northern child and youth

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Health Canada Santé Canada

Lakehead UNIVERSITY

The Centre of Excellence is committed to ensuring that young people with special needs living in rural and northern communities receive the best services Canada has to offer. Established in 2000, the Centre is centralized at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario. The national partners are: Memorial University in Newfoundland, Mount St. Vincent University in Nova Scotia, University of Northern British Columbia and the Government of Nunavut. The Centre is also involved with over 200 community, government and corporate partners across Canada.

Substance abuse is a problem for many young Canadians. The Task Force at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) researches the issue of substance abuse, particularly how it related to a variety of special needs. Alcohol, drugs, and solvents are a primary concern. In rural and northern communities, substance abuse programs for youth are often limited or unavailable. We need to make available programs that are specific to the needs of youth living in these remote communities.

Substance Abuse and the Centre of Excellence for Children and Adolescents with Special Needs

You can contact any Task Force in the Centre of Excellence for Children and Adolescents with Special Needs by visiting the National Website at www.coespecialneeds.ca.
You are also welcome to directly contact the UNBC Task Force on Substance Abuse.
Our website is www.unbc.ca/centreca
Our email address is special@unbc.ca
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Northern BC candidates speak on substance abuse and special needs

For this newsletter edition, staff at the UNBC Task Force on Substance Abuse thought it would be interesting to gain insight on provincial election candidates' perspectives on substance abuse and how it relates to childhood development. We asked candidates from the Green Party, New Democratic Party, and the Liberal Party, in the eleven ridings of northern BC to answer the following question:

> **There is a growing understanding about the negative relationship between prenatal drug and alcohol exposure and healthy child development: the relationship, however, is complex, involving issues of education, access to resources, nutritional sources, diagnostic capabilities, and intervention and prevention strategies. What role in this complex issue do you envision for the next provincial government and, if elected, how would you guide government policy and programming toward your vision?**

These are the responses we received (in the order we received them):

The Green Party of BC would ensure that the 7,000 children waiting for an assessment are evaluated within one year so they can receive services, by increasing the budget and staff of the Ministry of Children and Family Development

Grant Fraser, Green Party
Kamloops North Thompson

"An once of prevention is worth a pound of cure." may be an abused quote at times, but is a reality in FASD. Preventative education is of utmost importance starting with parents and youth, this will have a two fold long term effect a reduction in affected children and a cost reduction to our health care dollars that is already stretched to its maximum. I will support all initiatives that the Green Party as put forth in its platform to increase the expenditure of our health care system to include preventative medicine as well as education, to reduce future occurrence of such detrimental activities as drugs and alcohol abuse by pregnant women and teens.

Denis L Gendron, Green Party
Prince George North

I think there are two main answers to your question.
- The Green Party firmly believes in looking at the long term solutions to problems. Short term investment for long term benefits is always worth it. We need to expend a lot more effort dealing with problems, such as substance abuse amongst expectant mothers, and the issues that cause those problems to emerge. A Green government would pursue an aggressive policy of trying to solve these problems. Obviously these are very personal issues and throwing some money or creating a ministry is not going to suddenly make every situation perfect. But the government does need to do a lot more on this issue.
- The Green Party would immediately restore funding to the many social support agencies and ministries that have been reduced under the current government.

Hondo Arendt, Green Party
North Coast

I believe that we must be more deliberate in our approach to prevention, including investing more tax dollars. Too often we are "penny wise and pound foolish" in our approach to most issues. Investing in the prevention of drug and alcohol related developmental problems must be seen as a wise and worthwhile investment in a progressive society. Not only will this investment improve the quality of life for citizens (present and future), it will reduce health care costs and allow our health dollars

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to be directed to less easily preventable illnesses and primary care activities.

Bob Simpson, NDP
Cariboo North

To reply in a brief and concise manner: I think that education is the best way to deal with this issue. We also need to restore funding to social workers to help deal with these kinds of issues.

Andrej DeWolf, Green Party
Prince George-Omineca

Candidates were asked individually, however, the New Democratic Party chose to respond in the following fashion:

New Democrats believe that alcohol and drug abuse must be viewed as a public health issue, with multiple causes and diverse effects. One of the most serious effects of alcohol abuse that we as a province are now coming to terms with is the thousands of BC children affected by FASD. The impact of this phenomenon on our families, communities, schools and the province as a whole cannot be overstated.

Research tells us that use of a substance is not the only determining factor in the development of FASD, and other alcohol and drug-related birth defects, but rather that genetics and environmental factors - such as poverty, family violence, poor nutrition, and inadequate housing - also play a role. The provincial government has an important contribution to make in the provision of a social safety net that promotes the best chance for healthy child development.

The provincial government also has an important role, in close collaboration with communities, in developing effective public education and support services that promote healthy pregnancies and awareness of prenatal health in the community at large. The government should also ensure effective screening, outreach, prevention and treatment for women at risk and their babies. In order for these programs to be effective, we feel very strongly that they must address diverse audiences in culturally appropriate manner, and thus be able to actually reach women at risk - be they rural, urban, First Nations, members of an ethnic minority, or young teens.

As a model of intervention, the NDP has stated its commitment to the harm reduction model which sees abstinence as the best possible option, but works in the context of community standards and supports women at whatever stage of pregnancy they are at to reduce the harm to the fetus. Effective intervention also provides practical supports to women at risk and involves preventative efforts to reduce the chance of a future drug or alcohol-affected pregnancy.

Given the role played by socio-economic factors such as poverty, housing, nutrition and violence in the development of FASD and other alcohol and drug-related birth defects, we find it distressing to see the manner in which, under Gordon Campbell, our province's social safety net has been torn apart.

Under the BC Liberals, British Columbia has the biggest gap between rich and poor in all of Canada. And more children are living in poverty - almost one in five children in British Columbia now live in poverty. Yet, despite his promise to "make children the number one priority and devote adequate resources" Gordon Campbell targeted the Ministry of Children and Family Development for some of his government's largest budget reductions - over $200 million since 2001. And as recently leaked documents indicate, rather than having learned from his mistakes, Gordon Campbell is targeting the Ministry for Children and Family Development for more cuts next year.

The New Democrat plan will rebuild the social safety net through investments in housing, child care, income assistance, legal aid, and frontline women's centres. We have pledged to put resources into the Ministry of Children and Families, and support the transition of services to regionally-based and community-based agencies. The New Democrat health plan doubles the funding for public health and prevention in mental health and addiction services. This investment includes earlier identification and support for people at risk through expanded outreach programs, and the expansion of community-based recovery support and counseling.

New Democrats believe that public health and community-based programs are not only a necessary feature of a compassionate society, they make economic sense. As the BC Liberal government's own FASD website acknowledges, the financial cost of not investing in the area of FASD is formidable, since each child affected by FASD "may require an estimated $1 million to $2

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million over the course of their lifetime to support remedial medical, educational and social costs." And in a rare moment of praise for the former NDP government, the Campbell government also acknowledges that it was under former Premier Mike Harcourt that our province first began to positively and proactively address the issue of prenatal drug and alcohol exposure and healthy child development.

The New Democratic Party

The following candidates did not provide a response to our question:

Bulkley Valley Stikine – Leanna Mitchell (Green), Dennis MacKay (Lib).
Cariboo North – Steve Wallace (Lib), Doug Gook (Green).
Cariboo South – Charlie Wyse (NDP), Ed Sharkey (Green), Walt Cobb (Lib)
Kamloops-North Thompson – Kevin Krueger (Lib), Mike Hanson (NDP).
North Coast – Gary Coons (NDP), Bill Belsey (Lib).
Peace River North – Clarence Apsassin (Green), Richard Neufeld (Lib), Brian Churchill (NDP).
Peace River South – Blair Lekstrom (Lib), Ariel Lade (Green), Pat Shaw (NDP).
Prince George-Mount Robson – Wayne Mills (NDP), Shirley Bond (Lib), Don Roberts (Green).
Prince George North – Pat Bell (Lib), Deborah Poff (NDP).
Prince George Omineca – Charles Fraser (NDP), John Rustad (Lib).
Skeena – Patrick Hayes (Green), Robin Austin (NDP), Roger Harris (Lib).