July 22, 2022

The Honourable Sylvia Jones
Deputy Premier and Minister of Health
Training Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care
777 Bay Street, 5th Floor
Toronto, Ontario M7A 2J3

Dear Minister Jones,

On June 23, 2022, Niagara Region’s Board of Health endorsed a set of provincial recommendations to help address the ongoing and escalating opioid crisis experienced within Niagara and across the province. 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.

Niagara has been disproportionately impacted by the toxicity of the unregulated drug supply, particularly in regards to opioids. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020 – September 2021), there have been 259 confirmed opioid-related deaths in Niagara. This was a 67.1% increase compared to the 19 months prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (August 2018 – February 2020). From 2018 – 2020, Niagara’s opioid-related death rate was almost double the provincial death rate (Figure 1). Preliminary data for 2021 suggests that Niagara’s opioid-related death count will surpass previous years. In addition to an increase in opioid-related deaths, opioid-related emergency department (ED) visits in Niagara have also increased since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. There were 1,350 opioid-related ED visits in Niagara from March 2020 – September 2021 which was a 24.9% increase compared to the 19 months prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are acutely aware of the complexities of substance use and substance use disorders. We are also aware that implementing a concerted, multi-pronged approach involving all levels of government is urgently needed to stem the tide of these needless deaths and subsequent grief that is devastating our communities.
As such, Niagara Region’s Board of Health, urges your government to take the following actions:

1. Create a multi-sectoral 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 supply options;
3. Revise 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, Rapid Access to Addition Medicine Clinics), 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 from early childhood;
8. Fund additional and dedicated positions for local public health to support the critical local coordination and leadership of local opioid and substance strategies;

Niagara Region’s 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. These recommendations collectively promote effective public health and safety measures to address the social and health harms associated with substance use.

Sincerely,

Jim Bradley
Chair, Board of Health, Niagara Regional Area
Regional Chair, Niagara Region

cc: Premier Doug Ford
    The Honourable Doug Downey, Attorney-General of Ontario
    Dr. Kieran Moore, Chief Medical Officer of Health of Ontario
    The Honourable Michael Tibollo, Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions
    Jeff Burch, MPP, Niagara Centre
    Wayne Gates, MPP, Niagara Falls
    Sam Oosterhoff, MPP, Niagara West
    Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens, MPP, St. Catharines
    Dean Allison, MP, Niagara West
    Vance Badawey, MP, Niagara Centre
    Tony Baldinelli, MP, Niagara Falls
    Chris Bittle, MP, St. Catharines
    Association of Local Public Health Agencies
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