

Joe Cressy, Chair
Board of Health
City of Toronto

November 16th, 2020



Dear Councillor Cressy and Board of Health members:

Re: HL23.2 Opioid Poisoning Crisis in Toronto

As nurses who work with people who are homeless and people who use drugs, we see first hand the need for a more robust response to the opioid crisis here in Toronto, Ontario and all across Canada.

Prior to the pandemic, the response to the opioid crisis was not meeting the needs of the people in our community, resulting in the deaths of thousands of people across Canada. Now during COVID-19, people are dying from opioid poisoning more than ever. In Toronto, we are seeing near doubling of overdose deaths resulting from changes in drug supply, increased isolation and increased barriers to access to harm reduction services, further adding fuel to this public health crisis that is already beyond an emergency.

As Street Nurses who have been working during the pandemic on top of the opioid crisis, we have known countless people who have died from a toxic drug supply. In Ontario alone, 46 people are dying from overdoses a week, directly related to the inaction from our government officials who have failed to address this emergency. Advocates have also been demanding for years for action on the housing crisis, which sees housing costs remain impossibly high and shelters remaining full, leaving people with nowhere to go and further displacing people away from much needed supports. The community has been dealing with co-occurring epidemics of the housing and overdoses crises for years which have been rapidly claiming the lives of thousands of people adding insurmountable grief to this dire situation.

People who use drugs deserve the best supports possible to ensure the safety of their lives. As nurses, we know the value of what housing, harm reduction services and decriminalization of drug use brings to one's life. We have seen how housing has provided much needed safety and stability to ensure the wellbeing of our clients, how the provincially funded naloxone program has gotten life saving antidote into the hands of many community members while overdose prevention sites have provided a safe place for people to use drugs, all resulting in thousands of lives saved, but more needs to be done urgently.

The Street Nurses Network supports the recommendations from the Medical Officer of Health to decriminalize simple possession of all drugs for personal use, provide additional funding to expand safer-supply programs, and to convene a multi-sectoral overdose task force including people who use drugs, to address this public health emergency. We also see the need to ensure that people have safe and affordable places to live and stable access to harm reduction services, including within the shelter system that needs to see at least 2000 hotel-shelter beds added to the system imminently. We recognize the critical need to act on these recommendations now before thousands of more people needlessly die. The government has the power to save lives and they should not wait any longer.

We look forward to hearing your decision.

Sincerely,
Roxie Danielson, RN, Street Nurse
(On behalf of the Street Nurses Network)