

# StreetHealth

## OPS AT STREET HEALTH, by Kelly White, OPS Coordinator

This is a devastating time. The situation for our clients who use drugs is increasingly bleak as the opioid overdose crisis shows no signs of abating. We see that almost every drug that is sold on the streets contains fentanyl. People who live in and frequent the neighbourhood of Dundas and Sherbourne are dying; they are losing friends, children, parents, and loved ones. Data from Toronto Public Health shows that in two months this summer paramedics responded to 32 fatal overdoses and 671 non-fatal overdoses, and because people are afraid of police involvement, it is estimated that only 1/3 of overdoses are even reported to 911.

### WHAT WE OFFER

As a response to this situation and thanks to the groundbreaking work of our colleagues in Moss Park, Street Health opened an Overdose Prevention Site (OPS) on June 27, 2018. We have had over 200 visits to date, providing a safe and welcoming space for members of our community who use drugs. Apart from a friendly conversation, cup of coffee, and safe space to use (either by injection, insufflation, or orally), we provide on-site monitoring for people at risk of overdose and can respond rapidly when an overdose occurs. Our space is low barrier (we only ask people their age, gender, and what substance they are using) and wheelchair accessible. We also offer naloxone training and distribution, drug checking using fentanyl test strips, free harm reduction supplies, safe disposal options, a library of information on resources, workshops and trainings, and referrals to the many services Street Health and the community provide. We are currently open from 11 am – 4 pm, Monday to Friday. We coordinate with the other OPS sites in the area to cover as many hours of the day as we can, but sincerely wish we had the capacity to create a situation where none of our clients ever has to use alone or in a public place.

International research on supervised consumption services has found that these sites are beneficial not only to people who use substances, but the surrounding community as well. Evidence has shown that these services save lives, reduce sharing of needles that can lead to transmission of HIV and hepatitis C, increase use of detox and addiction treatment services, provide opportunities to connect people to health care and social services, reduce public drug use, reduce the numbers of inappropriately discarded needles, and, do not contribute to increased crime in the surrounding area. Indeed, this neighborhood is rife with unsafe consumption sites, and there is no one in the alleys or stairwells to support people if an emergency occurs.



OPS team members Megan, Kelly, Franky and Verity.

Having an easily accessible 'one-stop shop' for our clients who use drugs, in the neighbourhood where they use them, is absolutely crucial. Beyond being monitored for overdose, clients are invited to speak with a person who has lived through their own experiences with drugs, be seen by a nurse, find a case manager, or have their identification replaced. We are seeing a high proportion of women, unusual for a supervised consumption service. The feedback we are getting from our clients is that because our site is staffed primarily by people who have experience with drug use and our space is smaller, less clinical, and lower barrier, people who may feel more vulnerable at larger Supervised Injection Sites (SIS) feel comfortable here.

When people are able to take their time in a clean, relaxed environment, closely inspect the drugs they are using, and measure out their dose, it becomes less likely that complications will occur - less likely that the person will need to be revived with oxygen or naloxone, less likely that they will end up with abscesses or soft tissue infections or endocarditis, and less likely that they will require ambulance or hospital care. An OPS is different from a SIS in that it avoids the years-long application process in the context of an overdose emergency, but like an SIS, OPS' do so much more than just prevent overdose deaths. We demonstrate every day to people that they are loved and their lives are valued.

# EVERYONE HAS A STORY TO TELL

by Hilary Hwu, Summer Student

When former Street Health nurse Simonne first met Bill, he was underhoused, susceptible and marginalized. "I built a connection with him and linked him with the ID team," Simonne remembers. They helped Bill obtain ID, apply for a pension, and set up a bank account.

With encouragement from his nurse, Bill connected with a doctor and was diagnosed with tuberculosis. He required intensive medical treatment for nine months and Simonne supported him, arranging accompaniments and gaining help for him to keep his place in a rooming house.

It was around this same time that Bill's sister, Olga, was undertaking an extensive search to find her brother after being out of touch for decades. Her search led her to Street Health. "Bill's first reaction was that he did not want to see his sister," remembers Simonne. "Bill was a private man, keeping to himself even while receiving medical care." After years without family contact, it took some time for Bill to realize that his sister was eager to reconnect. Olga made arrangements to come to Toronto, unfortunately they never got to reunite as Bill passed away shortly before her planned visit.

Described as a "brilliant and avid reader," Olga remembers Bill's enjoyment in walks and spend time reading at the library, exploring whatever topic or idea caught his interest. "I feel sad that I didn't get the chance to reconnect with Bill," states Olga. "I know he had tough times in his life, and I wish he knew what a strong connection I have always felt for him in my heart."



Olga and her brother Bill in earlier days.

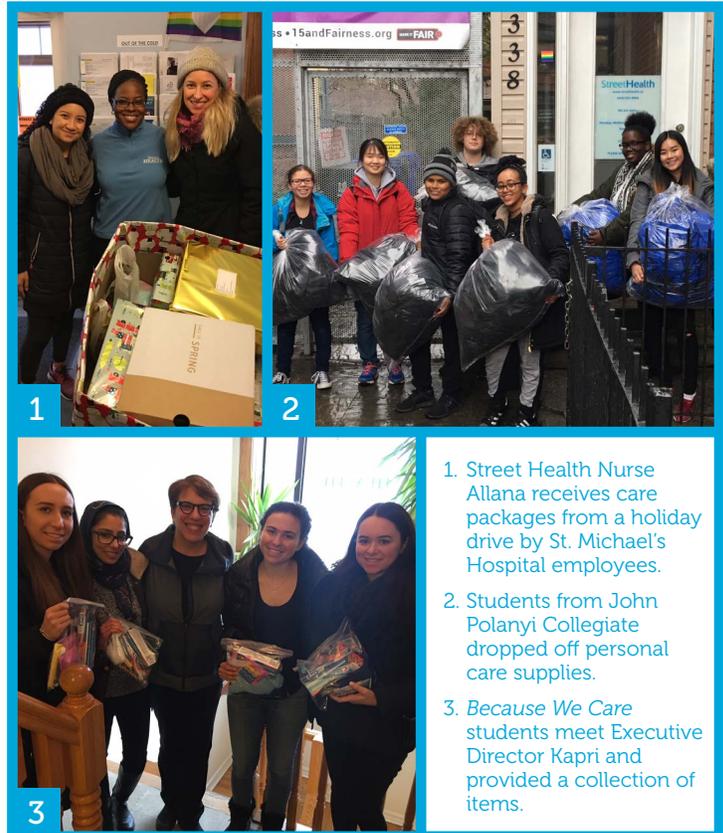
Olga expresses deep appreciation for the care and work that Simonne and the Street Health team provided for her brother. By supporting Street Health in her brother's memory Olga hopes that those experiencing poor health, addictions, poverty and homelessness gain community and family supports so they know they are not alone.

## IN-KIND(NESS)

As the time of year when people think about giving approaches, we are often surprised and delighted by the inventive and thoughtful ways donors decide to organize in-kind contributions for Street Health. Donations of personal care, hygiene supplies and winter warmth items, ensure that items are available anytime clients need them and are provided free of charge. Meeting an individual's immediate need(s) creates a relationship of reliability which can turn into further support for other services like nursing and community mental health.

Here are a few in-kind donation ideas to inspire family or group giving efforts. All collections of new and unused items ensure Street Health can meet clients' needs in months ahead.

- ZSA Legal Recruitment is located downtown and employees often see the homeless on their way to and from work. They coordinated a month-long, holiday collection of personal care supplies.
- When the Axsium Group held a conference, with participants coming from all over the world, they included the opportunity for attendees to bring new body and hair care toiletries. Their collection focused on high-demand items and was delivered the Street Health in the early fall.
- School groups ranging from elementary to post-secondary are keen to roll their sleeves up and help. Students from John Polanyi Collegiate fundraised, purchased, delivered and then spent a day at Street Health to help sort and prepare winter footwear for distribution. Similarly student-led initiatives from Harbord Collegiate and Winchester Public School have helped promote dental and foot health. *Because We Care* at U of T collected from students, staff and local businesses to provide a month's worth of supplies.
- Debbie purchased and photographed items to create a card, sharing the need for health promoting items, and making this contribution as her holiday gift to her family and friends.
- Inspired by their mom's 60th birthday celebration which asked guests to bring new socks for donation, the Goodtimes family now ask their annual holiday musical fete audience to bring winter warmth donations that are delivered to Street Health.



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1. Street Health Nurse Allana receives care packages from a holiday drive by St. Michael's Hospital employees.
2. Students from John Polanyi Collegiate dropped off personal care supplies.
3. *Because We Care* students meet Executive Director Kapri and provided a collection of items.

- Street Health's local community residents responded to postering and dropped off care supplies at the Ontario Restaurant, then staying to enjoy breakfast or lunch – with \$1 from each meal being donated to Street Health.

Each of these efforts and every financial donation helps Street Health connect with those who are experiencing homelessness or lack secure housing - supporting each person's efforts to build his or her wellbeing. Many thanks to all Street Health donors!

Sleeping bags are in high demand throughout the winter. Donations of new or gently used and freshly laundered sleeping bags are a much welcomed and appreciated contribution. Call 416-921-8668, x 229 if you plan to undertake a collection and /or delivery to Street Health.