

Street Health

Street Health's Response to Concerns Regarding the Overdose Prevention Site (OPS)

Street Health - Who we are:

- Founded in 1986, Street Health is a frontline health and social service organization working with Toronto's homeless community in the downtown east area of the city. We provide nursing, mental health case management, harm reduction, identification replacement and ID storage services, a mobile health service in partnership with Sherbourne Health Centre and an Overdose Prevention Site. Street Health has 60,000 client visits a year, 3000 client visits are for the OPS.

Responding to the Overdose Crisis:

- The intersection of Dundas and Sherbourne has, for years, had among the highest number of 911 calls for overdose in the entire city. This was the case before June 2018 when Street Health opened its Overdose Prevention Site.
- Even with the opening of the OPS at Street Health, the community centred around the intersection of Dundas and Sherbourne continues to be in a crisis. The lack of emergency shelter beds, rooming house stock disappearing, no affordable housing, lack of available detox beds and drug treatment services, lack of adequate income support and food insecurity contribute to this crisis.
- Every night hundreds of people stay on the street in unsafe conditions, women in particular stay in unsafe relationships because they have nowhere safe to go. Many people in the community face unimaginable amounts of suffering and hopelessness and greater supports and services are required to meet these needs.
- In response to an escalating public health crisis of fatal drug overdoses in the Sherbourne-Dundas neighbourhood and across the city overall, Street Health opened an Overdose Prevention Site in June 2018. The OPS is open Monday-Friday from 9:30 am -4:00 pm and serves an average 10-20 clients per day. Significantly 60% of our clients are women; they come to the OPS at Street Health because they feel safe.
- Street Health's OPS is the smallest in the city but despite the small size of the service, more than 50 lives were saved from overdose in the first year of operation.
- The current crisis in opioid use is not specific to downtown east of Toronto, it is a crisis in cities across Canada. Withdrawing services will not eliminate the issues we are facing daily at Dundas and Sherbourne and will have a negative impact on those least able to care for themselves.

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Street Health is committed to working with neighbors:

Street Health is committed to continue working with local residents to find balanced solutions to the issues they have raised. We have already responded to many suggestions by neighbours:

- 1) To address concerns about used needles, we have coordinated a collaborative system for needle pick up, cabbagetowncleanup@gmail.com where individuals can email a request for needle pick up from their private property- 311 only picks up from public spaces. Since Feb. 2019 we have received approximately 40 email requests and picked up approximately 100 used needles.
- 2) To address concerns about people hanging out on Street Health property during the day, as of July 2 we hired an outreach staff person to engage with and provide crisis intervention and referrals to individuals who hang out in front of Street Health. This staff member has successfully referred more than 20 people to a variety of other services. The person also does checks of the back alleys surrounding Street Health for used needles.
- 3) In response to neighbours' concerns about the number of people hanging out on and in front of Street Health property in the evenings and weekends, on August 2 we erected a fence. This fence effectively prevents access to the property and has completely eliminated people from hanging out after Street Health is closed. Litter, noise, and sidewalk congestion have also been eliminated.
- 4) In response to concerns about low lighting, Street Health has upgraded and improved our external lighting. We have also posted signage about reducing noise and garbage.
- 5) In response to local neighbours requests to provide training about how to administer Naloxone, we are in the process of organizing such a training.
- 6) In response to calls to help during emergency overdose situations in the community, Street Health staff respond to overdoses during the day. Street Health staff have responded to and reversed over 20 overdoses.
- 7) To ensure we are aware and responsive to community concerns we participate in a range of local community conversations and initiatives. These include, the Dundas-Sherbourne Community Safety Network, Margaret's Community Liaison Committee, the Focus table, and ongoing communications with Cabbagetown South Residents Association members, Police from 51 Division, etc.

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Meeting the Needs at Dundas-Sherbourne:

- Some neighbours are calling for the closure of Street Health's OPS with the misconception that the closure will mean that people who use drugs, many of whom who have lived in the community for years, will leave the community and end the current problems.
- The problems with homelessness, crime and drug use experienced in our neighbourhood are not new. What is new is that the supply of illicit drugs people are using is more toxic than at any other time in history. Approximately 300 people died in 2018 and to date over 100 people died of OD in 2019. Toronto is also in the middle of a housing and shelter crisis that has been building for years.
- Closing Street Health's OPS site would only mean that the people in this community who do inject drugs would suddenly lack a safer option and revert back to using in alleys, parks, and on people's properties.
- To attribute all of the social problems of homelessness and drug use to the Street Health OPS is unfounded. The people who gather at Dundas and Sherbourne do so because there is nowhere else to go.
- All levels of government need to do more to ensure that people who are homeless and people who use drugs have a realistic hope of safety and inclusion. Funding for services for people experiencing addiction across the continuum of care needs to be expanded.
- For example, further funding services to be open evenings and weekends would provide overdose prevention services to people and connect them with other services to help them achieve their goals. A community where no one has to use drugs in public is a goal we all share.
- We understand that the neighbourhood around Dundas and Sherbourne is changing but we cannot leave behind the people who have called this neighbourhood home at a time when their needs are so great.

For further information please contact:

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