but has not yet signed the Accord or been added to the invitation list, please contact bjohnson@nclga.ca to ensure you are included.

Advancing Recovery-Informed Workplaces

Building on the insightful panel sessions at the Symposium, hosted by the **BC Construction Safety Association**, and **Dr. Paul Farnan's presentation**, titled, "[How Recovery Informed Workplaces can Strengthen Construction and Local Communities](#)," the NCLGA is working to explore the development of recovery-informed workplaces at the local government level.

What is a Recovery-Informed Workplace?

A recovery-informed workplace is one that proactively destigmatizes addiction and mental illness and provides a supportive environment for individuals in recovery. It embodies a comprehensive approach that includes the following key principles:

- **Accepts and Respects:** Assists workers who are interested in pursuing recovery or are already in recovery, offering a safe and inclusive environment
- **Educates:** Provides education for both management and employees on internal policies and processes that support and celebrate individuals committed to recovery
- **Minimizes and Enhances:** Strives to minimize workplace conditions that may lead to substance misuse while enhancing access to treatment and support for recovery
- **Promotes Supportive Policies:** Maintains robust and supportive workplace policies that celebrate recovery journeys and foster long-term well-being
- **Lessens Stigma:** Actively reduces stigma surrounding addiction and mental illness, creating a culture of understanding and compassion.

By adopting recovery-informed practices, local governments can lead by example, fostering healthier workplaces and communities while supporting individuals on their recovery journey.

If you are interested in learning more about recovery-informed workplace practices or would like to discuss how your local government can integrate these principles, we encourage you to reach out to us. Please contact us at bjohnson@nclga.ca to express your interest or for more information.

We look forward to collaborating with you to make a meaningful impact.

Source: [Recovery Informed Workplaces - Building Resiliency](#)

Upcoming Board Strategy Sessions

NCLGA Board Strategy Session

Monday, January 13, 2025, 5:30 – 7:30pm

In-person, Prince George, BC and Via [zoom](#)

NCLGA Board Strategy Session

Sunday, May 11, 2025, 6:00pm – 8:00pm

In-person, Prince Rupert, BC

NCLGA Board Strategy Session

Monday, September 22, 2025, 12:00pm – 2:00pm

In-person, Vancouver, BC

Upcoming Board Meetings

NCLGA Board Meeting

Friday, February 28, 2025, Time TBC & Saturday March 1, 2025, Time TBC

Via [zoom](#)

NCLGA Board Meeting

Friday, June 20, 2025, Time TBC & Saturday, June 21, 2025, Time TBC

In-person, Prince George, BC and Via [zoom](#)

NCLGA Board Meeting

Friday, October 17, 2025 & Saturday, October 18, 2025, Time TBC

Via [zoom](#)

Upcoming Meetings & Events

Member Webinar

Early 2025, Date TBC

Via [zoom](#)

Mental Health and Addictions Accord – Signatories Meeting

Early 2025, Date TBC

Via [zoom](#)

NCLGA Annual General Meeting and Convention 2025

May 12-15, 2025

Prince Rupert, BC. More information will be posted on the NCLGA website

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NCLGA Newsletter

How to Contribute

We encourage our members to contribute content for the newsletter. We welcome your submissions. Please submit content to bjohnson@nclga.ca – thank you!

The quarterly member newsletter aims to enhance communication within our organization, celebrate our collective achievements, and provide valuable information to support the work of our members. We look forward to your participation and contributions to make our newsletter a success!