

# 'ADDICTION IS A HEALTH ISSUE — IT'S NOT A LIFESTYLE CHOICE'

## HALTON COUNCILLORS WANT OPIOID OVERDOSE CRISIS ADDRESSED NOW

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While COVID-19 continues to dominate headlines, there's another serious issue impacting local residents' health and well-being that far predates the pandemic.

Preliminary data shows at least 25 Halton residents lost their lives to suspected opioid-related overdoses last year, with over 1,000 deaths being recorded across Canada in the first three months of 2020 alone.

According to Public Health Ontario, the pandemic has only exacerbated the issue, with health experts projecting a 50 per cent increase in opioid-related deaths across the province for 2020 compared to 2019.

And Halton politicians are saying enough is enough. Regional council is now calling for a long-term, comprehensive strategy to address the opioid crisis in local communities and beyond.

The councillors are asking the provincial and federal governments to work with Halton Regional Police, Halton Public Health, first responders and community organizations to formalize the plan, with an emphasis on harm reduction, treatment and prevention while maintaining enforcement.

Council's efforts come as welcome news to those who've been working to address the opioid issue in Halton for some time, including Betty-Lou Kristy.

Since losing her 25-year-old son Pete to an accidental opioid overdose in 2001, she has dedicated her life to helping fix gaps in the mental health and addictions systems.

She's currently part of a provincial COVID-19 table geared to mental health and addictions, where she's sharing her insights as a bereaved mother who's been in recovery for almost two decades from alcohol, multi-drug addictions, trauma and mental health issues.

"When you have regional players and police and the community at a table all working on something, it speaks loud and clear that you (people struggling with addiction) are valued and we need to do something about this," said Kristy,

who's also the director of Support House's Centre for Innovation in Peer Support, which works locally to integrate peer support services in the mental health and substance use/addictions system.

"If nothing else, it will help break down the stigma, bias and discrimination that still to this day surrounds substance use and drug use. Addiction is a health issue — it's not a lifestyle choice."

Kristy's work at the provincial level has made her aware of the millions of dollars in funding earmarked to address the issue across Ontario and plans that are in place, such as the 'Roadmap to Wellness: A Plan to build Ontario's Mental Health and Addictions System' that was launched just before the pandemic began.

More locally, she suggested the Halton Equitable Drug Strategy committee from years ago should reconvene — a move she feels could quickly help further the region's goal as many of the same community partners were involved.

With the pandemic presenting additional challenges for those living with addictions, more solutions can't come soon enough for Kristy.

"The opioid issue was a



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Opioid-related deaths are on the rise across the province, according to Public Health Ontario.

huge crisis even before COVID-19, and we know the death rates and overdoses that leave harm are out of control right now," she said. "The pandemic has shone a bright light on mental health and substance use issues and where the gaps and inequities are in the system."

Halton Regional Police are also all too familiar with the issues surrounding opioid use, with the local force responding to over 200 calls related to the drugs between January and November 2020. During the same time frame, Halton paramedic services attended 165 calls for suspected opioid overdoses, according to a report from Halton Public Health.

"The number of overdoses in a concern for us," said Det. Sgt. Barrett Gabriel of the Halton Police Drugs and Morality Unit, noting he appreciates that the region's motion formal-

izes what police have been doing for quite some time.

"We would like to stop any increase and work with our partners to address this and see how we can decrease the trend nationally. It's a very complex problem, and there is no one easy solution."

While targeting illegal substances through enforcement is a big part of the job for local police, Gabriel said there's also a significant education component for those using drugs.

"We understand people are going to use, but overdoses are preventable," said Gabriel, adding Halton police have been carrying naloxone to reverse the effects of an opioid overdose since 2018. "We're trying to encourage people to not use alone, which is impacted by COVID-19 and social distancing."

Police also promote the "don't run, call 911" campaign, which encourages

those who see someone in distress from a potential overdose to contact emergency services, with the Good Samaritans Act offering some protections for those who make the call.

"We're not looking to persecute people who are using — we're looking to save lives if they're in trouble," he said.

Back at the regional council table, the local politicians stressed the seriousness of the issue and urgency of addressing it.

Likewise, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) has made a variety of recommendations to the province on addressing the opioid overdose emergency, said Milton Coun. and AMO board of directors member Colin Best.

"I've heard from a number of mayors and councillors in other municipalities stating that opioid addictions are causing serious problems in their communities in health, crime and the diversion of scarce emergency services to keep up with this crisis," he said.

"This is an important physical and mental health issue affecting not only individuals, but also their families, first responders, hospitals and other facilities."

*STORY BEHIND THE STORY: With the pandemic only making the opioid crisis worse across the country, we wanted to take a closer look at what's being done in Halton to address the serious issue.*

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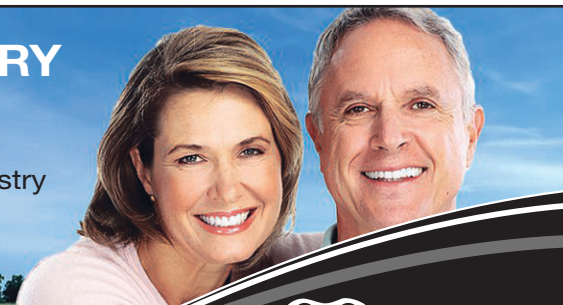


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