

From: [Toronto Overdose Prevention Society](#)
To: [Board of Health](#)
Subject: My comments for 2021.HL29.2 on June 14, 2021 Board of Health
Date: June 11, 2021 11:10:14 AM
Attachments: [BOH Deputation-TOPS-June 10 2021.pdf](#)

To the City Clerk:

Please add my comments to the agenda for the June 14, 2021 Board of Health meeting on item 2021.HL29.2, Toronto Overdose Action Plan: Status Report 2021

I understand that my comments and the personal information in this email will form part of the public record and that my name will be listed as a correspondent on agendas and minutes of City Council or its committees. Also, I understand that agendas and minutes are posted online and my name may be indexed by search engines like Google.

Sincerely,
Raffi Balian

Comments:

Statement from Toronto Overdose Prevention Society to the Board of Health

Meeting No. 29

June 14, 2021

Agenda Item HL 29.2

To the Members of the Board of Health,

We are still grieving and will not attend your meeting.

We are still grieving our friends, colleagues, family members, and loved ones. Each one of us is overwhelmed by the unrelenting scale of overdose deaths in our communities. 6,000 people died in Canada in 2020. Last year in Ontario, overdose deaths increased by 60% when nearly 2,500 people died. Overdose deaths among people experiencing homelessness rose by 133% during the pandemic, with a significant increase in overdose deaths occurring in shelters, respites and physical distancing hotels. **As this committee meets to talk about the overdose action plan and make recommendations without substantive actions, more and more people are dying.**

The harm reduction community has come to this committee countless times to depute as the overdose crisis continues to escalate - we have shared evidence, told personal stories about those we knew, and pleaded with this committee to urgently address this health emergency. Instead, this committee has made recommendation after recommendation without concrete action. Enough of the recommendations and endless working groups: It's time for the City of Toronto to act.

Instead of coming to this meeting to depute any further, we are using this time to hold space outside Toronto City Hall to grieve and honour the ones we've lost as a result of

policy inaction and the racist, colonial and oppressive laws which have directly led to this toxic drug supply.

Instead of using the powers at their disposal, the Toronto Board of Health has been satisfied to issue a number of toothless recommendations to other levels of government. The buck-passing has to stop. **The City has a number of tools at their disposal to implement rapid, meaningful responses to stem the tide of preventable overdose deaths.** This includes the immediate implementation of Overdose Prevention Sites in shelters, respites and hotels, and providing comprehensive training on overdose response to all of the staff (including security, employment agency, and relief staff).

Importantly, the City of Toronto could also request an immediate Section 56 exemption from the federal government to enact decriminalization for the City of Toronto. Dr. Eileen de Villa, Toronto's Medical Officer of Health, recommended that the City implement decriminalization in 2018 - in the 3 years since, the City has refused to enact meaningful changes to decriminalize people who use drugs, putting them at increased risk of health harms. **There is no need for yet ANOTHER working group to examine this issue. [Leading civil society organizations are calling on the City of Toronto to immediately implement decriminalization, without delay, and we join in this call.](#)** We also highlight that people who use drugs and people who have experienced criminalization for their drug use must be the primary stakeholder and expert group providing recommendations to the City of Toronto in all matters surrounding decriminalization.

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. Immediately 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.

In grief and rage,

Raffi Balian

Toronto Overdose Prevention Society



Statement from Toronto Overdose Prevention Society to the Board of Health

Meeting No. 29

June 14, 2021

Agenda Item HL 29.2

To the Members of the Board of Health,

We are still grieving and will not attend your meeting.

We are still grieving our friends, colleagues, family members, and loved ones. Each one of us is overwhelmed by the unrelenting scale of overdose deaths in our communities. 6,000 people died in Canada in 2020. Last year in Ontario, overdose deaths increased by 60% when nearly 2,500 people died. Overdose deaths among people experiencing homelessness rose by 133% during the pandemic, with a significant increase in overdose deaths occurring in shelters, respites and physical distancing hotels. **As this committee meets to talk about the overdose action plan and make recommendations without substantive actions, more and more people are dying.**

The harm reduction community has come to this committee countless times to depute as the overdose crisis continues to escalate - we have shared evidence, told personal stories about those we knew, and pleaded with this committee to urgently address this health emergency. Instead, this committee has made recommendation after recommendation without concrete action. Enough of the recommendations and endless working groups: It's time for the City of Toronto to act.

Instead of coming to this meeting to depute any further, we are using this time to hold space outside Toronto City Hall to grieve and honour the ones we've lost as a result of policy inaction and the racist, colonial and oppressive laws which have directly led to this toxic drug supply.

Instead of using the powers at their disposal, the Toronto Board of Health has been satisfied to issue a number of toothless recommendations to other levels of government. The buck-passing has to stop. **The City has a number of tools at their disposal to implement rapid, meaningful responses to stem the tide of preventable overdose deaths.** This includes the immediate implementation of Overdose Prevention Sites in shelters, respites and hotels, and providing comprehensive training on overdose response to all of the staff (including security, employment agency, and relief staff).

Importantly, the City of Toronto could also request an immediate Section 56 exemption from the federal government to enact decriminalization for the City of Toronto. Dr. Eileen de Villa, Toronto's Medical Officer of Health, recommendation that the City implement decriminalization in 2018 - in the



3 years since, the City has refused to enact meaningful changes to decriminalize people who use drugs, putting them at increased risk of health harms. **There is no need for yet ANOTHER working group to examine this issue. [Leading civil society organizations are calling on the City of Toronto to immediately implement decriminalization, without delay, and we join in this call.](#)** We also highlight that people who use drugs and people who have experienced criminalization for their drug use must be the primary stakeholder and expert group providing recommendations to the City of Toronto in all matters surrounding decriminalization.

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. Immediately 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.

In grief and rage,
Toronto Overdose Prevention Society