

# **Our Health, Our City: A Mental Health, Substance Use, Harm Reduction and Treatment Strategy for Toronto**

**Date:** November 13, 2023

**To:** Board of Health

**From:** Medical Officer of Health

**Wards:** All

## **SUMMARY**

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With a diverse and growing population, the City of Toronto offers an extraordinary wealth of cultural, social, and economic opportunities, making it one of the most livable cities in the world. To keep Toronto vibrant and welcoming, individuals and communities in the city must have equitable access to opportunities to optimize their health and achieve their full potential.

In June 2022, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health to develop a Mental Health and Addictions Strategy for Toronto. At the same time, the Board of Health directed the Medical Officer of Health to engage with stakeholders throughout summer and fall 2022 to refresh the Toronto Drug Strategy. This staff report presents *Our Health, Our City: A Mental Health, Substance Use, Harm Reduction and Treatment Strategy for Toronto*.

The strategy was developed through extensive consultation over the last 18 months with many stakeholders and partners, including people with lived and living experience of mental health and/or substance use issues. The strategy presents a city-wide, comprehensive population-level approach with recommendations for all levels of government, City divisions, and community partners to help address mental health and substance use related issues across the lifespan. This report outlines the proposed vision, mission, guiding principles, strategic goals and recommended actions to guide the city for the next five years.

Multiple City divisions were consulted in the development of this strategy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. The Board of Health endorse *Our Health, Our City: A Mental Health, Substance Use, Harm Reduction and Treatment Strategy for Toronto* attached as Attachment 1 to this report.
2. The Board of Health direct the Medical Officer of Health to establish an implementation panel for *Our Health, Our City: A Mental Health, Substance Use, Harm Reduction and Treatment Strategy for Toronto*, and report back to the Board of Health in the first quarter of 2024 with recommendations on the panel terms of reference and membership selection criteria.
3. The Board of Health direct the Medical Officer of Health to provide dedicated staffing resources from Toronto Public Health to support the implementation of *Our Health, Our City: A Mental Health, Substance Use, Harm Reduction and Treatment Strategy for Toronto*, responsible for convening stakeholders, advocating with appropriate levels of government, and monitoring progress on implementation.
4. The Board of Health direct the Medical Officer of Health to report to the Board of Health with annual progress reports on the implementation of *Our Health, Our City: A Mental Health, Substance Use, Harm Reduction and Treatment Strategy for Toronto*.
5. The Board of Health request the Province of Ontario and Government of Canada to provide increased, ongoing and sustainable funding for shelter services, affordable housing and supportive housing, including supportive housing for people experiencing homelessness, complex mental health and/or substance use related challenges.
6. The Board of Health request the Province of Ontario to fund low-barrier crisis stabilization spaces for people with mental health and/or substance use related issues that operate 24 hours per day, seven days per week across the city as part of a full continuum of evidence-based services, treatment and wrap around supports.
7. The Board of Health request the Medical Officer of Health to collaborate with first responders and hospitals to implement a coordination protocol that enhances the seamless transfer of individuals experiencing mental health and/or substance use crises to the most appropriate services.
8. The Board of Health endorse the expansion of the Toronto Community Crisis Service to be city-wide, as Toronto's fourth emergency service.
9. The Board of Health forward *Our Health, Our City: A Mental Health, Substance Use, Harm Reduction and Treatment Strategy for Toronto* attached as Attachment 1 to this report, to the following Federal Ministers: Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, Minister of Health, Minister of Employment, Workforce and Official Languages, Minister of Housing, Infrastructure and Communities, Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Youth, and Minister of Families, Children and Social Development.

10. The Board of Health forward *Our Health, Our City: A Mental Health, Substance Use, Harm Reduction and Treatment Strategy for Toronto* attached as Attachment 1 to this report, to the following Provincial Ministers for their information and consideration: Minister of Health, Minister of Children, Community and Social Services, Minister for Seniors and Accessibility, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Minister of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade, Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, Associate Minister of Housing, and Associate Minister of Women's Social and Economic Opportunity.

## **FINANCIAL IMPACT**

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There are no financial impacts associated with this report.

## **DECISION HISTORY**

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On April 17, 2023, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health to continue to develop the comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy with targeted actions to address mental health and substance use and present to the Board of Health in fall 2023 and requested 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.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.HL3.1>

On June 20, 2022, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health to conduct community consultations throughout 2022 to inform a refreshed Toronto Drug Strategy for consideration by the Board of Health in 2023.

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

On June 20, 2022, the Board of Health adopted Item HL38.7 – Update on a Mental Health and Addictions Strategy for Toronto, requesting the Medical Officer of Health, in consultation with the City Manager to report back on the recommendations outlined in Motion 2021.MM37.17 to its next meeting.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.HL38.7>

On April 11, 2022, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health to work with Toronto School Boards to assist in the development of short and long-term approaches to promote the mental health and wellbeing of children and youth in Toronto and report back to the Board of Health with a status update in the second quarter of 2023.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.HL36.3>

On April 11, 2022, the Board of Health directed the Medical Officer of Health and the Associate Director, Toronto Drug Strategy Secretariat to create a specific Two-Spirit,

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Drug Strategy as a component of the Toronto Drug Strategy.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.HL36.5>

On April 11, 2022, the Board of Health directed the Medical Officer of Health and the Associate Director, Toronto Drug Strategy Secretariat to incorporate Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Advisory Committee's feedback into the creation of the Strategy and consult with Sherbourne Health, AIDS service organizations, The 519 and other Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer health service providers.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.HL36.5>

On November 9, 2021, City Council adopted Item MM37.17 – Creating a Mental Health and Addictions Strategy for Toronto, which requested the Medical Officer of Health, in consultation with the City Manager, to investigate options to better coordinate mental health and addictions services in Toronto.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2021.MM37.17>

## COMMENTS

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*Our Health, Our City: A Mental Health, Substance Use, Harm Reduction and Treatment Strategy for Toronto* responds to the need for a comprehensive and integrated approach to mental health and substance use issues in Toronto, and is intended to reflect the current social, economic, and health landscape in Toronto. This strategy works across the lifespan, from children to seniors, and offers recommendations along a continuum of interventions, including prevention, harm reduction, and treatment services. The recommended actions provide a roadmap for the next five years, tailored to the current needs of the city. The strategy builds on years of efforts on the part of many City Divisions and community partners to advance actions under [Ontario's Mental Health Promotion Guideline \(2018\)](#), [Ontario's Substance Use Prevention and Harm Reduction Guideline \(2018\)](#), the [Toronto Drug Strategy](#) (originally launched in 2005), and the Toronto Overdose Action Plans (launched in [2017](#) and updated in [2019](#)).

### Development of the Strategy

In 2022, Toronto Public Health began a year and a half long process to develop a comprehensive Mental Health, Substance Use, Harm Reduction and Treatment Strategy for Toronto in collaboration with a diverse range of stakeholders. First, an inventory of Toronto Public Health's existing drug-related strategies was conducted to identify ongoing opportunities and gaps. Next, a jurisdictional scan of existing drug and mental health strategies was conducted to provide insights into best practices. Toronto Public Health convened a Drug Strategy Reference Group to provide input on the development of the strategy and recommendations.

An extensive consultation process was conducted, including specific engagement and input from populations disproportionately impacted by mental health and substance use issues, such as youth, African, Caribbean, and Black communities, women, 2SLGBTQ+ and Indigenous communities. As directed by the Board of Health on April 11, 2022,

targeted outreach was conducted to gather input from Toronto School Boards and organizations serving 2SLGBTQ+ communities, such as the 519, Rainbow Health, and Sherbourne Health Centre.

In total, engagements were carried out with representation from over 80 organizations:

- 200 participants on 18 community roundtables which included people with lived and living experience
- 84 external stakeholder interviews
- 30 interviews and roundtables with people who use drugs
- 13 City Divisions, Commissions and Corporations consulted
- Deputy Mayor's Mental Health Roundtable in June 2023

## **Equity Impact**

Poor mental health, mental illnesses, and substance use disorders are often symptoms of larger, more complex issues, grounded in a combination of biological, psychological, social, environmental, systemic, and intersecting factors. These include a lack of access to the social determinants of health and systemic oppression. Disparities are evident across mental health and substance use indicators with various populations being affected by distinct mental health and substance use related issues.

Marginalized populations are also disproportionately impacted by mental health and substance use issues. For example, data show that populations at greater risk for poor health outcomes related to mental health and/or substance use include people experiencing homelessness<sup>1</sup>, women<sup>2</sup>, 2SLGBTQ+ populations<sup>3</sup>, seniors<sup>4</sup>, Indigenous peoples<sup>5</sup>, Black and other racialized populations<sup>6</sup>, and children and youth<sup>7</sup>. To ensure the strategy is responsive to the needs of these communities, population-specific engagements were conducted to gather input from diverse communities and the strategy includes population specific recommendations that aim to reduce disparities and inequities.

[A Health Equity Impact Assessment](#) was completed on the strategy to mitigate any unintended consequences for marginalized communities. Toronto Public Health, working closely with City Divisions and community partners, will continue to engage and collaborate with diverse communities throughout all stages of strategy implementation. Potential unintended consequences will be monitored and mitigated through collaboration with impacted communities and targeted interventions.

## **Collective Commitment and Impact**

### *Ontario Public Health Standards and Guidelines*

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 & 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 multisectoral 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. Both guidelines require public health to integrate mental health and substance use where appropriate when developing programs, policies, and services.

### *Role of Multiple Stakeholders Working with Toronto Public Health*

There are many different organizations that provide mental health and substance use services, supports and interventions in Toronto. This strategy is a call to action for all stakeholders to come together to advance a coordinated and comprehensive response to mental health and substance use issues. The successful implementation of this strategy will rely on significant and ongoing collaboration across City Divisions, government partners, civil society, as well as the implementation of other City strategies and actions by a range of health and social service providers. Everyone in Toronto has a role in promoting mental health and wellbeing for our city.

## **Overview of Our Health, Our City: A Mental Health, Substance Use, Harm Reduction and Treatment Strategy for Toronto**

### **Vision**

Toronto is a diverse and resilient city that prioritizes the mental health, wellbeing, and safety of all residents. Everyone can access the health care, services, resources, and community spaces they need to support their mental health and prevent substance use related harms with dignity and ease. Mental health and substance use are addressed as health issues rather than criminal issues. Mental health and substance use stigma and discrimination have been eliminated.

### **Mission**

Advance policies, programs, and partnerships in the city of Toronto that reduce inequities and increase access to the social determinants of health to improve mental health and wellbeing and minimize the health and social impacts of substance use related harms.

### **Guiding Principles**

The four pillars approach to drug policy, which generally includes prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and enforcement, has been a widely adopted framework in addressing drug-related issues. These four pillars grounded the original 2005 Toronto Drug Strategy. However, throughout community consultations to inform the strategy, there was overwhelming feedback that these pillars are no longer effective, as they contribute to siloes in thinking and in programs and services, and do not adequately address the complexities of substance use and the drug toxicity crisis. Stakeholders, both service

providers and service users, recommended that Toronto Public Health adopt guiding principles as the framework for this strategy.

### *Strategy Principles*

#### 1. Health and Community Safety for Everyone

This strategy is for all of Toronto — every age group, population, and neighbourhood, and even those who may not have personal experience with mental health and/or substance use challenges. Everyone has a right to health and to feel safe.

#### 2. Meaningful Inclusion of People with Lived and Living Experience

People with lived and living experience of mental health issues and those who use substances are experts on these topics. Their involvement in policy and program development is essential to creating meaningful solutions and positive social change. A diverse range of lived expertise and perspectives are required in the development of each policy and program.

#### 3. Anti-Oppression, Anti-Racism, and Decolonization

Reducing mental health inequities and substance use harms requires a commitment to anti-oppression, decolonization, and combating systemic discrimination, including racism, sexism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, ableism, etc. This includes recognizing that people inhabit multiple intersecting identities. It means ensuring that programs and services are culturally safe, community-informed and client-centered.

#### 4. Evidence, Innovation, and Continuous Improvement

Policies and programs must be informed by the best available evidence to maximize benefits and reduce harms. Service providers must embrace health system quality and ensure that the options provided are safe, effective, client-centred, efficient, timely and equitable<sup>8</sup>. Supporting a culture of research, innovation, and evaluation across our city is necessary to successfully respond to dynamic health trends and crises.

#### 5. City-Wide, Collaborative, and Comprehensive

This strategy requires extensive collaboration and ongoing partnership between City divisions, community agencies, government partners, health care leaders, businesses, and civil society to ensure that its benefits are equitably experienced by all neighbourhoods and communities across Toronto. This strategy meaningfully addresses the full continuum of care from prevention to harm reduction to treatment, responds to all types of drugs (regulated and unregulated) and the full spectrum of mental health promotion needs to enhance overall health and wellbeing for everyone in Toronto, from infants to seniors.

Please refer to the strategy attachment for the full descriptions of the guiding principles.

## Strategic Goals

The strategy includes recommendations for action across seven strategic goals, in accordance with the guiding principles:

1. Promote mental health and wellbeing across the lifespan.
2. Prevent and reduce harms and deaths related to substance use across the lifespan.
  - 2a. Reduce drug toxicity deaths caused by the unregulated drug supply and support those affected by the drug toxicity crisis.
  - 2b. Reduce harms and deaths associated with regulated drugs including alcohol, cannabis, tobacco, and vapor products.
3. Expand access to the full continuum of high-quality, evidence-based and client-centred services to address mental health and/or substance use issues, including prevention, harm reduction and treatment supports.
4. Advance community safety and wellbeing for everyone.
5. Improve access to housing and other social determinants of health.
6. Support mentally healthy workplaces and optimize the mental health of workers.
7. Proactively identify and respond to emerging mental health and substance use issues.

## Next Steps

### *Indigenous Specific Strategy for Mental Health and Substance Use*

The City of Toronto is committed to decolonization, reconciliation, and collaborating with Indigenous partners on policies and programs to prevent substance use related harms and promote mental health. As such, the development of an Indigenous-specific strategy for mental health and substance use for Toronto is currently underway. This work draws on lessons learned from the 2019 [Toronto Indigenous Overdose Strategy](#), the 2016 [Toronto Indigenous Health Strategy](#), and the [City of Toronto's Reconciliation Action Plan](#) endorsed by City Council in April 2022.

Indigenous people are not excluded from achieving the benefits of the *Our Health, Our City Strategy*. However, in recognition of the principles of cultural safety and self-determination, the actions in the *Our Health, Our City Strategy* do not explicitly offer recommendations regarding Indigenous health and wellbeing, as these are being co-developed by a distinct but parallel process noted above.



## *Implementation and Accountability*

It is recommended that implementation of *Our Health, Our City: A Mental Health, Substance Use, Harm Reduction and Treatment Strategy for Toronto* is supported by staff from Toronto Public Health. Toronto Public Health will initiate, monitor, and evaluate progress of this strategy through two tables:

1. Following the approach taken to implement the 2005 Toronto Drug Strategy, it is proposed that an implementation panel oversee implementation of *Our Health, Our City*. The implementation panel will provide advice and input on strategy milestones, targets, and detailed plans for implementation. It is recommended that Toronto Public Health report back to the Board of Health on recommendations on the establishment of an implementation panel in the first quarter of 2024.
2. As directed by the Board of Health in April 2023, the Medical Officer of Health and the City Manager have convened and co-chaired a Mental Health, Substance Use, Harm Reduction and Treatment Interdivisional Table with relevant City Divisions, Commissions and Corporations. This table will meet quarterly to ensure progress and accountability on recommendations relevant to specific City Divisions. Further, the table advances alignment, ensuring that City Divisions and strategies incorporate a shared understanding of mental health and substance use issues and necessary actions to address them.

Many of the recommendations in the strategy are aligned with various initiatives Toronto Public Health and partners have been supporting over the last year to advance drug policy and mental health promotion in Toronto. This includes the [Deputy Mayor's Mental Health Roundtable](#) at which participants and the City of Toronto identified areas of action that are funding priorities: homelessness and mental health, crisis services, and transfer of care from first responders to hospitals and other services. Based on this, it is recommended that the Board of Health:

- Request the Province of Ontario and Government of Canada to provide ongoing and sustainable funding for shelter services and increase funding for affordable and supportive housing, including supportive housing for people experiencing homelessness, complex mental health and/or substance use related challenges.
- Request the Province of Ontario to fund low-barrier crisis stabilization spaces for people with mental health and/or substance use related issues that operate 24 hours per day, seven days per week across the city as part of a full continuum of evidence-based services, treatment and wraparound supports.
- Direct the Medical Officer of Health to collaborate with first responders and hospitals to implement a coordination protocol that enhances the seamless transfer of individuals experiencing mental health and/or substance use crises to the most appropriate services.
- Endorse the expansion of the Toronto Community Crisis Service to be city-wide, as Toronto's fourth emergency service.

## *Ongoing Monitoring and Evaluation*

The implementation of the strategy will be assessed through an annual progress report to the Board of Health. Toronto Public Health will also work with experts in mental

health and substance use to develop an annual report card on mental health and substance use related outcomes in the city. The report card is intended to monitor key mental health and substance use related indicators and assess whether there are changes to population health outcomes. Some examples of indicators that will be used to measure progress include the number of opioid toxicity deaths, non-fatal and fatal calls to paramedics due to suspected opioid overdoses, perceived need for mental health care, mental health status and coping, student substance use, technology use, and alcohol and tobacco morbidity and mortality. This data-driven approach will be vital to ensuring accountability, continuous improvement, and effectiveness of the *Our Health, Our City Strategy*. By regularly assessing progress on the strategy and health outcomes, the implementation plan can adapt and evolve to meet the dynamic mental health and substance use needs of Toronto's population.

## CONTACT

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## SIGNATURE

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Dr. Eileen de Villa  
Medical Officer of Health

## ATTACHMENTS

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Attachment 1: *Our Health, Our City: A Mental Health, Substance Use, Harm Reduction and Treatment Strategy for Toronto.*

Attachment 2: Strategy Action Implementation Partners Table

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1 Gomes T, Murray R, Kolla G, Leece P, Bansal S, Besharah J, Cahill T, Campbell T, Fritz A, Munro C, Toner L, Watford J on behalf of the Ontario Drug Policy Research Network, Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario and Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario). (2023). Changing Circumstances Surrounding Opioid-Related Deaths in Ontario During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Toronto, ON. Retrieved from: <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/c/2021/changing-circumstances-surrounding-opioid-related-deaths.pdf?la=en>

2 Pearson, C., Janz, T., & Ali, J. (2013). Health at a Glance: Mental and substance use disorders in Canada. Statistics Canada Catalogue. Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/82-624-x/2013001/article/11855-eng.pdf?st=3wAfBJ4P>

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4 Holt-Lunstad, J. (2022). Social Connection as a Public Health Issue: The Evidence and a Systemic Framework for Prioritizing the “Social” in Social Determinants of Health. *Annual Review of Public Health*. Retrieved from: <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-052020-110732> .

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8 Health Quality Ontario (2015). Embrace Health Quality. Retrieved from: <https://www.hqontario.ca/Portals/0/documents/health-quality/quality-poster-en.pdf>