



PARKDALE
QUEEN WEST
Community
Health Centre



South Riverdale
COMMUNITY
HEALTH CENTRE



REPORT RELEASE

Building a Harm Reduction and Substance Use Continuum of Care, 2018

In early 2018, the Toronto Central LHIN provided funding to support 5 Community Health Centres in Toronto (Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre, South Riverdale Community Health Centre, LAMP Community Health Centre, Regent Park Community Health Centre and Unison Health & Community Services) to engage in a collaborative process to guide the deployment and utilization of resources in the area of harm reduction in response to the overdose crisis. From January to March 2018, consultations were held with 125 people who use drugs and use harm reduction services, harm reduction service providers, and key informants working in a variety of health and social service agencies. This led to the development of a series of recommendations for developing a Harm Reduction and Substance Use Continuum of Care.

Unfortunately, the full report *Recommendations for Building a Harm Reduction and Substance Use Continuum of Care* was unable to be released in the spring of 2018 due to political considerations given the ongoing provincial election. However, the overdose crisis in Ontario – and particularly in Toronto – has worsened in the intervening years. Additionally, there is emerging evidence that the intersection of the dual crises of COVID-19 and overdose are leading to a dramatic increase in overdose in the community in early 2020. There is a strong need for harm reduction supports that recognize the unique risks faced by people who use drugs during this crisis, particularly as physical distancing, isolation and other COVID-19 response measures have rendered access to services in community settings more challenging.

An additional consideration brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic is the need to integrate harm reduction supports across multiple models and in multiple settings, including within shelters and respite, but also within the hotels and apartments that are being rapidly scaled-up to house people who are unsheltered and/or experiencing homelessness during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. [Recently released data](#) from the Ontario Coroner's Service shows that in Toronto in 2019 prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 23% of people who died of opioid overdose in 2019 were experiencing homeless, a stark increase compared to 2018 when 11% of people who died of opioid overdose were experiencing homelessness. That almost a quarter of all overdose-related deaths in Toronto in 2019 occurred in people experiencing homeless underscores the urgent need to ensure that comprehensive harm reduction services and supports – including access to Safer Supply and Overdose Prevention Sites within housing and shelters - are being provided across multiple housing settings, and within all health and social services settings that people are accessing.



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The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced a need to rapidly provide shelter and housing to allow for physical distancing for people who are unsheltered and/or experiencing homelessness. However, as these shelter and housing models are scaled-up, there is a strong and continuing need to ensure that comprehensive harm reduction and substance use supports are provided alongside them to mitigate potential harms from the ongoing overdose crisis. The risk of overdose to people who use drugs from using drugs alone in shelters, respite, and expanding housing models being provided in hotels and apartments calls from the rapid deployment of harm reduction services such as Safer Supply (referred to as 'managed opioid programs' in the recommendations) and the implementation of low threshold overdose prevention sites or peer witnessing interventions in these settings.

The *Recommendations for Building a Harm Reduction and Substance Use Continuum of Care* report provides crucial and still pertinent advice for how to integrate harm reduction services and supports across multiple settings where people who use drugs live, access services, and receive healthcare and social services. We are pleased as a community of CHC to release this report to inform the work we all need to do in building responsive harm reduction strategies and intervention.

Thank you to Dr. Gillian Kolla, researcher, evaluator and advocate for leading the review and preparing this report. Gillian's expertise and commitment to research that examines how risk and harm are experienced, embodied and mitigated by people who use drugs, and what is needed to improve their pathways into treatment and care made this report possible

Should you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact:

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