

# Opioid Crisis – Summary of Construction Sector Consultation

## BACKGROUND

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On June 14, 2021, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health to convene a meeting with construction sector stakeholders, including the Ontario Construction Consortium and the Carpenters' District Council of Ontario, and the Chair, Toronto Board of Health, to discuss opioid use and overdoses among construction workers and how Toronto Public Health's comprehensive Toronto Overdose Action Plan can assist in addressing these issues and to report to the Board of Health in the Fall of 2021 on the outcomes and further recommendations.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2021.HL29.2>

The [Toronto Overdose Action Plan](#) provides a comprehensive set of actions for all orders of government to prevent and respond to drug overdoses. In response to a request from the Toronto Board of Health, Toronto Public Health convened a meeting with construction sector stakeholders on September 1, 2021 to discuss the impact of the opioid crisis on the sector and opportunities for action. Construction sector stakeholders identified the following areas for action: awareness and training, prevention, support and treatment, and data and evidence. It will take multiple partners working together to advance the actions identified by stakeholders at the meeting.

The meeting included representatives from the following organizations:

- Carpenters' District Council of Ontario
- Greater Toronto Sewer and Watermain Contractors Association
- Heavy Construction Association of Toronto
- Interior Systems Contractors Association
- London InterCommunity Health Centre
- Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development
- Ontario Construction Consortium
- Ontario General Contractors Association
- Ontario Harm Reduction Network
- People with Lived/Living Experience of Substance Use and Construction Work
- Residential Construction Council of Ontario
- Toronto and Area Road Builders Association
- Toronto Public Health

## WHAT WE HEARD

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### **Impact of opioid crisis on people in the construction sector**

In general, discussion participants do not see substance use happening on work sites or on coffee breaks. Although, the Ministry of Labour shared that there are isolated incidents where substance use issues and/or overdoses are occurring on work sites, particularly in overnight work.

While substance use may not be happening on work sites, participants see substance use as a workplace issue because employees are using substances, and substance use and overdose incidents are impacting the workplace. For example, the Carpenters' District Council of Ontario shared that they recently experienced the loss of a second year apprentice to an opioid overdose. The impact of this was felt through the entire organization, including among staff at their training centre and classmates.

Discussion participants agreed that substance use issues need to be addressed by organizations with the same level of seriousness as any other health and safety issue.

### **Actions taken by construction sector to respond to opioid crisis**

Representatives from the construction sector discussed initiatives and projects underway to respond to the opioid crisis in this sector.

#### **Initiatives to Increase Awareness and Provide Training**

- To raise awareness about the opioid crisis, RESCON has had webinars open to anyone in the industry about mental health and substance use. Meeting participants shared their appreciation that these webinars have been open to everyone in the industry.
- RESCON has also been developing and sharing practical tools to mitigate mental health and substance use incidents on- and off-site.
- The Carpenters District Council has offered a three-day program on mental health first aid to staff instructors and union reps to help them know how to respond if a worker raises a mental health concern. One of the challenges that was raised about mental health first aid training is that currently available programs are not tailored to the construction industry.
- The Carpenter's District Council is also working to build mental health topics into all of their training programs and developing a special program for staff and leadership about addressing the opioid crisis.

### Health and Safety

Meeting attendees discussed addressing substance use through a health and safety lens and described taking a more holistic approach to health and safety due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specific approaches are:

- The Ontario General Contractors Association includes substance use and mental health in their health and safety work and uses a "fit for duty" framework. They find that this approach breaks down barriers to talking about substance use and mental health by addressing these as safety issues. All workplace health and safety issues, including substance use issues, are discussed at the health and safety committee.
- The Ministry of Labour shared that one of the challenges they have seen is that substance use issues are difficult to identify in the workplace. In a lot of cases, substance use issues are not identified until it is too late.
- The provincial Labour Management Network is collaboratively addressing substance use issues, including developing fit for duty and fit for work documents and materials.

### Access to Counselling and Treatment

- The Ontario General Contractors Association provides employees with access to one-on-one counsellors through a phone app.
- The Greater Toronto Sewer and Watermain Contractors Association has negotiated a collaborative approach to substance use within their collective agreements. Their collective agreement has funds dedicated to help fund the DeNovo Treatment Centre and they are planning to build on this program through future rounds of bargaining.

### **Further actions to support addressing the opioid crisis in the construction sector**

The meeting included a discussion of what additional actions are required that would be helpful in addressing the opioid crisis in the construction sector.

### Initiatives to Increase Awareness and Provide Training

- Raise awareness about the distinction between mental health, substance use, and substance use disorder/addiction, i.e. substance use is not the same as a substance use disorder/addiction and those who use substances often do not have a mental illness diagnosis.
- Raise awareness about and breakdown substance use stigma, including in the language we use, which makes it difficult to talk about drug use and be open about it, especially on work sites due to fear of reprisal or safety issues.

- Provide training about substance use, overdose and overdose prevention, including (consider mandatory training):
  - Tailored mental health first aid training for the construction industry.
  - Training new hires about opioid use and opioid dependence prior to injury and receiving an opioid prescription.
  - Additional fit for duty training for employers and employees and ensuring that existing materials get into everybody's hands.

### Prevention

- Fund through employee benefits programs non-pharmaceutical options for injuries, such as physiotherapy.

### Support and Treatment

Provide more accessible and higher quality help for people with substance use issues, including:

- In-person appointments when virtual appointments may not be a good fit.
- Reduced wait times for treatment for those who want it.
- Options for people who would like to continue to use substances.
- Options for people with concurrent disorders (mental health and substance use).
- Training Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) counsellors to better support people who use substances.

### Evidence Reviews and Data

- Call for data on the differential impact of substance use on construction sub-sectors and various trades.
- Request data on the pathways that lead people to substance use, i.e. is it because of workplace injuries and opioid prescriptions.
- Request evidence reviews about effective substance use prevention.
- Request evidence reviews about best practices to address substance use issues.
- Establish a list of evidence-based services.

### Opportunities:

- Leverage construction stakeholders' strong labour management network to move this issue forward.
- Leverage the Carpenters District Council's willingness to partner with other organizations and experts in the field and bring their communications infrastructure to that partnership.
- Collate the data and evidence needs of stakeholders and determine if these could be shared with the Ministry of Labour to inform upcoming funded pilot.
- Create a hub where construction sector stakeholders can come together to develop ways to respond to the opioid crisis in the construction sector.

## SUMMARY

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The [Toronto Overdose Action Plan](#) provides a comprehensive set of actions for all orders of government to prevent and respond to drug overdoses. In response to a request from the Toronto Board of Health, Toronto Public Health convened a meeting with construction sector stakeholders to discuss the impact of the opioid crisis on the sector and opportunities for action. Construction sector stakeholders identified the following areas for action: awareness and training, prevention, support and treatment, and data and evidence. It will take multiple partners working together to advance the actions identified by stakeholders at the meeting.

## RESOURCES

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- Health Canada has information on substance use related stigma. People who use drugs face stigma and discrimination from family, friends, service providers, and society at large. We can all [learn more](#) and help address the drug poisoning crisis by using respectful language.
- Toronto Public Health offers free [online training](#) on the signs of opioid overdose, risk factors, and how to respond, including how to administer naloxone. The training may be completed on-demand or through a live webinar.
- Naloxone can temporarily reverse the effects of an opioid overdose and save lives. Naloxone is available for free at many pharmacies, as well as some community agencies. You can find out where [naloxone is available](#) across Ontario.
- In-person supervised consumption services are available in some communities in Ontario. Locations and hours of Toronto sites are available at [toronto.ca/consumptionservices](https://toronto.ca/consumptionservices).
- Virtual Overdose Response: There are anonymous and non-judgmental overdose response services available to people who use drugs. These help reduce the risk of fatal overdose.
  - There is a 24/7 [National Overdose Response Service](#) available by calling 1-888-688-6677.
  - There is the Be Safe app that provides overdose response through an app: [www.bebave.io](https://www.bebave.io).