

DRUG USER LIBERATION FRONT

A brief history

Introduction

On June 23, 2020, a group of concerned citizens in Vancouver, British Columbia, blocked a busy intersection and erected a tent, on which hung a banner that read “the only real drug problem is scoring real good drugs,” a quote from a song by the band NOFX. On another banner, the words “Drug User Liberation Front” (DULF) had been painted. Motivated by tremendous grief and a need for systemic change, community members from existing drug user groups (BC/Yukon Association of Drug War Survivors, Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users [VANDU], Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society, the Coalition of Peers Dismantling the Drug War, and the BC Association of People on Opiate Maintenance), allied professionals from organizations (including folks from Pivot Legal Society and the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition [CDPC], and individuals came together to collectively support this action and statement. DULF was the name that the

group had decided to act under.

To raise awareness and prompt action on the increasingly deadly supply of drugs in Vancouver, this action was conducted on the heels of a BC Coroners Service announcement that 170 people had died from preventable illegal drug overdoses in May 2020, surpassing the previous record of 161 set in December of 2016, and was held in recognition of the thousands of people that had died of preventable overdoses since the 2016 declaration by the government of British Columbia that the overdose crisis was a public health emergency.

Inside the tent, activists began handing out over one hundred individually packaged doses of cocaine and raw opium. Chris Ewart of DULF and Jon Braithwaite of VANDU made history by openly giving out illicit cocaine and opium to prevent overdoses, in public, for the very first time. Every package contained an information slip explaining the exact contents of the drugs, as determined by community-based drug-checking services available in Vancouver. The organizers of this action leveraged their existing connections in the community to source the cleanest substances they could find. However, they had only three days after hearing of the record-breaking overdose numbers to source, test, and package the substances. While they were able to find substances that were free from fentanyl, they were not able to find pure cocaine and heroin for the demonstration. Nevertheless, those who received these substances knew precisely what they were receiving.



The first DULF public distribution of cocaine and opium.
Photo from Jesse Winter, reprinted with permission.



One point (0.100 g) of cocaine provided by DULF at the first action. Photo ©Gusfowler, Twitter, reprinted with permission.



Immunoassay test strips were used on cocaine to test for contamination from fentanyl and other substances. Photo by Jesse Winter, reprinted with permission.



People entering the DULF tent to receive drugs at the first DULF event. Photo by Jesse Winter, reprinted with permission.



Photo by Jesse Winter, reprinted with permission.

While the substances were being distributed, Eris Nyx rallied nearly a hundred supporters at the intersection of Dunlevy and East Hastings to ensure that people knew exactly why DULF was there and to ensure that the activists had the protection of the community from the police force and other interlopers. After all the substances were distributed, the entire group marched around the block with powerful speakers presenting at each intersection, with a notable feeling in the air that something extremely important had just taken place.



Eris Nyx leads the protest march at the first DULF event. Photo by Jesse Winter, reprinted with permission.

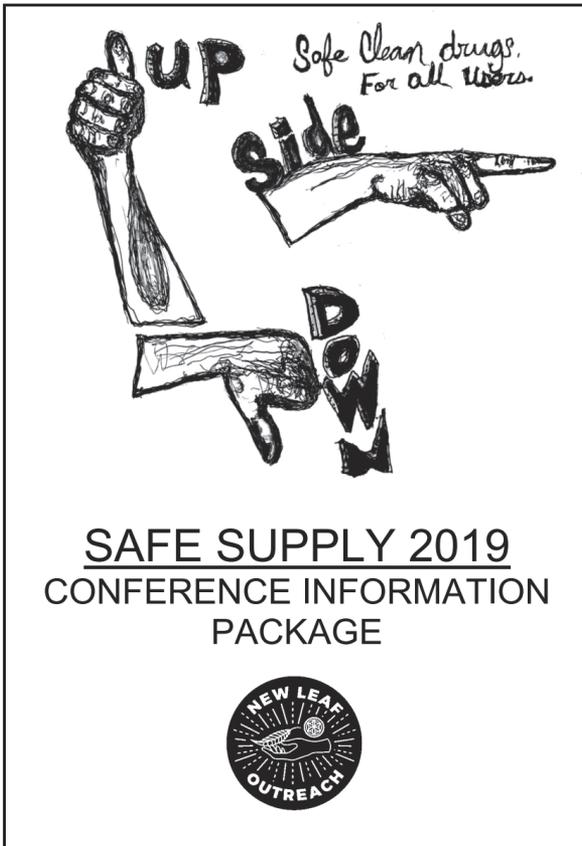
THE DRUG USER LIBERATION FRONT
NO MORE DEATH:
A MARCH FOR SAFE
SUPPLY NOW!
TUESDAY JUNE 23 (TOMORROW)
Meet outside of VANDU at 1:30 PM
March leaves VANDU at 2:00 PM
\$5 STIPENDS AVAILABLE FOR THE FIRST
200 PEOPLE
BE COVID SAFE! TRY TO REMAIN 6 FEET AWAY FROM OTHERS!
BRING AND WEAR A MASK IF YOU HAVE ONE!

Conceiving and Conceptualizing the Idea

The concept of a regulated and safe supply of drugs has been around for many years, and different models have been conceptualized to bring the idea into practice. Originating in Europe, “safe supply” was actualized as a form of treatment for people with diagnosed substance use disorder (SUD), and later implemented on a very small scale in Canada at Vancouver’s Crosstown Clinic. These programs demonstrated the effectiveness of a consistent supply of heroin in reducing chaotic patterns of substance use and increasing safety among the people able to access the programs. Along a similar line of drug substitution treatment substances such as methadone, covered by PharmaCare since the 1960s, Suboxone, covered since 2015, and Methadose, covered since 2014, have been treatment options for people with opioid use disorder. The critical difference between these programs and what DULF was demonstrating is that a regulated supply of drugs does not need to be sit-

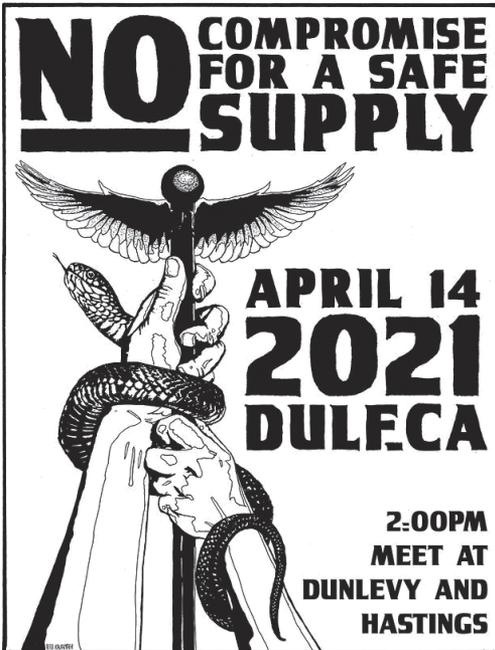
uated within a framework of treatment and medicalization.

Of course, people who use drugs and the organizations they belong to have long known that if we truly wanted to stop the drug poisoning crisis, we would need to provide regulation to the illicit supply of drugs. It was for just this purpose that a drug user group called New Leaf Outreach Society, based in Nanaimo and led by Kevin Donaghy, organized Safe Supply 2019—a conference focused on real solutions to mass overdose death—which occurred at Poets Cove on Pender Island, October 17 to 19, 2019.



It is our mandate that this conference support people who use drugs in resolving the current crisis of prohibition and the ongoing wave of mass overdose death that is smothering the province of British Columbia. By engaging in peer-driven discourse around counter-power to the regime of prohibition and the crisis of variability in the drug supply, we will help people who use drugs understand various models that could assist them in establishing safer supply channels in communities which may have varying openness to harm reduction.

This province-wide conference will provide practical wisdom that will continue to inform and inspire people who use drugs in a meaningful way and increase their capacity to initiate safe supply projects. We will bring together peer leaders from across the province, as well as health service providers and other community partners that already have an understanding of the importance of safe supply, to discuss the nuances of the subject. Although the establishment of safe supply may seem like a medical issue of paramountcy in the face of the ongoing wave of death, some barriers must be overcome and some issues remain to be addressed. Our ultimate goal is to give people who use drugs hope that things may actually get better in the face of ongoing genocide.



Above: DULF member Phoenix Beck McGreevy speaking at the April 14, 2021, event. Photo by Nathaniel Canuel, reprinted with permission. **Left:** DULF event poster.

Acting Again

April 14, 2021

Not long after the May 2020 announcement of a record-breaking 170 deaths by drug poisoning in one month, the BC Coroners Service made another announcement: July 2020 had continued this trend, with 175 people dying from illicit drug overdoses. In total, British Columbia lost 1,716 people to preventable overdose death in 2020. In the face of continued inaction by all levels of government, the Drug User Liberation Front began to take on a definite form as a leading voice in the push for safe supply and drug regulation.

DULF pulled together its community of supporters to plan the next action. This time, the group had honed new strategies to get a more reliable supply of substances, and they were better equipped and ready to take matters into their own hands. Taking a step further, DULF would provide clean and tested cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine, neatly packaged into small cardboard boxes labelled with contents and health warnings.

Emboldened by the need for action, a refusal to go unseen, and the knowledge that these substances would save lives again, on April 14, 2021, five years after the declaration of the drug toxicity crisis in BC, the group set up a tent outside of VANDU at Dunlevy and Hastings in Vancouver. DULF let the community know beforehand that they would be giving out a community-regulated supply of illicit substances, and even went as far as alerting the Vancouver Police Department of the exact date, time, and location of their protest. At this event, DULF members handed out the community-regulated supply along with COVID person-



Community-regulated supply of cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine at a DULF event. Photo by Jackie Dives, reprinted with permission.



A safe supply of free drugs is given out during an event organized by DULF in Vancouver. Photo by Guy Fellicella reprinted with permission.

al protection gear and harm reduction resources. Notably, Vancouver Coastal Health, the BC Centre on Substance Use, and the Overdose Prevention Society lent support at this event, with on-site sanctioned Fourier-transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy drug-checking services and an overdose prevention site.



An FTIR drug-testing device used at the event. Photo by Jackie Dives, reprinted with permission.

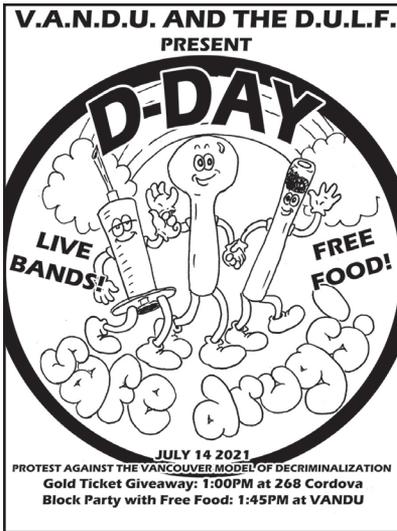
At the intersection of Dunlevy and Hastings again, Eris Nyx rallied an even larger crowd of supporters, with local band Crackdown performing live music on the back of a flatbed truck to which a banner with text screaming “OUR PANDEMIC HAS BEEN IGNORED” had been pinned. After the substances had been distributed, the crowd and truck made their way around the block, sharing speeches and stories of tragedy, resilience, and hope. Even though police were present at the action, they only provided traffic control for the protest, and there were no conflicts with enforcement or arrests made at the action.

D-Day

July 14, 2021 – Action at Vancouver Police Department Detachment

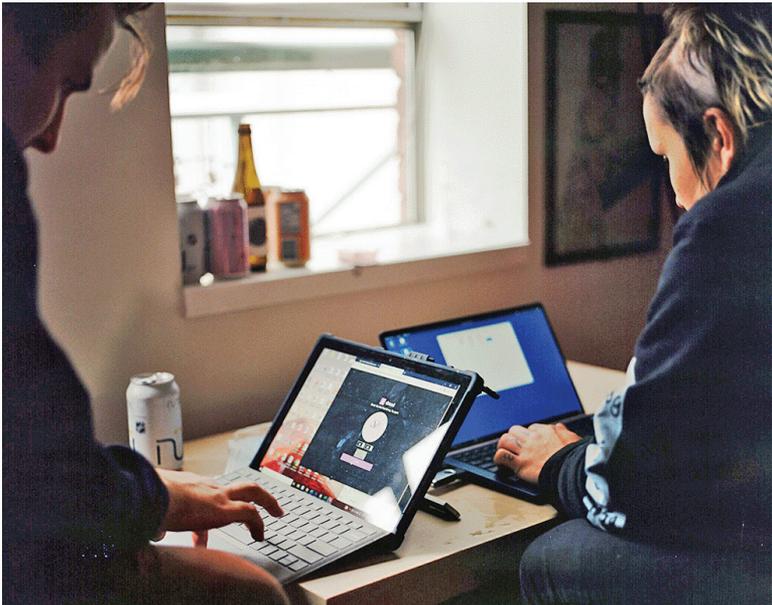
After the second DULF demonstration, there were extensive discussions between the City of Vancouver and other community stakeholders, including VANDU, regarding an application to the federal government to decriminalize the personal possession of drugs in Vancouver. The purpose of these meetings was to collectively work out details of this decriminalization proposal. However, the voices of drug policy experts and people with lived experience with substance use were marginalized and disregarded when challenged by representatives from the Vancouver Police Department. This became particularly apparent when the city finalized the “Vancouver Model” of decriminalization with the drug threshold limits for possession being dangerously low, contrary to actual patterns of substance use as measured and reported by VANDU.

In response to the exclusion of meaningful input of drug users from the “Vancouver Model” of decriminal-



July 14, 2021, DULF and VANDU event poster.

ization, the dangerously low threshold limits, and the lack of any provisions for the regulation of the illicit supply of drugs, a third action was proposed. Many different ideas were suggested for the action, but ultimately DULF and VANDU decided that a drug giveaway in front of a Vancouver Police Department detachment with



Jeremy Kalicum and Eris Nyx navigating the dark web to source substances for future distributions. Photo by Jackie Dives, reprinted with permission.



Vancouver city councillor Jean Swanson preparing to distribute safe supply at the DULF/VANDU event. Photo by Jackie Dives, reprinted with permission.

amounts exceeding the proposed threshold limits made an impactful statement. Considering the high risk of distributing illicit substances on the doorstep of the local police, the group called on support from people who had expressed support for DULF actions in the past. They contacted Vancouver city councillor Jean Swanson, who carried with her a long history of supporting justice for Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, and pitched the idea, to which she promptly and unapologetically agreed.



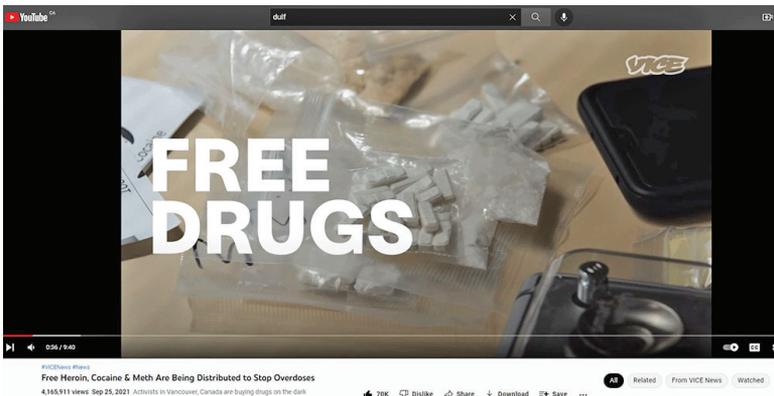
Newly developed packaging designed by DULF to accommodate larger amounts for distribution.

With the idea cemented, the group began to work on the logistics of the action and further develop the compassion club model (a cooperative model where people who use drugs can access tested substances). Notably, to maintain some control and temper expectations, the model moved to distributing substances to established and prominent drug user groups, such as VANDU, who would then distribute the safe supply to their existing membership. There was also a redesign of the packaging for larger amounts of substances.

DULF Goes Viral

Vice News YouTube Feature

A fundamental component of DULF's ability to act is public attention and support, and as such, there was a concerted effort made in mid-2021 to get as much media attention as possible. While dozens of stories had been written by local publications about DULF actions, there were a few pieces that had noteworthy impact. First was the July 14, 2021, Vancouver Is Awesome article enti-



Screenshot of YouTube video posted by Vice News with over four million views.

tled “Free heroin, cocaine and meth handed out outside of the Vancouver Police Department,” which was promptly posted in the Reddit community r/worldnews and reached the front page of Reddit within an hour. It received 17,700 upvotes before being removed by community moderators. This article proved to other outlets that pieces on DULF’s initiatives did have broad appeal to the public.

Subsequently, on September 25, 2021, Vice News released a YouTube video entitled “Free heroin, cocaine & meth are being distributed to stop overdoses,” highlighting DULF’s previous actions and exploring the model. This video has been the most successful release regarding DULF and has over four million views.

Moms Stop the Harm Collaboration and Applications to Health Canada

August 31, 2021

In anticipation of the 2021 International Overdose Awareness Day (IOAD), DULF and VANDU began to prepare an application to Health Canada requesting an exemption from the prohibition against possession and trafficking illegal substances under section 56(1) of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (CDSA). Section 56 grants the federal minister of health the ability to exempt any person, class of persons, or any controlled substance from provisions of the CDSA if the minister believes the exemption is necessary for a medical or scientific purpose or is otherwise in the public interest. This is the same exemption that has allowed the operation of Insite (supervised injection site) and temporary overdose prevention sites.

After composing a fifty-six-page report, complete with letters of support, relevant citations, signed affidavits,

sworn statements from people who use drugs, and letters of support, DULF submitted the application on August 31, 2021, in tandem with another distribution of cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine in front of the Vancouver office of provincial minister of health Adrian Dix. At this event, Moms Stop the Harm (MSTH), a national advocacy group, joined DULF in distributing the illicit substances and publicly aligned itself with the movement for community-led compassion clubs. On this day, DULF also facilitated a province-wide substance giveaway where drug user groups in every health authority in British Columbia were provided with cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine to distribute to their membership.



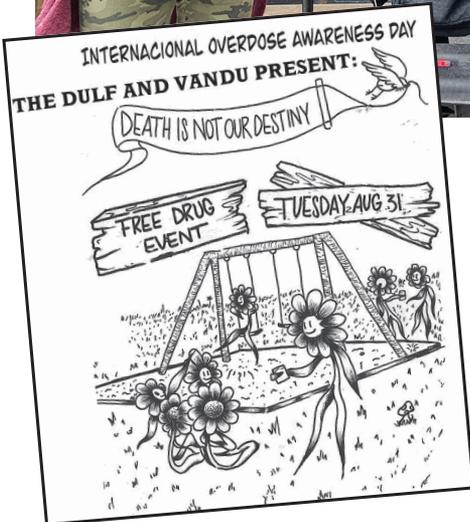
MSTH and DULF representatives on International Overdose Awareness Day 2021 outside the Vancouver office of provincial health minister Adrian Dix. Photo by Jackie Dives, reprinted with permission.



Members of MSTH attend a DULF event holding pictures of loved ones lost to preventable and accidental drug poisonings. Photo by Jackie Dives, reprinted with permission.

Shortly after International Overdose Awareness Day, DULF and VANDU completed an application for a supplementary Health Canada Substance Use and Addictions Program (SUAP) grant for funding to evaluate the ongoing compassion club activities. Notably, this grant had been the federal government's preferred tool for fostering innovation in this field. With these two applications in place, DULF and VANDU continued to rally support for the applications by collecting letters from Moms Stop the Harm, Fair Price Pharma (a domestic pharmaceutical supplier of

heroin), Vancouver Coastal Health, First Nations Health Authority, Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, Portland Hotel Society, and the BC Centre on Substance Use, among several others. The highest-profile of these support letters was from Vancouver City Council; it was put forward by Councillor Swanson and passed unanimously with the condition that all substances would be obtained through a legal and regulated supplier, such as Fair Price Pharma.



Left: DULF poster for International Overdose Awareness Day 2021.
Above: Members of the Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society receiving safe supply to distribute to their group membership, Vancouver, 2021. Photo by Nathaniel Canuel, reprinted with permission.

Dope on Arrival Giveaway Program

In an effort to put continual pressure on the provincial and federal governments, DULF developed a crowd-sourced sustainer donor campaign and committed to using the funds to provide a tested and labelled supply of cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine to Vancouver-based drug user groups every time the BC Coroners Service data on illicit drug toxicity deaths is released. At the time of writing, DULF had given out over 345 doses each of cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine, without a single reported overdose, either fatal or non-fatal, with actions on December 9, 2021; February 9, 2022; March 11, 2022; April 14, 2022; May 4, 2022; and June 9, 2022, fulfilling its commitment to keep pace with the BC Coroners Service releases.

The April 14, 2022, action coincided with the sixth anniversary of the declaration of the overdose crisis in British Columbia. On this day, the Drug User Liberation Front partnered with drug user groups across BC to demonstrate again



Brian O'Donnell preparing DULF-provided substances to distribute to VANDU members. Photo by VANDU, reprinted with permission.

that community-led compassion clubs could be operated in communities everywhere in the province. The groups that participated in this event were the British Columbia Association of People on Opiate Maintenance (Vancouver), Coalition of Peers Dismantling the Drug War (Vancouver), Coalition of Substance Users of the North (Quesnel), i2i Peer Support (Sunshine Coast), Mountainside Harm Reduction Society (Chilliwack), Northern Sun Helpers (Fort St. John), SOLID Outreach (Victoria), Tenant Overdose Response Organizers (Vancouver), Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (Vancouver), and Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society (Vancouver). On this day, seventeen grams of tested and labelled heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine were distributed to members of drug user groups across the province.



DULF designed flyer for the Dope on Arrival Campaign.

Health Canada Response to Applications

On March 23, 2022, VANDU and DULF received a response from Health Canada regarding the SUAP proposal for evaluation funding. It effectively amounted to a rejection on the basis that DULF and VANDU did not have the section 56(1) exemption that would be required to operate legally. This was not completely surprising to the groups, but there was a palpable sense of irony that the section 56(1) exemption request, submitted nearly a month before the SUAP application, had been sitting on a Health Canada desk for six months.

Two hundred forty-five days and 1,333 preventable overdose deaths in BC after the submission of the section 56(1) exemption request, the groups received a response from Health Canada on April 21, 2022. While this process was supposed to be an iterative one, there had only been two communications from Health Canada, the first to ask trivial questions about the proposal (which were largely covered in the application), and the second to reject the application.



A member of VANDU passes a dose of DULF-sourced substances to a community member. Photo by Jackie Dives, reprinted with permission.

Continuing the Fight

By rejecting the exemption request and in their communications with drug user groups, federal regulators have demonstrated their disregard for the safety and well-being of people who use drugs. This raises concerns regarding the rights of people who use drugs provided under sections 7 and 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. As was the case with Insite, it seems clear that a legal challenge will be necessary to make tangible progress on

the federal stage. At the time of writing this history, DULF is committed to continuing the fight to finally bring a level of regulation to the illicit drug market and move the concept of safe supply from rhetoric to reality through civil disobedience, legal challenges, advocacy, education, and dialogue.

By DULF and VANDU @ July 25, 2022
Vancouver, BC

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