

# Public Health Association of BC

Summer



School

## Simplifying Complexity: Public Health Approaches & Practice in Complex Systems



Public Health  
Agency of Canada

Agence de la santé  
publique du Canada



# Safer Supply

In 2019 PHABC Board endorsed a safer supply statement

## Key Points

- Prohibitionist approach to drug policy has not stopped illegal substances from entering the market or prevented use
- Illegal supply is contaminated and presents risk for PH
- A comprehensive PH approach is needed including: harm reduction; addictions treatment, prevention, and the legalization and regulation of all psychoactive substances
- In the meantime, safer supply initiatives must be scaled up and out with support from provincial govt, physicians, PH, public safety, allied health professionals, and guided by the wisdom of people with lived experience.

# Complex Adaptive Systems

## What are Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS)?

- The term 'complex adaptive system' can be used to describe any system made up of interrelated components that constantly act and react to each other
- CAS are both unpredictable and resilient

## Complex Adaptive Systems thinking can assist with:

- Defining public health problems
- Implementing multifaceted interventions
- Challenging assumptions about simple cause and effect models
- Evaluating intervention outcomes
- Supporting collaborative approaches to maximize impact

# Complex Adaptive Systems in Public Health

- CAS frameworks put complex problems into context, and promote shared understandings/approaches that recognize interconnectedness, interdependence, and collective action.
- Goal is not to simplify complex systems, but to illuminate so stakeholders can see their place in collective PH action.

## We need to start thinking differently

	Reductionist	Systems Thinking
Problem exploration	Isolate parts	Explore emergent nature of the whole
Goal	Solve a problem	Develop shared understanding of problem, approach, progress
Nature of problem	Understood objectively	Multiple causes, no single solution, perspective and context matter
Responsible to take action	Others	Everyone

# Drug Policy and Safer Supply

- Drug policy exists within CAS'. Interactions among system actors have evolved to produce constant changes in laws, enforcement activities, patterns of drug use, attitudes about drug use, the composition of the illegal drug supply, prevention efforts, treatment paradigms and harm reduction initiatives.
- Safer supply efforts must target diverse stakeholders, socio-political values & facts, and interventions that interact to produce or limit potential for change.