

Board of Health Meeting
Dr. Vera Etches – Verbal report
September 18, 2023

Good afternoon, Kwey, Unusakut (oo-nah-sa-coot), Taanishi, Ahnii, Bonjour,

Tonight, I will provide updates on substance use and overdose in Ottawa and efforts to catch up on routine childhood vaccination.

Substance Use and Overdose

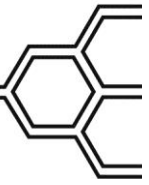
Since 2017, when the Ottawa Board of Health first declared an overdose crisis and noted the need for all levels of government to act, our city, like many others across the country, has seen a significant increase in the harms caused by fatal and non-fatal drug overdoses – worsened by an increasingly toxic and unpredictable supply of unregulated drugs and by rising unmet needs for health and social supports that would prevent and mitigate harms from substance use and promote substance use health.

Ottawa Public Health initiatives related to substance use health include surveillance and reporting, and our work in this area continues to evolve, as I will mention below.

Last week, Public Health Ontario released a report on overdose and substance-related toxicity deaths in Ontario. It describes trends in fatal substance-related toxicities broadly and combines data on deaths due to alcohol, stimulants, benzodiazepines, and opioids.

In it, PHO noted that “Coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic emergency starting in March 2020, deaths due to accidental alcohol and drug toxicities increased by 37% from 2020 to 2021 in Canada, with a disproportionate number occurring among younger populations. These deaths were mostly attributable to opioid poisonings where fentanyl – primarily from the unregulated drug supply – directly contributed to the death. Although opioids were directly responsible for the vast majority of alcohol and drug toxicity deaths across Canada, there has been increasing attention on the harms caused by other substances, either alone or in combination with opioids.”

The report also noted that the use of multiple substances has been associated with worse outcomes compared to people who use only one substance, including an increased risk for toxicity-related morbidity and mortality and reduced effectiveness of toxicity-reversing agents such as naloxone, which only reverses the effects of opioids.



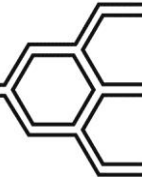
Work to improve these numbers requires many different interventions given the complexity of the challenges and the importance of getting at root causes. As a society and in our health and social systems we need to invest and use all the evidence-based tools in our collective toolbox to address mental health and substance use health.

Le travail qu'il nous faut accomplir afin d'améliorer ces chiffres nécessite de nombreuses interventions différentes, compte tenu de la complexité des problèmes et de l'importance de s'attaquer aux causes fondamentales. En tant que société et dans nos systèmes sociaux et de santé, nous devons investir et utiliser tous les outils dans notre boîte à outils collective pour aborder la santé mentale et la santé liée à l'utilisation de substances.

Mental health challenges and homelessness are both on the rise and have been made worse by the pandemic. The increase in mental health and substance use challenges, at least partly, are a result of the unintended consequences of the measures required to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, which resulted in service reductions across the social and health systems, increased social isolation, increased toxicity and unpredictability of the unregulated drug supply, and increased job loss and financial insecurity.

To improve the health and wellness of individuals and communities, it is necessary to address social inequities that are often the root causes of ill health, such as poverty, racism and colonialism, as we see that risks of negative outcomes are higher for people with low incomes.

OPH works in partnership to prevent substance use harms through supports to parents for early childhood development, another significant determinant of health. Pour aider à prévenir les événements indésirables dans l'enfance qui peuvent augmenter la probabilité d'une consommation ultérieure de substances, SPO a continué à investir dans le programme "Bébés en santé, enfants en santé" qui aide les parents à créer un environnement familial sûr et stimulant et à donner à leurs enfants un bon départ dans la vie. Children with a healthy start are more likely to develop resilience and coping skills that protect them from substance use in the future. The program helps to identify and address developmental or behavioral or mental health concerns early on by providing information, resources, screening and referrals for early intervention services. Addressing these concerns early on can lead to improved outcomes for children and prevent more significant challenges down the road. More about our work on prevention will be brought forward to the Board in December as we present the action plans related to our new strategic goals.



Only by working with a wide range of partners on a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach will we come close to addressing the scale of a problem that has caused such unspeakable tragedy and suffering.

That's why Ottawa Public Health is just one organization among many that has formed a vast network of partners who are responding to this crisis. These partners include the City's Community and Social Services Department, police, paramedics, firefighters, and the regional coroner's office.

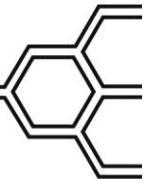
They also include hospitals, pharmacies, community health centres as well as social services and housing organizations. Also part of this network are people with lived and living experience of substance use as well as providers of mental health, substance use health and addictions services.

No one agency oversees all these sectors, but people understand we cannot make progress without integrated approaches, so together, we have established the **Ottawa Overdose Prevention and Response Task Force** and the **Ottawa Community Action Plan**. The Action Plan has three key goals which continue to resonate and articulate the work underway: to reduce harms from substance use across the lifespan; to prevent stigma and promoting substance use health; to expand harm-reduction initiatives; and to improve access to comprehensive services for mental health and substance use health.

The Ottawa Overdose Prevention and Response Task Force is in the process of being reinvigorated to include more partners in recognition of the complexity of the situation and the multiple types of supports and responses required. OPH will continue to dedicate resources to providing what we call "backbone" or convening support to the Task Force. SPO continuera à consacrer des ressources à ce que nous appelons le pilier ou le soutien aux convocations du groupe de travail.

At the November Board of Health meeting, OPH will bring forward an update about the expansion of this multi-sector overdose response strategy to address and respond to the drug overdose and toxicity crisis and the impact on communities.

The update to the Board will include the launch of the second phase of the dashboard, first launched in the spring of this year, that will provide more timely and detailed information about mental health, addictions and substance-use health. We have heard that community members are seeking enhancements in our public reporting of overdoses. This dashboard will track and measure trends to better support system

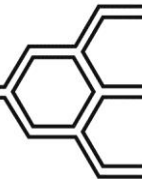


planning, program development and service coordination and evaluation. OPH has been working for multiple years to keep adding to our data sources from partners, such as hospitals, paramedics and others to be able to examine substance use health from multiple angles and inform various aspects of prevention and response. We continue to advance data sharing agreements and are proud of the way the dashboard will present information on prevention through to the availability and effectiveness of treatment options.

Another way Ottawa Public Health is collaborating with partners to address the overdose crisis is through the City of Ottawa's **Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan**. As part of this plan, OPH is working with partners to develop non-police alternatives when responding to mental health and substance use crises.

Bien que Santé publique Ottawa ne fournisse pas directement de traitement pour les troubles liés à l'utilisation de substances, notre équipe oriente les patients et plaide en faveur d'un meilleur accès au traitement. While we don't directly provide treatment, one example of how we support linking people to treatment is through an initiative, led by the Ottawa Paramedics Service, Ottawa Public Health is working with the Paramedic Mental Wellbeing Response Team and the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre to develop pathways to connect residents into the Rapid Access Addiction Medicine program, supporting patients with suboxone treatment, with a focus on the unhoused population.

Finally, Ottawa Public Health is a collaborating partner on the **Byward Market Balanced** Community Task Force, which is focused on enhancing the mental health, safety and wellbeing of everyone who lives, works and visits the Byward Market. Evidence-based approaches to improving substance use health include ensuring people have a supportive social network and are able to contribute to their community. One of the Task Force's initiatives is a pilot project called the Block Leader Program, a training and outreach program developed by the community to restore its leadership. Block Leaders work 2-hour shifts 2 to 3 times per day. The Block Leader program is empowering the street-involved community to take a leadership role within their community, and members of the growing Block Leader team work alongside street involved individuals to support them, connecting people to services, helping to clean up the neighbourhood, discussing and building on strategies to reduce violence and crime, and increasing respect, compassion and safety. To date, over 70 Block Leaders have been trained and there continues to be interest in the program.



Other areas of focus for the Byward Market Balanced Community Task Force require support, such as to identify safe spaces for all members of the Byward community, safe spaces contribute to building of community connection and cohesion, and this is also true for people who are currently homeless and unsheltered, and, on the day, looking to provide safe spaces for this community is integral to community cohesion, safety and well-being.

Linking people to primary care, and mental health and substance use treatment remains a challenge, in the Byward Market and across the City of Ottawa. Healthcare partners are seeking to address the need for more treatment by building on existing services funded by Ontario Health.

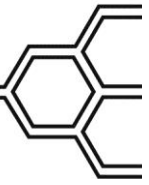
Given the high risk of toxicity and toxicity related death from substance use, Ottawa Public Health has been collaborating with pharmacies and other health and social service providers to also meet people where they are at with harm reduction approaches. OPH continues our provincially mandated role to expand access to naloxone, the life-saving medication that can temporarily reverse an opioid overdose.

There are currently 24 active partnerships, including with hospital emergency departments, Ottawa Police, Ottawa Paramedic Services as well as other providers of health and social services. En 2022 seulement, plus de 10 000 trousse de naloxone ont été distribuées dans le cadre de ce programme. Ottawa has one of the highest rates of naloxone distribution among our peer health units.

Through another program supported by the provincial government, some 200 local pharmacies have distributed more than 25,000 kits in the first quarter of this year alone.

And thanks to the efforts of St. John's Ambulance, naloxone training is now part of what is taught in all first-aid training courses. St. John's Ambulance also offers free online naloxone training and kits, as do the Red Cross and Respect Rx Pharmacy's Naloxone Care program.

Ottawa Public Health provides naloxone training to the hospitality and tourism sector as well as the construction industry. In partnership with the City of Ottawa's Special Event Advisory Team, earlier this summer, OPH supported large special events with overdose prevention training and resources and launched *Party Safer*, a free naloxone training course offered online. Together, these courses have reached more than 3,500 people to date.



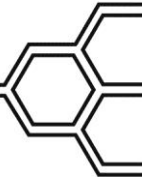
But there's more that still needs to be done, which is why we are working with partners to address gaps in harm reduction services, such as drug checking and safer inhalation. The Coroner has shared data that currently in Ottawa the majority of people dying are dying from exposures to multiple drugs at once and are smoking rather than injecting drugs. Along with Consumption and Treatment Service partners, OPH is purchasing drug checking machines and will use the information to keep people who use drugs and the wider community informed about the results. We are sharing the data on deaths due to inhalation with healthcare partners who will need funding from the Ministry of Health to implement solutions.

We see that the current Consumption and Treatment (CTS) sites in Ottawa are grappling with the changing landscape of drugs available, staffing levels, and the limitations of the health and social services systems. They reversed over 1100 overdoses in 2022, this is more than twice as many compared to 2020. Les sites de consommation et de traitement, les infirmières de SPO, et les personnes chargées de la réduction des risques offrent des soins pleins de compassion dans un environnement très difficile. I want to thank harm reduction workers for keeping people alive and connecting people to supports every day.

OPH is mandated to conduct routine inspections, complaint-based investigations, enforcement, and public reporting for CTS. CTS compliance requires sites to be responsible for keeping a 15m perimeter free of harm reduction supplies. However, we have heard from neighbouring residents that there are significant incidents happening outside of this perimeter and broader in scope than the issue of harm reduction supplies. Neighbours echo the concern about violence in the area, and people who use the sites reported concerns about violence and safety in the Safer Downtown for All report as well.

OPH's Community Needle Retrieval Program continuously reviews program data combined with community feedback to make ongoing adjustments to levels of service for needle and harm reduction supply pick-up, including additional needle drop boxes, increasing needle hunter route length and location changes to support communities.

In addition to previously established community liaison efforts, OPH, along with our City and community partners, are working to increase both formalized and informal avenues for community engagement and feedback. An example of this work specific to the Sandy Hill, Lowertown and ByWard market area has included the establishment of the



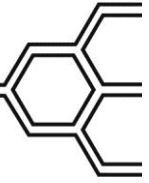
City's Community and Social Services Department new Community Engagement Team. The comprehensive partnerships and approaches mentioned above are aimed at reducing the disorder, concerns, and harms in neighbourhoods most affected.

It is hard to overstate the continued grief and suffering experienced by individuals, families, neighbours and entire communities, including businesses, who have been impacted by this crisis; Ottawa Public Health hears your voices and shares your concerns.

On August 31st, Ottawa Public Health joined people with lived and living experience as well as the harm reduction community to mark International Overdose Awareness Day. This annual event remembers those who have experienced drug-related harms, including fatal overdoses, and acknowledges the grief of the families and friends left behind.

We continue to hear that stigma remains a major barrier to people accessing the supports and services they need. Stigma is present when people voice that harmful substance use is a choice rather than a medical condition. Like other medical conditions, there are risk factors and evidence-based treatments for substance use that can be addressed and advanced.

Stigma is behind assumptions that people with substance use that causes problems or risk of death is really about homelessness, when the data shows that most people dying from drug toxicities die in their own homes when using alone. A key message in our Stop Overdoses campaign is to not use alone, and always carry naloxone. We promote overdose prevention tools such as the free National Overdose Prevention Line and the Brave app to connect people who would otherwise use drugs alone with remote anonymous supervision and overdose support. And, people need to be able to reach out to friends or family to have someone with them, but stigma often stands in the way. En effet, les gens doivent pouvoir s'adresser à leurs amis ou à leur famille pour avoir quelqu'un à leurs côtés, mais la stigmatisation est souvent un obstacle. That's why last week, Ottawa Public Health participated in the Working on Wellness Festival, an event that brought together community partners working in mental health, substance use health and physical health to keep learning together about how to build better supports, including a healthcare system that is free of stigma, for people across all socio-demographics.



The event was organized by the Community Addictions Peer Support Association, (CAPSA), which represents people with lived or living experience with substance use. Ottawa Public Health has been working alongside this group and others on initiatives to reduce stigma and improve uptake and access to services to support the substance use health of the community. A key principle that CAPSA promotes is that the majority of the population uses substances and that we must continue to find ways to improve the health of all people, regardless of their location on the substance use spectrum. As I said earlier, this means working in partnership to invest much more in many different evidence-based interventions – from prevention in early childhood and adolescence, to supportive housing, to treatment capacity and to safer neighbourhoods.

Knowing that I would be providing this verbal update tonight, some of our partners have registered to speak as public delegations so you'll be hearing directly from them very shortly. We are grateful for their work and collaboration to address this crisis in our community.