



Canada's source for  
HIV and hepatitis C  
information

La source canadienne  
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le VIH et l'hépatite C

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## Board of Health Meeting No. 29 - Agenda Item HL 29.2

June 14, 2021

To the Members of the Board of Health,

CATIE is grieving the massive loss of friends, colleagues, family members, and loved ones in our community. CATIE is Canada's HIV and hepatitis C knowledge exchange broker and a trusted national source for up-to-date, unbiased information about HIV and hepatitis C. As a national organization that supports people working in HIV, hepatitis C and harm reduction, we continue to learn of countless losses within this sector – a devastating trend that has escalated since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

We have been overwhelmed by the unrelenting scale of overdose deaths in our communities – 6,000 people died in Canada last year. In Ontario, overdose deaths increased by 60% over the previous year when nearly 2,500 people died in 2020. During the pandemic, overdose deaths among people experiencing homelessness rose by 139%, with a significant increase in overdose deaths occurring in shelters, respites and physical distancing hotels.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also shown us what a strong and well-resourced response to a public health crisis can look like. This response has been in stark contrast to the limited action taken in response to the overdose crisis. Without substantive actions to meet the Board of Health recommendations, more and more people will continue to die. People who use drugs deserve better. They are valued and loved members of our communities.

In solidarity with the Toronto Overdose Prevention Society, we are calling on the City to not wait for other levels of government to step in and provide solutions when, in fact, there are many lifesaving interventions that can be enacted without them.

We call on the City of Toronto to immediately:

1. Enact drug decriminalization by urgently requesting a Section 56 exemption from the federal government for the City of Toronto. Toronto's Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Eileen de Villa, recommended decriminalization 3 years ago, with no action from the City since then. There is no time for another working group while people continue to die.
2. Ensure that people who use drugs are the primary stakeholder and expert group on all matters related to decriminalization in the City of Toronto;
3. Implement full-scale harm reduction supports and open overdose prevention sites in all shelters, respites, and physical distancing hotels;

4. Ensure mandatory and comprehensive overdose response training is provided to all staff (including security, employment agency and relief staff) in shelters, respites, and physical distancing hotels;
5. Implement regular and rigorous accountability measures across all City-funded shelters, respites, and physical distancing sites to ensure overdose preparedness;
6. Declare a moratorium on violent encampment evictions and support overdose response measures for encampment residents.

We demand that these measures be urgently adopted by this government as continued inaction will inevitably lead to more preventable deaths. We cannot allow this level of death and grief to be normalized.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Edmiston', with a large, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Laurie Edmiston,  
Executive Director  
CATIE

