

Developing a Mental Health and Addictions Strategy for Toronto

Date: March 29, 2023

To: Board of Health

From: Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

SUMMARY

The mandate of Toronto Public Health (TPH) is to improve the health of the population, reduce health inequities, and prepare for and respond to public health emergencies. In contrast to our health care delivery partners, such as hospitals and community-based health care agencies, public health achieves these objectives using a prevention focused approach, working at the population level. In this context, TPH works to promote mental health and respond to substance use issues across the population, which includes work to prevent and address the harms associated with substances.

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted mental health and increased the need for services and interventions. An overall increase in the use of substances, such as alcohol and cannabis, has also been observed.¹ Further, Toronto continues to be in the midst of a drug toxicity crisis, exacerbated by the continued impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, the Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario confirmed there were 591 opioid toxicity deaths in Toronto. Drug toxicity deaths are preventable and due in large part to the unregulated drug supply, where unpredictable potency combined with unexpected and concerning substances significantly increase the risk of overdose.

In June 2022, the Board of Health adopted a motion on the need for a mental health and addictions strategy for Toronto, and directed the Medical Officer of Health to update the Toronto Drug Strategy following extensive stakeholder engagement. This staff report provides an update on actions taken by Toronto Public Health to date, and makes recommendations on further steps to develop a Mental Health and Addictions Strategy.

Shelter, Support and Housing Administration (SSHA) and Social Development, Finance and Administration (SDFA) staff were consulted in the development of this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. The Board of Health request the Medical Officer of Health to continue to develop the comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy, which includes the refreshed Toronto Drug Strategy, with targeted actions to address mental health and substance use and present to the Board of Health in fall 2023.
2. The Board of Health delegate to the Medical Officer of Health the authority to complete the annual declaration of compliance for the Service Accountability Agreement between Toronto Public Health and Ontario Health, the funder for the Methadone Works – Opioid Substitution Clinic within The Works program.
3. The Board of Health request the Medical Officer of Health, in consultation with the City Manager, to convene and chair a Mental Health and Addictions committee of relevant City Divisions and Toronto Public Health, focused on coordinating the City of Toronto's policies and programs related to mental health and substance use.
4. The Board of Health reiterate its call requesting the Federal government to develop a national framework to permit the simple possession of all drugs for personal use.
5. The Board of Health request the Medical Officer of Health to continue working with Health Canada on the conditions that would allow for an exemption approval under Section 56(1) of the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* to decriminalize drug possession within the City of Toronto.
6. The Board of Health reiterate its calls requesting the Federal and Provincial governments to immediately scale up prevention, harm reduction and treatment services for people who use drugs.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact associated with the adoption of the recommendations in this report.

DECISION HISTORY

On June 20, 2022, the Medical Officer of Health provided an update to the Board of Health on the COVID-19 response and other public health functions and presented priorities for 2022-2023, including responding to the drug toxicity crisis and promoting mental health <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.HL38.2>.

On June 20, 2022, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health, in consultation with the City Manager, investigate options to better coordinate mental

health and addictions services in Toronto <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.HL38.7>.

On June 20, 2022, the Board of Health directed the Medical Officer of Health to continue working with Health Canada on the conditions that would allow for an exemption approval under Section 56(1) of the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* within the City of Toronto, and requested the Medical Officer of Health to conduct community consultations throughout 2022 to inform a refreshed Toronto Drug Strategy <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.HL38.3>.

Beginning in July 2018, the Board of Health has repeatedly called on the federal government and Minister of Health to decriminalize the possession of all drugs for personal use

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<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2020.HL23.2>

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2020.HL17.2>

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2021.HL29.2>

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<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.HL38.3>

COMMENTS

Status of Mental Health and Substance Use in Toronto

Mental health and mental illnesses have worsened in Toronto during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic period when compared to the pre-pandemic period, there has been an increase in the monthly rate of mental health and addictions-related outpatient visits to any physician. Error! Bookmark not defined. Further, a poll conducted in January 2022 for the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) found that that more Ontarians (24 percent) sought help for their mental health challenges compared to previous polls (17 percent in 2021 and 9 percent in 2020). That same survey reported that 43 percent of people found it difficult to access mental health supports, up from 37 percent at the start of the pandemic.¹ To learn more about the overall status of the health and well-being of the population, including mental health, see [Toronto's Population Health Profile 2023](#).

Ontario-wide data on the prevalence of substance use among adults and youth is available for alcohol, cannabis, and non-medical use of prescription opioids. Data for 2022 show that among adults, 80.4 percent reported alcohol use in the past twelve months, 32.9 percent reported using cannabis in the past twelve months, and 18 percent reported the non-medical use of prescription opioids in the past twelve months.² Data for 2021 show that among youth in grades 7-12, 31.8 percent reported alcohol use in the past 12 months, 17 percent reported cannabis use at least once in the past 12 months, and 12.7 percent reported non-medical use of prescription opioids in the past 12 months.³

Drug Toxicity Crisis in Toronto

In Toronto, the number of preventable drug toxicity deaths remains high due to an increasingly unpredictable and unregulated drug supply. The most current data on opioid toxicity deaths from the Office of the Chief Coroner estimate that in Toronto, 591 individuals died in 2021 and 545 individuals died in 2020, a 100 percent and 84 percent increase, respectively, compared to 2019.⁴

Non-fatal suspected opioid overdoses increased to an all-time high in 2021 before decreasing in 2022. In 2022, there were 3,684 non-fatal calls for suspected opioid overdoses attended by Toronto Paramedics Services. This was a 39 percent decrease compared to 2021, and similar to what was seen in 2020 and 2019.⁵ While opioid overdoses occur in all areas of Toronto, the neighbourhoods with the highest number of suspected opioid overdose calls are in the downtown core.⁵

Standards for Substance Use and Mental Health Promotion

Under the authority of the Ontario *Health Protection and Promotion Act*, the Ontario Public Health Standards and Guidelines specify the mandatory health programs and services to be provided by boards of health and outline the minimum expectations and requirements for the delivery of public health programs and services.

The [Substance Use Prevention and Harm Reduction Guideline, 2018](#) requires local public health, in collaboration with other partners, to develop programs and services to prevent or delay substance use and reduce the health and social harms associated with substance use in its population.

The [Mental Health Promotion Guideline, 2018](#) requires local public health, through multi-sectoral collaboration, to seek opportunities to implement whole-population and community-based interventions, embedding strategies and approaches across all public health programs and across the life course that promote mental health and prevent mental illnesses.

Update on Substance Use and Mental Health Promotion Programs

Clinical and Harm Reduction Programming at *The Works*

Toronto Public Health continues to provide a range of services to reduce drug-related harms for people who use drugs. The Works program provides supervised consumption services, opioid agonist therapy (such as methadone) and injectable Opioid Agonist Therapy (iOAT), in addition to overdose prevention and response training, nursing services, counselling, support and referrals and distributing harm reduction supplies and naloxone to agency partners across the city, and providing mobile and street outreach.

In 2022, The Works supported more than 21,000 visits for supervised injection, responding to more than 500 overdoses. Additionally, The Works and their community partners distributed more than three million needles and recorded almost 300,000 visits for harm reduction services. The Works also continues to prevent the spread of communicable diseases and provide health and social support to people who use drugs throughout the City of Toronto,

In February 2023, Toronto Public Health announced a new and innovative partnership between The Works, St. Michael's Hospital (Unity Health Toronto), and Toronto Western Hospital (University Health Network) that will expand supervised consumption services and better connect them with the range of health care offerings provided by acute care. These are the first such partnerships of this kind in Ontario. These partnerships are expected to respond to the significant need for harm reduction services in downtown Toronto and will help to connect clients to a broad range of health services.

iPHARE and Shelter Overdose Response Services

The Integrated Prevention and Harm Reduction initiative (iPHARE) is a multi-pronged effort by the City and community agencies to reduce opioid-related deaths in Toronto's shelter system. The initiative was established in December 2020 by Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, Toronto Public Health, community health and harm reduction partners, and people with lived experience of homelessness and substance use.

In 2022, iPHARE provided more than nine million dollars in funding for a range of harm reduction supports, including embedded harm reduction workers or visiting harm reduction outreach workers at 23 shelters, respites and shelter hotel locations identified as priority sites, and a mobile program to provide harm reduction support to clients required to self-isolate in shelters experiencing a COVID-19 outbreak, support services for enhanced intensive mental health case management supports and Urgent Public Health Needs Sites in selected shelters across the city.

Toronto Drug Strategy Refresh

As directed by the Board of Health in 2022, Toronto Public Health has conducted extensive community consultation with people who use drugs, community agency leaders, service providers, researchers, clinicians, policy makers, and city staff to inform a refreshed Toronto Drug Strategy. The engagement included a focus on population-specific needs through roundtables centred on the substance use considerations for youth, women, 2SLGBTQ+, and African, Caribbean, and Black populations, as well as building relationships with urban Indigenous partners to collectively address the drug toxicity crisis impacting urban Indigenous communities.

The update to the Toronto Drug Strategy will include lessons learned from the foundational 2005 Toronto Drug Strategy, the 2017 Overdose Action Plan and its 2019 update, and an interjurisdictional scan of international drug strategies. It will present a comprehensive approach to addressing substance-related issues in Toronto.

To coordinate the City of Toronto's policies and programs related to mental health and substance use programs, and new initiatives needed to address mental health, addictions, and substance use issues in the population, the Medical Officer of Health will convene and chair a Mental Health and Addictions committee of relevant City Divisions and Toronto Public Health.

A Made-in-Toronto Approach to Drug Criminalization

Beginning in July 2018, the Board of Health has consistently called on the federal government to decriminalize the possession of drugs for personal use and the Medical Officer of Health continues to recommend that the Board of Health call for Canada-wide decriminalization.

In the absence of a national approach, in 2021, the Board of Health directed the Medical Officer of Health to begin a process with Health Canada to decriminalize the possession of drugs for personal use within the City of Toronto. Toronto Public Health undertook extensive engagement with health providers, people with lived and living experience, the Toronto Police Service, and various City Divisions. On January 4, 2022, Toronto Public Health made an initial submission to Health Canada requesting an exemption to the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* to allow for the possession of drugs for personal use in the city, recognizing that substance use is a health issue and not a criminal one. This requested change has the potential to meaningfully improve the health and wellbeing of all Torontonians.

Toronto Public Health has conducted further engagements throughout 2022 and into 2023 with a diverse range of partners, including people with lived and living experience of drug use, service providers, and the Toronto Police Service on further details of the model, including the definition of personal possession, population-specific considerations, opportunities to enhance wraparound health and social services and referral pathways, and implementation considerations.

Toronto Public Health submitted a second submission to Health Canada on March 24, 2023, which recommends a Toronto model of decriminalization that includes the whole city of Toronto, all people in Toronto, all unregulated drugs in possession for personal use, and voluntary referrals to health and social services. Toronto Public Health continues to work with Health Canada and local organizations and partners to advance this alternative approach to criminalizing substance use.

Mental Health Promotion

Mental health promotion is foundational in all programs and services delivered by Toronto Public Health. While many Toronto Public Health staff and resources focused on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic through 2020 and into early 2023, Toronto Public Health promoted positive mental health throughout all COVID-19 response activities. For example, the ongoing rollout of COVID-19 vaccination, interactions with the public through COVID-19 case and contact management, and ongoing support to schools and other sectors provided opportunities to promote mental health.

Mental health promotion interventions were also embedded in activities related to harm reduction, including identifying mental health needs that support people who use substances and their community during each client interaction. Additionally, Toronto Public Health has been collaborating with the Downtown East Ontario Health Team, Gerstein Centre and other partners to develop a proposal for a 24/7 mental health and substance use crisis centre to support individuals who are experiencing a crisis related

to substance use or mental health, which would alleviate pressures on hospital emergency departments, Toronto Paramedic Services, and the Toronto Police Service.

A Renewed Approach to Substance Use and Mental Health Promotion

On June 20, 2022, the Medical Officer of Health provided a report to the Board of Health on the four key priorities for action for Toronto Public Health for the remainder of 2022 and into 2023. These priorities include: responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and other emerging public health issues, addressing the drug poisoning crisis, promoting mental health, and rebuilding public health functions.

Building on the extensive activities to address mental health, addictions, and substance use in the city, Toronto Public Health, alongside City divisions and community partners, intends to develop a comprehensive approach to how the city responds to and addresses mental health and substance use and actions aimed at improving mental health and well-being for the population of Toronto, including those who use substances.

This approach will require commitment from all levels of government, and the Medical Officer of Health recommends that the Board of Health continue to call for federal and provincial investment in the full continuum of mental health, harm reduction, and treatment services.

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SIGNATURE

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