



Hamilton

INFORMATION REPORT

TO:	Mayor and Members Board of Health
COMMITTEE DATE:	February 13, 2023
SUBJECT/REPORT NO:	Opioid Emergency Response (BOH23008) (City Wide) (Outstanding Business List Item)
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	City Wide
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COUNCIL DIRECTION

This report is in response to the following direction from Council on January 25, 2023:

- i) That the Medical Officer of Health or designate be directed to investigate the thresholds of opioid deaths and overdoses that would enable the declaration of a state of emergency and report back to the Board of Health; and,
- ii) That staff be directed to include in their report the response required to address such an emergency; and available sources of funding to enable an effective response by the City of Hamilton.

INFORMATION

Hamilton, like the rest of the province, continues to experience a public health crisis associated with the harms from opioids. Between 2016 and 2021 Hamilton experienced a 245% increase in opioid-related overdoses and a 229% increase in opioid-related deaths. From January to October 2022, there were 139 confirmed or probable opioid-related deaths in Hamilton.¹ Hamilton’s opioid death rate has been consistently higher than the provincial rate.²

¹ Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario received January 20, 2023.

² Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario, extracted from the Public Health Ontario Interactive Opioid Tool, January 24, 2023. Retrieved from:

OUR Vision: To be the best place to raise a child and age successfully.

OUR Mission: To provide high quality cost conscious public services that contribute to a healthy, safe and prosperous community, in a sustainable manner.

OUR Culture: Collective Ownership, Steadfast Integrity, Courageous Change, Sensational Service, Engaged Empowered Employees.

As this crisis continues to prevail, additional strategies to address the harms from opioids have been considered, including formal declaration of an opioid emergency. This report provides information on the process for declaring an emergency in Ontario, as well as an overview of mental health and addictions interventions to address the public health crisis associated with the harms from opioids in Hamilton.

Declaring an Emergency in Ontario

In November of 2019, Council declared an opioid crisis in the City of Hamilton. This local declaration raised awareness of the increase in overdoses in Hamilton and requested action from the Provincial and Federal governments. The declaration did not constitute an official emergency declaration, as legislated in Ontario through the *Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act, R.S.O 1990, c. E.9* (EMCPA). EMCPA defines an emergency as “a situation or an impending situation that constitutes a danger of major proportions that could result in serious harm to persons or substantial damage to property and that is caused by the forces of nature, a disease or other health risk, an accident or an act whether intentional or otherwise.” The intent of a declaration under the EMCPA is to respond to an acute emergency requiring a coordinated response that exceeds current capacities, and not necessarily for responding to systemic health issues.

While Hamilton would benefit from additional funds to further respond to the opioid crisis, an official declaration would not lead to the provision of funds. In Ontario, financial assistance for emergencies to cover extraordinary costs after a disaster is administered through the Municipal Disaster Recovery Assistance (MDRA) program. The funding is conditional on municipal costs totalling at least three per cent of the municipality’s tax levy. The eligibility language in the program is very specific to natural disasters that are “caused by forces of nature. Examples of natural events that have the potential to cause disasters include but are not limited to floods, tornados, earthquakes, landslides and wildfires affecting populated areas.” As such, the current opioid crisis would not be eligible under the MDRA.

Currently there are some funding sources available for organizations to access to implement interventions to address the opioid crisis. This includes Health Canada’s Substance Use and Addictions Program (SUAP), where funding is available to government agencies and community-led and not-for-profit organizations in Canada for a wide range of initiatives aimed at addressing problematic substance use prevention, harm reduction and treatment initiatives for various psychoactive substances, including opioids. Since program inception in 2016, SUAP has issued three national calls for proposals in 2017, 2019, and 2021.

<https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/data-and-analysis/substance-use/interactive-opioid-tool#/maps>

The Province of Ontario provides funding for consumption and treatment services sites (CTS) in Ontario. They have also provided investments in mental health and opioid treatment, with recent announcements in treatment funding in 2022.³

Additionally, some agencies rely heavily on private donations to charitable organizations to fund their mental health and addiction initiatives. Examples of such programs include a new safer inhalation room at Prairie Harm Reduction's safe consumption site in Saskatoon which operates entirely on donations and revenue generated from selling of merchandise.

Thresholds for Action

In emergency management, thresholds for an elevated response can be quantitative, but are often situational and based on contextual factors and the capacities of responding agencies. Opioid-related escalation thresholds were exceeded before 2019, prompting the local crisis declaration. Since that time, extensive work across Hamilton has been done to minimize impacts of opioids and is detailed in subsequent sections of this report. Currently, thresholds are in place as part of the opioid early warning system maintained by Public Health Services to monitor local activity and issue alerts to the community. The system provides a weekly report to community partners about paramedic response activity, flags suspected elevated overdose periods, and includes qualitative information collected from partners based on their experiences in the community. In addition to the early warning system, Public Health Services collaborates with Hamilton Paramedic Services, Hamilton Health Sciences, St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton and community partners to provide timely opioid-related surveillance information to the public online via the Hamilton Opioid Information System (HOIS). The system provides data related to paramedic calls for opioid overdoses, naloxone distribution, hospital visits for opioid overdoses, emergency department visits for drug use and suspected overdoses, and mortality data.

Opioid Crisis Response in Hamilton

As communicated at the December 2022 (BOH22018) and January 2023 Board of Health (BOH23002) meetings, Public Health Services is focused on upstream population health, working within an integrated system of health and social services to collectively address complex health issues alongside community partners. Given the substantial public health burden, Public Health Services and the broader community of health and social service providers have a shared responsibility to respond to the opioid crisis and to reduce harms to people who use drugs.

As such, the Hamilton community has been actively responding to the opioid crisis with innovative and evidence-informed interventions since the crisis rapidly began to grow in

³ Ministry of Health. (2023). Ontario launches new addiction recovery fund. Retrieved: <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1001596/ontario-launches-new-addictions-recovery-fund>

2016. A 2017, an Opioid Response Summit that was convened by the Mayor to address concerns regarding increases in overdose deaths led to the creation of an opioid response plan and the establishment of the Hamilton Drug Strategy (HDS). Physicians and hospital partners continue to provide access to treatment services and have established a Rapid Access Addiction Medicine (RAAM) Clinic. Safe consumption sites have been established at Hamilton Urban Core Community Health Centre and Carole Anne's Place, with plans for another community site under way. Keeping Six - a grassroots organization - provides advocacy, support and an organized voice for people with living/lived experience. Through its Harm Reduction Committee, the Greater Hamilton Health Network is focused on expansion of supervised consumption and safe supply programs. There are also four active SUAP projects in Hamilton, including by the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), Hamilton Branch's Reducing Harms of Substance Use and Advancing Recovery through Peer Support program; Grenfell Ministries' Community Outreach Action Collaborative Hamilton and National Overdose Response Service programs; and, the AIDS Network's Support and Safer Supply program. Finally, as outlined at the January 2023 Board of Health (BOH23002) report, mental health and addictions continues to be a departmental priority for Public Health Services, with focused attention in 2023 on: trauma and violence-informed care, municipal policies to address substance use, community health promotion, and harm reduction.

These interventions, combined with the efforts of many other health and social service agencies not listed above, continue to be essential in enhancing the quality of life and reducing harms for people who use drugs in Hamilton. However, the opioid crisis is a complex issue that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, an increasingly toxic and unregulated drug supply and inadequate policies that fail to recognize drug use as a health issue. Addressing the opioid crisis requires a comprehensive and coordinated public health approach across multiple agencies and all levels of government and must include solutions that focus on the determinants of health, public health and the human rights of people who use drugs.⁴ While this coordinated approach continues to be advocated to provincial and federal governments, there is a need for a more coordinated response to enhance local efforts and strengthen the local opioid response.

Therefore, Public Health Services has proposed a renewed local opioid response plan with leadership from health and social service agencies to coordinate, develop and implement a comprehensive and integrated plan. The Hamilton Drug Strategy has

⁴ Health Canada Expert Task Force on Substance use. (2021). Report #2, Recommendations on the Federal Government's Drug Policy as Articulated in a Draft Canadian Drugs and Substances Strategy (CDSS). Retrieved February 2 from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/corporate/about-health-canada/public-engagement/external-advisory-bodies/expert-task-force-substance-use/reports/report-2-2021.html>

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approved this as a priority area for action in 2023, and will initiate the renewal of the plan in March 2023. This action-oriented plan will be developed over a series of facilitated sessions and will be presented at the June 2023 Board of Health meeting. As the Hamilton Drug Strategy secretariat, Public Health Services will assist with planning and monitoring of the plan.

APPENDICES AND SCHEDULES ATTACHED

Not Applicable.