

To the Members of City Council,

Not everyone has a backyard. Not everyone can afford to drink at a licensed establishment, or feels safe and welcome to do so. If you are unhoused, this is particularly true, and it is compounded by the fact that shelters do not allow drinking. This is all to say that if you are a person experiencing homelessness, there is literally no place but public space in which you can consume alcohol.

Substance use, including the use of legal substances like alcohol, is deeply stigmatized among people who are unhoused. As someone who has worked with unhoused people for the past eight years, I know that public drinking by people who are homeless is disproportionately criminalized, leading to deep harm and financial cost to those who receive tickets or are arrested. Given that an estimated 10% of all interactions between Toronto Police Services and the public are with people experiencing homelessness, this also entails a substantial cost to the City that could be significantly reduced if drinking in parks were decriminalized.¹

Beyond reducing the unfair and costly criminalization of unhoused people, decriminalizing drinking in municipal parks also makes good sense as a harm reduction measure. Many people I have worked with utilize drop-in spaces to consume substances, including alcohol. While we are not licensed establishments, we understand that people have no other safe spaces in which to drink – especially spaces where staff and fellow service users can support people to better manage their alcohol use. Because there are few managed alcohol programs in Toronto, and none that are non-residential, there is a significant gap in services where many drop-ins step up to support people. Giving people who are unhoused safe spaces to drink helps to reduce consumption and health risks, including the risks associated with the consumption of non-beverage alcohol, e.g. mouth wash and hand sanitizer, without triggering withdrawal symptoms. And, to be clear, alcohol withdrawal entails significant health risks, including the potential for death in severe cases, and it can entail costly, unnecessary visits to the emergency room.

¹ <https://ccla.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Rethinking-Community-Safety-A-Step-Forward-For-Toronto-Full-Report-12.pdf>

If alcohol consumption were decriminalized in public parks, it could open the door to creating managed alcohol programs outdoors, where folks could drink safely and socially, and be connected to basic needs and health and social services and supports while doing so. People are already doing this inside drop-ins, but we need to further destigmatize alcohol consumption among unhoused people and expand spaces in which good harm reduction practices can be employed. Parks could be this space, as has happened in other cities, including Vancouver's successful Community Managed Alcohol Program.² This could also curtail drinking in spaces where unhoused people are much more apt to be criminalized, such as TTC vehicles or the bathrooms of restaurants and coffee shops.

People of every identity and socioeconomic circumstance drink alcohol, and they are already doing so in public spaces like municipal parks. Decriminalizing this practice will only have positive impacts by reducing profiling and ticketing, but also by laying the groundwork for better public health and harm reduction outcomes for unhoused people. The time is now: decriminalize drinking in Toronto's parks. It is the humane, equitable, and just thing to do.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diana McNally". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Diana Chan McNally
10 May 2022

² <https://www.phs.ca/applying-harm-reduction-to-alcohol-consumption-on-city-streets/>