

## THE LINDSAY ADVOCATE

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# The other pandemic: Opioid deaths surge during age of COVID

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August 31 is International Overdose Awareness Day (IOAD), a global event that aims to raise awareness of overdose and reduce the stigma of a drug-related death.

The numbers are staggering whether measured nationally, provincially, or locally. Between January 2016 and December 2019 there were 15,393 apparent **opioid-related deaths in Canada**. In 2019 there were 1,509 **opioid-related deaths in Ontario**.

In our local health unit region there were 22 opioid-related deaths in 2019. As of August 14, 2020, there have been 88 suspected drug overdoses in the area served by the Kawartha Lakes Police Service (KLPS) compared to 93 for all of 2019.

These grim statistics do not tell the whole story, however. As Catherine MacDonald, substances and harm reduction coordinator at the Haliburton Kawartha Pine Ridge District Health Unit (HKPRDHU) explains.

“The information we get from agencies that have a more direct relationship with people who use substances can add perspective beyond the official stats that tell us what’s going on with the overdose situation in this region. For instance, we often learn how people experiencing overdoses will not call 911.”

The grief that is left behind for families and friends is one of the reasons the **IOAD** was founded in 2001 in Australia. The now global event — held on 31 August each year — “aims to raise awareness of overdose and reduce the stigma of a drug-related death.”

While there are no official local IOAD activities (unlike the recent flag-raising at the Peterborough Police), local business person Jesse Kalosza is spearheading a community-led day. Kalosza will be giving away purple ribbons (one of the colours of the IOAD campaign) at his business

**Thirteen Tattoo Studio** at 147 Kent Street W. in Lindsay on Aug. 31 from 12–5 p.m. and throughout the rest of the week.

Kalosza is urging residents to support the awareness day “by tying a purple ribbon around a tree or something else in town, wearing purple, or lighting a candle.

Kalosza, along with his wife Sarah Kalosza — who he calls “the brain behind the project” — has been promoting a new local Facebook page called **My Life Mattered**. The site is “dedicated to all those in our community of the City of Kawartha Lakes who have lost their lives to the drug crisis. These people all have someone who cared for them deeply and are just that; people. They should be viewed as such and not just another statistic.” The site also endeavours to end the stigma around addiction.

Some would say the page should be recommended reading for every citizen and every elected official in the city. While incredibly sad, it speaks to a community effort to address local overdoses and the stigma that comes with them. Clearly the message is starting to get out. As of this writing, the page has 1,542 likes.

To find out about official local responses to what is an apparent health crisis, *The Advocate* reached out to the HKPRDU, the KLPS and the city.

“The health unit also continues to work closely with EMS, local police services, partner agencies like **PARN** [the Peterborough Aids Resource Network],

**Fourcast** and **Green Wood Coalition**, and concerned residents to address opioid overdoses,” in their catchment area, says MacDonald.

Advocates like Kalosza think that the opiate epidemic should be declared a public health emergency. The Canadian Public Health Association agrees, stating in their 2016 position paper **The Opioid Crisis in Canada** that, “where conditions exist, [provinces should] declare the opioid crisis a public health emergency to facilitate the allocation of resources and to overcome legal or other barriers in the interest of public health.”

This has yet to happen locally or provincially despite the climbing death and hospitalization rates. MacDonald states that, “although the health unit has not officially declared the opioid epidemic a public health emergency, we recognize it as such and have put a strong priority on offering services to support people who use substances.”

According to Rod Sutherland, director of human services for Kawartha Lakes, **The Haliburton, Kawartha Lakes, Northumberland (HKLN) Drug Strategy** was presented to city council on September 8, 2019. There does not seem to be an overall city response to the problem beyond participation in the drug strategy in terms of collecting information centrally. When asked if the city gets informed statistics on overdose deaths/overdose interventions, Sutherland said these may be received by different departments “based on their

connection to related programs or services.”

And as for declaring a local health emergency, Sutherland said “the health unit’s board would likely have to make that declaration on behalf of the health unit. That recommendation would likely require a council resolution and I don’t believe this has been specifically presented to, or addressed by, council.”

For its part, the KLPS is doing some innovative work on the problem, as Sgt. Dave Murtha explains.

“In addition to traditional law enforcement, the Kawartha Lakes Police Service works closely with our local community partners to address the use of drugs in our community.”

Murtha explains that KLPS is involved in a partnership with Fourcast, a local agency that assists people struggling with addiction or homelessness. One day a week, an officer and an addictions counsellor go into the community to speak with people who have overdosed, people who are struggling with addiction, and also to distribute Naloxone kits to those who may be at risk of overdosing.

“This is a partnership unique to the Kawartha Lakes and we are proud of the number of people who we have successfully connected to addiction counselling, housing or other supports in the community,” Murtha said.

However, there is reason to believe that the problem is going to get worse.

As MacDonald explains, evidence does suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has made the opioid epidemic even worse.

In August, the chief coroner of Ontario reported that opioid-related deaths for January–July 2020 were up 35 per cent from the previous year.

And it appears that is the case locally, too.

“At this time, the health unit cannot provide data for local deaths due to opioid overdose during COVID-19. However, what we are hearing anecdotally from local police services, EMS, and other community partners is an increase in the number of overdose events in recent months during COVID-19.”

The reasons for this, like addiction itself, are complex. MacDonald explains that an increasing toxic unregulated drug supply, a change in income for some people, increased isolation and anxiety are just some of the factors leading to the increase.

“It is little wonder that opioid overdoses and deaths are increasing,” she adds.

For many people, these deaths are unknown or just ignored. As Kalosza asks, “How do you fix a problem until you admit a problem exists?”

MacDonald says any solutions will involve all of us.

“Everyone has a role in supporting local harm reduction efforts – especially now – and addressing the ongoing opioid epidemic in Kawartha Lakes. Let’s work together, setting aside personal concerns and opinions, and treat people impacted by

opioids with compassion and dignity.”

After all, she says, whether a pandemic or epidemic, we’re in this together.

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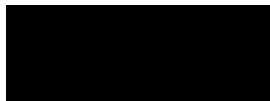
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