



REPORT FOR ACTION

Toronto Indigenous Overdose Strategy

Date: February 6, 2019

To: Board of Health

From: Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

SUMMARY

The opioid poisoning crisis continues unabated in Toronto and in communities across the country. Indigenous individuals and communities have experienced profound grief and loss from this crisis. While there is limited data available, we know that many Indigenous People in Toronto have overdosed and some have died as a result of the toxic illicit drug supply. New prevention, harm reduction and treatment initiatives have been implemented in recent years, but not on the scale or with the urgency required. For Indigenous communities in Toronto, the lack of culturally-safe services that reflect the diversity of Indigenous values and traditions are contributing to this crisis.

The need for a separate Indigenous-led process to develop an overdose prevention and response strategy for Indigenous People in Toronto was recommended in the *Toronto Overdose Action Plan* (TOAP). This staff report provides an overview of the recently developed *Toronto Indigenous Overdose Strategy* (TIOS), which is intended as a companion document to the TOAP. Development of the TIOS was led by an Indigenous facilitator in collaboration with an advisory committee comprised of Indigenous service providers and community members, and Toronto Public Health (TPH) staff. Indigenous service providers and non-Indigenous service providers that work with Indigenous People who use substances were consulted as part of this initiative. However, this report is deeply rooted in the perspectives and advice received from a diverse range of Indigenous People who use/have used substances and who were the main stakeholders consulted for this strategy.

The directions in the TIOS align well with those of the TOAP. The TIOS directs recommendations to all levels of government and community service providers in the areas of prevention, harm reduction and treatment. The recommendations are grounded in an Indigenous world view that seeks to reconnect Indigenous People to their culture and traditions as part of improving health and well-being holistically. Overall, people said they want Indigenous services delivered by Indigenous service providers, in particular, Indigenous peer workers with lived experience of substance use.

Toronto Public Health is strongly committed to supporting implementation of the recommended actions in TIOS, and will undertake the actions directed to TPH. Toronto Public Health will dedicate an Indigenous staff resource to assist in supporting the implementation of TIOS in collaboration with Indigenous service providers and

community members, including Indigenous People who use/have used substances, and City divisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. The Board of Health Endorse the *Toronto Indigenous Overdose Strategy*, as outlined in Attachment 1.
2. The Board of Health again urge the Government of Canada and the Province of Ontario to fund and support the development of Indigenous-led overdose prevention and response action plans at the federal and provincial levels.
3. The Board of Health urge the federal and provincial to align 2019/2020 (and beyond) funding calls with practical and immediate overdose responses, in particular access to funding supports for Indigenous agencies to create, strengthen and enhance culturally-safe outreach, mobile and peer support services to Indigenous Peoples who use substances.
4. The Board of Health urge the federal and provincial governments to contribute funding to Toronto Public Health's Toronto Urban Health Fund Indigenous Stream, which is under development, to support Indigenous agencies.
5. The Board of Health urge the federal and provincial governments to contribute funding to Toronto Public Health's Toronto Urban Health Fund to enhance support to Indigenous-specific programs and services in mainstream organizations to expand their outreach and harm reduction capacity.
6. The Board of Health urge the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care to dedicate funding for 24/7 Indigenous-led Consumption and Treatment Services in Toronto as part of the new Consumption and Treatment Services program.
7. The Board of Health urge the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care to ensure the availability of culturally-safe medical care to Indigenous Peoples who use substances now and into the future. Health care providers should explore opportunities to support the use of traditional medicines and approaches to healing, including facilitating access to Ceremony, Healing Circles, Elders, and/or Healers for their Indigenous clients.
8. The Board of Health urge the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care to require all provincially-funded health care providers that provide medical services to Indigenous Peoples in Toronto to demonstrate accountability through formal mandates and strategic plans for their investments and outcomes related to culturally safe care for Indigenous Peoples, including ongoing Indigenous cultural safety training and education for non-Indigenous health care providers.
9. The Board of Health urge the Ministry of Health and Long-term Care to increase and target funding to support the development and operationalization of culturally-safe,

appropriate, and on-demand abstinence-based treatment spaces for Indigenous Peoples.

10. The Board of Health forward the *Toronto Indigenous Overdose Strategy* to the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, the Toronto Indigenous Health Advisory Circle, the City's Aboriginal Affairs Committee, the City's Indigenous Affairs Office, the City's Shelter, Support and Housing Administration Division, the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council, and all local public health units in Ontario, and
11. The Board of Health direct the Medical Officer of Health to provide a one-year progress report on implementation of the *Toronto Indigenous Overdose Strategy* to the Board of Health and the Toronto Indigenous Health Advisory Circle in 2020.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no financial impacts associated with this report.

DECISION HISTORY

In March 2017, the Board of Health endorsed the *Toronto Overdose Action Plan*, which included a recommendation for an Indigenous-led process to develop an overdose strategy for Indigenous people in Toronto.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2017.HL18.3>

COMMENTS

Background

The opioid poisoning crisis continues unabated in Toronto and in communities across the country. Indigenous individuals and communities have experienced profound grief and loss from this crisis. While limited data is available, we know that many Indigenous People in Toronto have overdosed and some have died as a result of the toxic illicit drug supply. New prevention, harm reduction and treatment initiatives have been implemented in recent years, but not on the scale or with the urgency required. For Indigenous People, the lack of culturally-safe health and social services that reflect the diversity of Indigenous values and traditions are contributing to this crisis.

In 2013, research about premature deaths among Toronto's Indigenous communities was presented by Anishnawbe Health Toronto to the Board of Health (BOH). This action was part of the impetus to convene the Toronto Indigenous Health Advisory Circle, and development of the *Toronto Indigenous Health Strategy*. The *Our Health Counts Toronto* survey of Indigenous communities in Toronto led by Indigenous organizations and researchers, found that over 90 percent of Toronto's Indigenous population live in poverty, and 18 percent of Indigenous adults in Toronto used prescription opioids without a prescription or not as prescribed.¹

¹ Well Living House, St. Michael's Hospital (2016). *Our Health Counts Toronto: Developing a Population Based Urban Aboriginal Cohort to Assess and Enhance Individual, Family, and Community Health and Wellbeing*.

In light of this data and history, and as part of implementing the TOAP, TPH committed to working with an Indigenous facilitator to engage Indigenous communities in identifying overdose prevention and response strategies specific to Indigenous People, in accordance with the operating principles of the *Toronto Indigenous Health Strategy*. This recommendation was made in recognition that strategies developed from a “Western” perspective are not necessarily relevant or appropriate for Indigenous People, and that Indigenous People should identify issues and solutions for themselves. The TIOS is intended as a companion document to the TOAP.

The TOAP recommended that the federal and provincial governments should also develop Indigenous-led overdose prevention and response action plans for Indigenous People. However, as neither level of government has developed an Indigenous overdose strategy to date, it is recommended that the Board of Health renew calls for this action.

The following sections of the report provide an overview of TIOS (see full report in Attachment 1).

Guiding principles

The following operating principles from the *Toronto Indigenous Health Strategy* guided the process to develop TIOS:

- Health plans are developed with Indigenous Peoples as full partners.
- Wherever Indigenous Peoples go to access programs and services, they receive culturally appropriate, safe and proficient care, and all barriers to optimal care have been removed.
- Care is planned to be responsive to community needs and is appropriate, efficient, effective and high quality at both systems and interpersonal levels.
- Dedicated resources and funding for Indigenous health programs and services will support a coordinated and collaborative system.
- Leverage and build the capacity of Indigenous leadership and Indigenous communities to care for themselves.

The process was also guided by the following principles in the Canadian Mental Health Association (2018) report, *Care not Corrections: Relieving the Opioid Crisis in Canada*:

- Involving people with lived experience of substance use in policy planning and program development.
- Involving Indigenous communities in policy planning and program development.
- All health and social services for Indigenous communities should be grounded in culture and in supports that are Indigenous-controlled and culturally-safe, including those that are trauma-informed.
- Indigenous communities must have access to culturally-appropriate and safe services at all stages of care—from health promotion to treatment.

Process to develop the strategy

In spring 2018, the Toronto Central Local Health Integration Network contracted Minokaw Consulting to facilitate the development of an Indigenous overdose strategy for Toronto. The facilitator convened an advisory committee comprised of Indigenous service providers and community members, and TPH staff. This group was expanded

over the course of the project to include additional advisors from the Indigenous service sector, and individuals with expertise in overdose prevention and response generally. This group provided key insights on how best to engage Indigenous individuals who use substances, and service providers that work with them.

Seven advice circles were carried out with 70 Indigenous individuals who use/had used substances, as follows:

- Two men's circles (22 individuals);
- Two women's circles (19 individuals);
- One two-spirit circle (11 individuals);
- One circle with individuals who inject drugs (8); and,
- One youth circle (10 individuals).

In addition, 15 one-on-one conversations with Indigenous People who use substances were carried out by Indigenous community outreach workers.

Input was also gathered from 24 service providers (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) who serve Indigenous People at a facilitated session. This information was supplemented by seven in-depth survey responses from session participants.

What we heard

The individuals who participated as Advisors in the advice circles shared stories of disconnection, pain and sadness, but also of courage and hope. They also identified solutions to address the overdose crisis. Overall, people said they want Indigenous services delivered by Indigenous service providers, in particular, Indigenous peer workers with lived experience of substance use.

The following quotes from the TIOS report reflect the voices expressed, which in turn inform the recommended actions.

- *Advisors noted first and foremost the need for dignity and self-respect to remain intact.*
- *A strong desire to seek solace from culture (not to be "cured") resonated in all circles.*
- *Trauma was a constant theme...they have lost person after person, there has been little time to grieve the losses and no Ceremony for the passing of their friends and loved ones.*
- *The desire for services that meet basic needs of housing or safe spaces, personal cleanliness, and feeling satiated by food, as well as the simplicity of being hugged or touched with kindness was evident.*
- *Culturally-safe supports and services that recognize Indigenous Peoples as unique must be a guiding principle for services established for Indigenous People who use substances.*

- *The perception is that service workers are generally not knowledgeable about Indigenous culture and history and colonialism...this results in spaces in which Indigenous People who use substances feel judged and like misfits; they are less willing to seek out much needed assistance from such organizations.*

Key strategies and recommendations

1. *Expanded outreach, mobile and peer support services:*
All governments should increase funding to support Indigenous organizations and mainstream organizations who work with Indigenous People who use drugs to create, strengthen and enhance culturally-safe street outreach, mobile and support services for Indigenous People who use substances.
2. *Wide availability of naloxone and drug testing:*
The distribution of naloxone and associated training with Indigenous People who use substances should continue to be expanded, as should availability of naloxone through community agencies, social housing providers, etc. Further, the planned drug testing project for Toronto should be implemented as soon as possible.
3. *24/7 culturally-safe and appropriate harm reduction drop-ins and respite centres:*
Toronto Indigenous service agencies should develop 24/7 drop-in services and respite centres for specific groups (e.g. women, youth, and two-spirit), and provincial and federal governments should fund this service expansion for delivery through the TPH Toronto Urban Health Fund.
4. *24/7 Indigenous-only supervised consumption services:*
The provincial government should dedicate funding for Indigenous-led Consumption and Treatment Services, and Toronto Indigenous service providers should support Indigenous advocates, program staff, and volunteers with operating these services for specific groups (e.g. women, youth, and two-spirit).
5. *Culturally-safe and appropriate medical care:*
The provincial government should ensure the availability of culturally-safe medical care to Indigenous People who use substances, including the use of traditional medicines and approaches to healing such as access to Ceremony, Healing Circles, Elders, and/or Healers for their Indigenous clients, and there needs to be ongoing Indigenous cultural safety training for non-Indigenous health care providers.
6. *Culturally-safe, appropriate, and on-demand abstinence-based treatment:*
The provincial government should increase and target funding for culturally-safe, and on-demand abstinence-based treatment for Indigenous People, and Toronto Indigenous service agencies should develop 24/7 abstinence-based treatment services for specific groups (e.g. women, youth, and two-spirit).
7. *Affordable housing and safe shelters:*
City and community organizations should uphold agreements to collaboratively devise an action plan to address challenges with homelessness, housing gaps, and the need for enhanced housing supports for Indigenous People. The City should also advocate for increased federal and provincial funding to implement culturally-appropriate shelter spaces for Indigenous People.

The recommendations in TIOS align well with those in the TOAP and the *Toronto Indigenous Health Strategy*. The actions reflect evidence-based strategies grounded in both Indigenous health and substance use research and community knowledge. Actions related to the use of traditional medicines and approaches to healing, and the provision of culturally-safe services also align with recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. There is a serious lack of Indigenous-specific overdose strategies in Canada, and in that regard TIOS represents important leadership and action on this critical health issue. While the strategy was developed based on the perspectives and advice of Indigenous People in Toronto, the findings and recommendations will likely have relevance for other communities. Indeed, many Indigenous People living in Toronto come from communities elsewhere in the country, and bring those identities, connections and perspectives to bear on their lives here.

Toronto Public Health continues to take action to respond to the opioid poisoning crisis, and provides regular updates to the BOH. Initiatives include expanding the distribution of naloxone, overdose prevention and response training, supervised consumption services, and funding for peer initiatives. Some Indigenous service providers deliver overdose prevention and response services, and some mainstream organizations provide services to Indigenous People who use substances. However, it is clear from the TIOS consultations that there is a serious lack of culturally-safe or specific services to meet the needs of Indigenous People. Action is urgently needed and must be guided by Indigenous values and traditions.

Implementation of the strategy

Toronto Public Health is strongly committed to implementing the actions recommended in TIOS, in accordance with the guiding principles set out in the strategy. Specific actions that TPH will take include the following:

1. Dedicate an Indigenous staff resource to assist in supporting implementation of the strategy in collaboration with Indigenous service providers and community members, including Indigenous People who use/have used substances, and City divisions.
2. Implement TIOS actions directed to Toronto Public Health.
3. Submit a one-year progress report on the implementation of TIOS to the Board of Health and the Toronto Indigenous Health Advisory Circle in 2020.

Implementation of TIOS will also be coordinated with implementation of TOAP and the Toronto Indigenous Health Strategy to ensure alignment and strategic leveraging of resources and efforts.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Toronto Indigenous Overdose Strategy