

Municipal Drug Strategy Coordinators Network of Ontario
c/o Adrienne Crowder
Manager, Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy
176 Wyndham St. N.
Guelph ON, N1H 898

August 21, 2020

Honourable Patty Hajdu
Minister of Health
Government of Canada
House of Commons
Ottawa ON, K1A 0A6

Dear Honourable Minister of Health Hajdu,

We would like to commend your government for addressing the drug poisoning crisis by funding and facilitating access to safer supply initiatives, and other health interventions. As you know, safer supply initiatives provide pharmaceutical-grade drugs, such as hydromorphone or diacetylmorphine, to people who use substances within a health care context. However, additional safer supply initiatives are needed in Ontario and across Canada. Therefore, on behalf of the Municipal Drug Strategy Coordinators Network of Ontario (MDSCNO), we urge the Government of Canada to immediately increase funding to safer supply initiatives to save lives, and improve the health, safety and well-being of people who use drugs in our province.

Safer supply initiatives significantly improve individual health by transitioning people from the toxic, unregulated market to pharmaceutical-grade substances within a health care context. Substance use is addressed as a health issue rather than a criminal justice issue. Safer supply initiatives can also offer participants case management and other supports to address a spectrum of health and social concerns. These health initiatives have demonstrated exceptionally high client retention rates and significant reductions in overdose fatalities while simultaneously creating a pathway to health care services for their clients.¹ Beyond the health sector, safer supply initiatives provide significant benefits, including improved community safety and well-being, and reduced

¹ Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction. "Exploring Expanded Response Options to Opioid Harms: Case Studies from Four Canadian Clinics", June 2020. Available at: <https://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2020-06/CCSA-Expanded-Response-Options-Opioid-Harms-Case-Studies-2020-en.pdf>.

enforcement- and criminal justice-related costs.² For these reasons, they have strong support in many Ontario communities.

In 2019, Ontario recorded the highest number of opioid-related overdose deaths in Canada, with 1,535 people dying from opioid-related poisoning, surpassing the province of British Columbia for the first time.^{3,4} Since the year 2000, when 111 opioid-related fatalities were recorded, the number of preventable deaths has increased every year, resulting in declining life expectancy in Ontario.⁵ While several factors contribute to the drug poisoning crisis, exposure to toxic drugs from an unregulated market is the primary driver of deaths in Ontario and the rest of Canada.

The drug poisoning crisis has been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in two concurrent public health crises. Services have temporarily closed or reduced their hours and capacity. In addition, the unregulated drug market has become increasingly toxic. Stress, isolation, and other pandemic-related factors have increased the risks associated with substance use. Preliminary data from the Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario shows a 35% increase in suspected drug-related deaths in Ontario in March, April and May 2020 compared to the monthly average in 2019, with approximately 60 suspected-drug related deaths occurring each week.⁶ It is now more evident than ever that urgent action is needed to address the opioid poisoning crisis that is co-occurring with the COVID-19 pandemic.

In late 2019 and early 2020, most community proposals submitted to the Substance Use and Addictions Program (SUAP) for safer supply initiatives were denied simply because of inadequate funding. The MDSCNO calls on the federal government to urgently increase SUAP funding available for existing proposals, and to issue a second call for new SUAP safer supply proposals to support a full spectrum of safer supply initiatives across Canada.

The MDSCNO's members are among Ontario's leading experts in drug policy and program development. We represent comprehensive drug strategies in many municipalities throughout Ontario who share a collective interest in making our province safer and healthier for present and future generations.

² Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario), Leece P, Tenenbaum M. *Evidence Brief: Effectiveness of supervised injectable opioid agonist treatment (siOAT) for opioid use disorder*. Toronto, ON; 2017.

³ Public Health Ontario. Personal Communication, May 2020.

⁴ Preliminary data from the Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario shows that there were 1,535 probable and confirmed opioid overdose deaths in Ontario in 2019. This number may increase as coroner's complete investigations.

⁵ Statistics Canada. (2020). *The Daily: Life Tables*. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200128/dq200128a-eng.htm>

⁶ Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario. Personal Communication, August 2020

Sincerely,

Adrienne Crowder

Adrienne Crowder
Manager, Guelph Wellington Drug Strategy
On behalf of the Municipal Drug Strategy
Coordinators Network of Ontario



Susan Shepherd
Manager, Toronto Drug Strategy Secretariat
On behalf of the Municipal Drug Strategy
Coordinators Network of Ontario

CC:

Prime Minister Trudeau
Alliance for Healthier Communities
Association of Municipalities of Ontario
Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness
Canadian Drug Policy Coalition
Canadian Mental Health Association
Canadian Nurses Association
Canadian Public Health Association
Chiefs of Ontario
College of Nurses of Ontario
College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario
Council of Medical Officers of Health
Federation of Canadian Municipalities
Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police
Ontario College of Pharmacists
Ontario Pharmacists Association
Ontario Public Health Association
Public Health Ontario

About the Municipal Drug Strategy Coordinators Network of Ontario

Our 65+ members work in diverse health settings across the province, including public health units, community health centres and not-for-profit organizations. Members coordinate multi-sectoral initiatives that aim to prevent and/or reduce the harms of substance use through regionally tailored strategies incorporating prevention, harm reduction, treatment and enforcement-justice initiatives. Learn more at: www.drugstrategy.ca.