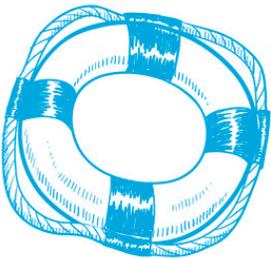


Safe Supply: An Essential Part of the Way Forward from the Poisoned Drug Overdose Crisis



Street Health has decades of experience responding to social and healthcare crises. Our staff are frontline witnesses and responders to the complex and sometimes unimaginable levels of suffering and hopelessness of the thousands of people who are homeless in Toronto.

It is undisputable that the overdose crisis has been compounded by the COVID pandemic – since 2016 more than 15,000 people have died from opioid overdoses. Sadly, the supply of illicit drugs has become more toxic and unpredictable than ever before.

Research findings, as well as our own experience, has consistently shown that providing people who use drugs with compassionate, evidence-based healthcare improves their health and helps those who want treatment to access it.

The Downtown East Collaborative Safe Opioid Supply (DEC-SOS) program is an essential harm reduction approach. It provides individuals who have opioid use disorder with a reliable pharmaceutical opioid of known quality and strength as an alternative to drugs found in the contaminated illegal supply. Program goals include reduced risks of overdose and other harms stemming from the toxic drug supply and connecting individuals to wrap around health and social services.

DEC-SOS operates as a collaborative program between Street Health, Regent Park Community Health Centre (CHC) and South Riverdale CHC with a flexible, low-threshold range of services leveraged by our combined resources and expertise. Clients regularly meet with a Nurse Practitioner for assessment and prescription renewals. A Case Manager and a Registered Nurse provide access to harm reduction supplies and education, grief/trauma counselling, and access or referrals including: testing, housing, treatment and immediate health support. Internal and external evaluation are essential components of the program.

Street Health recognizes that we cannot solve the overdose crisis without commitment from all levels of government to do more and ensure that people who use substances don't die. The way forward must include expanding consumption treatment and OPS services to 24 hour services, funding treatment options that are evidence based, expanding safe supply programs, decriminalizing drug possession, and equally importantly – ending homelessness.

Hotel and Shelter Harm Reduction

Since mid-November, Street Health has been part of a six-community agency partnership lead by Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre and Toronto Public Health – The Works to bring harm reduction and overdose prevention services to those staying at the physical distancing hotels and respites.

The agencies who are working with those who were homeless and are now sheltered at these locations are Regent Park, LAMP and South Riverdale CHCs, Sherbourne Health and the Neighbourhood Group.

Jon Graham is part of the team providing support for the 300 people staying at the 545 Lakeshore Respite and those at the Econo-Lodge located at Queen and Jarvis. This project also incorporates the involvement of peer workers who bring lived experience to their roles as harm reduction staff, adding a vital perspective to understand the current and long term situation and needs of those who are temporarily sheltered at these locations.

Key goals for this project include:

- overdose prevention,
- integrating harm reduction supplies, support and approaches among the shelter staff, and
- developing the peer role of those who have lived experience.

“Out of all of the losses and tragedy of COVID, we have seen some momentum to address issues like homelessness,” states Graham. *“Now we are beginning to use some of the tools and expertise that we know will help build these efforts. For this project that means a focus on harm reduction techniques and an acknowledgement of the vital role of workers who bring lived experience. This is an energy that we must ensure is not just a short-lived priority.”*



Jon, Harm Reduction Crisis Coordinator

Partnerships Bring Enhanced Services

This spring, Street Health is partners with TransPride Toronto and the Bad Date Coalition for a women's drop-in to address issues related to the health, isolation, and safety of non-binary people, trans and cis women who are homeless and/or street involved. This weekly drop-in, in the Dundas and Sherbourne region, is being held during typically underserved hours and has four main components:

1. Providing a safe, welcoming space; free from stigma and discrimination,
2. Offering educational sessions to enhance: coping skills, violence prevention and safety skills, and access to referrals for supports and services,
3. Providing therapeutic group and one-on-one counselling,
4. Expanding and supporting employment for people with lived experience in staff roles and as volunteers

This is a two year project, funded by the City of Toronto.

The Doorway – SUAP II

Street Health's Substance Abuse and Addictions Program (SUAP) is entering a new phase! SUAP II will improve the reach and impact of harm reduction knowledge and skills by increasing the capacity of individuals who use substances to participate in training activities. A core assumption of the project is that the community of people who use drugs embodies real social capital that can and should be mobilized to improve the life circumstances of its members in collaboration with agencies mandated to assist them.



SUAP II has three specific objectives:

1. Introducing community leadership and capacity building to improve and expand training and mentoring in Harm Reduction work by people with lived experience,
2. Strengthening the capacity of community members to respond to high risk behaviours associated with drug use by delivering foundational harm reduction training designed and facilitated by community members,
3. Preparing community members to work in the field of harm reduction and support the development of community led initiatives that provide harm reduction services.

Street Health is partnering with Parkdale Queen West, Regent Park and South Riverdale Community Health Centres to facilitate this project, with funding from Health Canada's SUAP program.

Immediate Supports and Connections

The loss of face-to-face connections and isolation have been some of the deepest felt impacts of the COVID pandemic. During the initial months of lockdown, Street Health's Harm Reduction Drop-Ins were closed. Knowing how much clients rely on these sessions, staff continued to look for every possible option to resume this important work. Out of the Cold organizers were also eager to address this need and in November asked Street Health to bring the harm reduction focus to the weekly Wednesday night sessions at St. Luke's United Church. Staff quickly realized that many of the 75+ people coming out each week would also benefit from access to healthcare services and made arrangements to bring the Health Bus onsite.

"This was a natural extension of Street Health's efforts to meet the community where they are gathered," commented Chaudhry, Harm Reduction Coordinator. *"When someone lacks secure housing, they have little time and ability to deal with other issues. Bringing a nurse and outreach worker to the location serving warm meals and friendly conversation allows clients to gain support for otherwise untreated health issues."* Street Health is proud to be part of this ongoing effort, which receives funding through the United Way of Greater Toronto.



(L-R) Alina, Chaudhry, Danielle and Ben



(L-R) Chaudhry, Bobby and Kelly

Partnership gets the work done!

Street Health is a partner with PASAN, Dixon Hall, and Regent Park Community Health Centre in the *Downtown East Community Clean-up Project* funded by the City of Toronto. This project engages people with lived and living experience of drug use, incarceration, homelessness, mental health challenges, sex work, HIV and Hepatitis C in low barrier employment to collect and safely dispose used and discarded harm reduction supplies. This community safety project aims to reduce stigma about drug use and the people who use drugs.