

May 6, 2022

The Honourable Christine Elliott
Minister of Health and Deputy Premier
Ministry of Health
College Park 5th Floor, 777 Bay St
Toronto, ON M7A 2J3

Dear Minister Elliott:

Letter of Support – Response to the Opioid Crisis in Ontario-Wide

On April 21, 2022 at a regular meeting of the Windsor-Essex County Board of Health, the Board considered a letter from Simcoe-Muskoka District Health Unit endorsing a set of recommendations for the province of Ontario and provincial Ministry of Health to help address the escalating opioid crisis province-wide.

Over the last five years, the region of Windsor-Essex County (WEC) has also experienced a worsening opioid and drug overdose crisis. In 2021, there were a total of 416 opioid-related emergency department visits reported in WEC, which is 58 more than those reported for in 2020 (358) and nearly quadruple those which were reported for in 2016 (108).^{1,2} The WEC community also observed a total of 68 opioid-related deaths in 2020, which represents the highest number of annual opioid deaths recorded in WEC since reporting began in 2005.² These upward trends are expected to continue as local data becomes available for 2021, with 33 opioid-related mortalities recorded in the first seven months of the annual period alone (January to July of 2021).¹

The following motion was passed:

Motion: That the WECHU Board of Health support the letter from Simcoe-Muskoka Public Health to the Hon. Christine Elliott in response to the Opioid Crisis province-wide and urges the following:

1. Create a multisector task force to guide the development of a robust provincial opioid response plan that will ensure necessary resourcing, policy change, and health and social system coordination.
2. Expand access to evidence informed harm reduction programs and practices including lifting the provincial cap of 21 Consumption and Treatment Service (CTS) Sites, funding Urgent Public Health Needs Sites (UPHNS) and scaling up safer opioid supply options.
3. Explore revisions to the current CTS model to address the growing trends of opioid poisoning amongst those who are using inhalation methods.
4. Expand access to opioid agonist therapy for opioid use disorder through a range of settings (e.g. mobile outreach, primary care, emergency departments), and a variety of medication options.

5. Provide a long-term financial commitment to create more affordable and supportive housing for people in need, including people with substance use disorders.
6. Address the structural stigma and harms that discriminate against people who use drugs, through provincial support and advocacy to the Federal government to decriminalize personal use and possession of substances and ensure increased investments in health and social services at all levels.
7. Increase investments in evidence-informed substance use prevention and mental health promotion initiatives that provide foundational support for the health, safety and well-being of individuals, families, and neighbourhoods, beginning for early childhood.
8. Fund additional and dedicated positions for health units to support the coordination and leadership of local opioid and substance strategies.

The Windsor-Essex County Health Unit fully supports the above recommendation, and thanks you for your consideration for expanding these provisions to all public health unit regions.

Sincerely,



Gary McNamara, Chair
Windsor-Essex County Board of Health

c: Nicole Dupuis, CEO, WECHU
Loretta Ryan, Executive Director, alPha
Michael A. Tibollo, Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions
Ontario Boards of Health
Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario
Dr. Kieran Moore, CMOH
MPs and MPPs in Windsor-Essex
Mayors and Municipal Council Members in Windsor-Essex

¹ Windsor-Essex County Health Unit. Personal communication with the Epidemiology and Evaluation Department. January 21st, 2022.

² Public Health Ontario (PHO). Interactive Opioid Tool – Opioid Related Morbidity and Mortality in the Geographic Area of the Windsor-Essex County Health Unit. Retrieved from <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/data-and-analysis/substance-use/interactive-opioid-tool>. Accessed April 14th, 2022.

March 16, 2022

The Honourable Christine Elliott
Minister of Health
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

Dear Minister Elliott:

Re: Response to the Opioid Crisis in Simcoe Muskoka and Ontario-wide

On March 16, 2022, the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU) Board of Health endorsed a set of provincial recommendations to help address the ongoing and escalating opioid crisis experienced within Simcoe Muskoka and province-wide. Despite regional activities in response to the opioid crisis, there remains an urgent need for heightened provincial attention and action to promptly and adequately address the extensive burden of opioid-related deaths being experienced by those who use substances.

In the 19 months of available data since the start of the pandemic (March 2020 to September 2021) there have been 245 opioid-related deaths in Simcoe Muskoka. This is nearly 70% higher than the 145 opioid-related deaths in the 19 months prior to the start of the pandemic (August 2018 to February 2020), when our communities were already struggling in the face of this crisis. The first nine months of 2021 saw an opioid-related death rate more than 33% higher than the first nine months of 2020, suggesting the situation has not yet stabilized.

As such, the SMDHU Board of Health urges your government to take the following actions:

1. Create a multisectoral task force to guide the development of a robust provincial opioid response plan that will ensure necessary resourcing, policy change, and health and social system coordination.
2. Expand access to evidence informed harm reduction programs and practices including lifting the provincial cap of 21 Consumption and Treatment Service (CTS) Sites, funding Urgent Public Health Needs Sites (UPHNS) and scaling up safer opioid supply options.
3. Explore revisions to the current CTS model to address the growing trends of opioid poisoning amongst those who are using inhalation methods.
4. Expand access to opioid agonist therapy for opioid use disorder through a range of settings (e.g. mobile outreach, primary care, emergency departments), and a variety of medication options.
5. Provide a long-term financial commitment to create more affordable and supportive housing for people in need, including people with substance use disorders.
6. Address the structural stigma and harms that discriminate against people who use drugs, through provincial support and advocacy to the Federal government to decriminalize personal use and possession of substances and ensure increased investments in health and social services at all levels.

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7. Increase investments in evidence-informed substance use prevention and mental health promotion initiatives, that provide foundational support for the health, safety and well-being of individuals, families, and neighbourhoods, beginning from early childhood.
8. Fund a fulltime position of a Drug Strategy Coordinator/Lead for the Simcoe Muskoka Opioid Strategy.

The SMDHU Board of Health has endorsed these recommendations based on the well-demonstrated need for a coordinated, multi-sectoral approach that addresses the social determinants of health and recognizes the value of harm reduction strategies alongside substance use disorder treatment strategies, as part of the larger opioid crisis response. Evidence has shown that harm reduction strategies can prevent overdoses, save lives, and connect people with treatment and social services. Further, there is an urgent need to change the current Canadian drug policy to allow a public health response to substance use, through decriminalization of personal use and possession paired with avenues towards health and social services, as our Board called for in 2018. These recommendations collectively promote effective public health and safety measures to address the social and health harms associated with substance use.

Sincerely,

ORIGINAL Signed By:

Anita Dubeau
Board of Health Chair
Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit

cc: Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions
Attorney General of Ontario
Chief Medical Officer of Health
Association of Local Public Health Agencies
Ontario Health
Ontario Boards of Health
Members of Parliament in Simcoe Muskoka
Members of Provincial Parliament in Simcoe Muskoka
Mayors and Municipal Councils in Simcoe Muskoka