

**PRESENTATION TO TORONTO BOARD OF HEALTH**

**BY**

**CARPENTERS UNION DISTRICT COUNCIL OF ONTARIO – MIKE YORKE, PRESIDENT**

**AND**

**ONTARIO CONSTRUCTION CONSORTIUM – PHIL GILLIES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

**JUNE 14, 2021**

Our thanks to Chair, Councillor Cressy and to the Members of the Toronto Board of Health for the opportunity of deputing to you today.

We want to commend you for your efforts to curb the opioid overdose crisis in Toronto. You must be concerned, as we are, about the sharp increase in overdose deaths that occurred in 2020 and continues today.

We share your concern with how this crisis is impacting all Torontonians – drug users, their families and, in some cases, their coworkers. Today we'd like to share with you our particular concern about the how this is affecting the construction industry workforce which we represent. And we want to tell you about a campaign we have launched to focus attention on this.

Back in February, we were made aware by Douglas McCarron, General President of the Carpenters Union based in the U.S. of data that was published by the Centres for Disease Control indicating that more construction workers were dying of drug overdose than in any other employment sector of the economy. The CDC report said that close to one-third of the overdose deaths among employed persons were people working in construction. We decided then and there that we had to investigate this to try to determine if the situation was the same in Canada. Frankly, we had no reason to believe the situation in the industry in our country would be any different. There was no comprehensive data available here, but a lot of anecdotal evidence that we had a crisis here in Canada and Ontario particularly.

Our worst fears were confirmed on May 19<sup>th</sup> when the report came out from the Ontario Drug Policy Research Network and the Ontario Coroner's Office. That report, with which we are sure you are familiar, told us the following:

- In Ontario approximately 2500 people were lost to drug overdose in 2020, up from 1500 in 2019. An increase of 60% in one year.

- Of those people who were employed at the time of their death, 30% were employed in construction work. No other employment category even came close. Our best estimate is that somewhere between 120 and 150 construction workers died of overdose in Ontario last year.
- To put that in perspective, around 20 construction workers died in 2020 from workplace accidents. So, looking at health and safety issues across the board, this drug use/overdose situation is by far our biggest problem.

With this dire situation firmly in mind, we launched our public/industry information campaign The Other Pandemic on May 31<sup>st</sup>. Our website, should you want to take a look, is [TheOtherPandemic.ca](http://TheOtherPandemic.ca). On the website you will see our news release and it links to other pertinent information. There is also a public service video we had produced which includes comments by public health experts Dr Andrea Sereda and Nick Boyce, as well as by Mayor John Tory. We are planning to produce a second video as several other big city mayors have told us they want to show their support.

In brief, why are construction workers getting addicted and dying?

- Construction work is tough, physical work. Workers get injured and their doctors put them on prescription pain killers which are usually opioids.
- When the prescription runs out, some workers have become addicted. With no other option, some will go to the street to buy drugs. And the drug on the street is the potentially deadly fentanyl.
- Another factor is simply demographics. There is a disproportionately high number of young males who use hard drugs. And there are a lot of young men in construction.
- Then there is the question of disposable income. Construction is for the most part well-paying work. So, a construction worker is more likely to have money to spend on drugs should they be so inclined, than a retail or clerical worker.
- Finally, there is a macho 'I can handle anything' ethic that runs through our workforce. But in encountering fentanyl, workers are confronted with something they cannot handle. Nobody can.

What do we do about this? Our The Other Pandemic campaign makes the following recommendations:

1. Drug users should not use alone. They should either go to a supervised injection site, or at the very least use in the presence of another trusted individual with access to a Naloxone kit. We know that that this runs counter to the overall Covid 19 messaging to

our society as a whole, which is stay home, do not congregate with people outside your family etc. But for a hard drug user, this advice is not good. They should not use alone.

2. Secondly, because of the implications of our first recommendation, all construction workers should get vaccinated against Covid 19 – to reduce the chances of becoming infected.
3. Thirdly, contractors and construction unions must step up their education and counselling programs to inform all workers of the dangers inherent in using street drugs.
4. Fourthly, governments need to increase addiction and counselling services to meet this unprecedented demand. We met with Ontario Mental Health and Addictions Minister Michael Tibollo on Friday last, and conveyed this message to him.
5. And finally, we urge workers who are wrestling with addiction to seek help to try to stop. With a public health crisis manifesting itself in a 60% increase in deaths in one year, there has never been a better time to stop using hard drugs if you possibly can.

The Other Pandemic Campaign, spearheaded by the Ontario Construction Consortium, has an active partner in The Carpenters Union District Council of Ontario. We are also partnered with the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades and the Interior Systems Contractors Association. We also have expressed support from the Ontario General Contractors Association, Residential Contractors of Ontario, and the Central Ontario Building Trades Council.

Thank you again for this opportunity to appear today. We would be pleased to receive any questions you may have.