

Opioid Overdoses in Canada

16,000 people have died from opioid overdose in Canada between January 2016 and March 2020 – devastating the people who loved them, and leaving untold thousands to grieve their loss.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, these tragic, preventable, deaths have risen to an unprecedented level. **Toronto alone recorded 27 overdose deaths in July.** The drug supply is increasingly toxic with substances like benzodiazepines and dangerously unpredictable amounts of strong opiates like fentanyl and carfentanyl. Since March many services that provide support and space for people who use drugs (PWUD) like overdose prevention sites and drop ins, have reduced capacity or increased barriers to access.

The community at Sherbourne and Dundas has consistently been an epicentre of opioid overdose. Every day, Street Health's Overdose Prevention Site (OPS) provides accessible, dignified, evidence-based healthcare to people who are facing extreme risk to their lives and health from homelessness and the toxic illicit drug supply. **Our site has been without government funding since being defunded by the province in March, 2019.** Thanks to public support, we currently have funds to maintain this lifesaving care that our clients have come to trust until March, 2021.

New Project SOS

The Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Health, recently issued the following statement to all provinces: *"the overdose crisis has been one of the most significant public health crises in recent Canadian history."* She adds, it is vital that *"we treat people who use drugs with compassion and give them the support that they need."*

With Health Canada's Substance Use and Addictions Program funding, Street Health is now providing a Safer Opioid Supply (SOS) Program, targeting people who are at elevated risk of overdose. Participants replace their reliance on contaminated street opioids with a prescription of predictable strength. Clients who may have spent \$2,000-\$5,000 each month to secure drugs can reduce or eliminate this expense along with the risk and stress caused by using drugs of unknown strength and quality. Those participating in the SOS Program are reporting decreased anxiety and an increased sense of control.

Street Health's program shares a Project Coordinator with Regent Park and South Riverdale Community Health Centres as part of a Downtown East Collaborative project. The team at Street Health includes a Nurse Practitioner, Registered Nurse and Community Health Worker. They provide primary care, support to reduce dependence on street opiates and referrals to community and healthcare services. The team also connects them to Street Health's OPS. The SOS Program is an option for those who have tried but did not find traditional replacements like Methadone helpful.

"This is a first step, but there is no single, quick fix for a health crisis of this magnitude," states Kapri Rabin, Executive Director. *"We need to expand harm reduction initiatives by renewing government support for the creation and maintenance of community-based overdose prevention services and offering universal access to basic income and housing."*

The community response has been positive. 250 participants will be enrolled in this pilot project, at the three downtown east locations, by March 2021.

Contributors: Liz Harrison, RN; Franky Morris, Community Health Worker; Kelly White, OPS Coordinator



This August, Twentytwenty Arts, a visual story-telling non profit, created awareness on the issue of overdose through the *Weathered* project. They invited those who have lost a family member or friend due to the toxic drug supply to submit a photo and narrative about their loved one. The shared memories are a beautiful and haunting reminder of **the people who are being lost to overdose – they are from all walks of life, they were loved and they had so much potential to offer the world.** Greenwin Corp. was the project sponsor and Street Health was proud to be the charity partner for this initiative. See the exhibit at streethealth.ca/weathered.

We are reminded that stigma and shame are driving this crisis as much as toxic drugs. People are so much more than their drug use, and Overdose Prevention Sites save lives.

Please see over for a selection of *Weathered* memories 

Some Weathered Memories



Jamie

"The man that wore these shoes was an extraordinarily beautiful person... Jamie was a beloved son, brother, grandson, nephew, boyfriend and friend. He was sensitive, kind, and creative. He loved the outdoors, the mountains and hiking; he also loved skateboarding, and he loved his family deeply... When Jamie was just a kid and into his teen years, he endured numerous injuries. He broke his wrist a couple of times, dislocated his elbow which eventually required surgery, broke his collar bone and was prescribed opiates by the doctors for pain... When he broke his scaphoid, a small bone in the wrist, it required four bone grafts. This was when he was first given IV fentanyl. Jamie's addiction eventually shifted from prescription drugs to highly poisonous street opioids. Jamie fought very hard to overcome his addiction; he attended

countless residential treatment centres, sought counseling, he even tried hypno-therapy. Jamie lost his battle on May 23, 2018. The week before his death, Jamie had detoxed himself and was trying desperately to get into yet another treatment centre. It is extremely dangerous to come off of opioids without support because a person's tolerance to the drug drops significantly, leaving them very susceptible to overdose. Did you know that you have to send an application and be accepted into our funded treatment centres?! Could you imagine if you were in an emergency situation and dying from your disease or from a heart attack and you had to apply for medical treatment and wait for a call back?! I talked to Jamie on the phone the day before he passed. Even though he sounded defeated and like he had lost hope, he said to me, "I'll let you go mom, I'm going to go try to get in for treatment somewhere." He said, "I love you." I said, "I love you too." Losing my son has been devastating for me, his family and friends and his twin brother. I have his snowboard and his picture propped up in my house, and each time I walk by I tell him I miss him and love him."

"Miranda was a strong advocate for harm reduction. She wanted to see a reality in which people have access to what they need to live their lives to the fullest without stigma, shame, and judgment. She believed in justice, safety, and community. I wear her slippers and remind myself to do what I can to keep her dream alive."



Franky's Friend



Shane's Mom

"If you had walked in these shoes you would have known of the childhood trauma. You would have known of the failure of several marriages, and the loss of the love of your life tragically passing 5 years into your only successful one. You would have known the struggles relating to major depressive disorder, to being manic and bipolar, and what it was like to be an addict of prescription pills to numb all the pain, finally numbing the pain for the last time. If you had walked in these shoes you would have known the amount of love you had for your children, whom you wore in your gold-hearted locket. You would have known how proud you were to be a 'Mimi' to four granddaughters, so much so a bracelet was a necessity to let everyone know of that title, and you would have known how valiantly you fought for one of those granddaughters while wearing an orange ribbon as she battled her way through Leukemia and won! If you had walked in these shoes, you would know how deeply you were loved and are missed."



The changes and challenges of 2020 have impacted everyone. Street Health would like to say thank you to all who are helping us maintain services and keep staff and clients safe during this difficult time. Our deep appreciation goes to:



Echo Foundation
Eglinton St. George United Church
Emergency Community Support Fund
Forest Hill Lions Club
Humane Society International
InterFaith Coalition to Fight Homelessness
J.S. Cheng & Partners Inc.
Just Socks
KNIX Foundation
La Foundation Emmanuel Gattuso
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Toronto Foundation – Better Toronto Coalition
United Way of Greater Toronto – Local Love Fund

Everyone who started, maintained or increased their level of monthly giving.

Everyone who made a donation.



Coldest Night of the Year (CNOY) February, 2021

Become a team leader, rally support from your family and friends, do a 2-5km walk on a date that works for you, learn more through our Street Health online update. All fundraising goes to supporting Street Health's services. Make a commitment to do CNOY in 2021!

More details coming soon.

