

PANDEMIC MADE A BAD SITUATION WORSE: POLICE

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across the country and province is reflected here locally. I think there's a lot of misconceptions that somehow Halton has better protective factors against the impacts of overdoses, and that's just not the case. We're a highly educated, very affluent community, but that is not enough to insulate us."

She said the HRPS drug and human trafficking unit "continues to disrupt the flow of illicit drugs throughout and within our region," including the largest drug seizure in the history of the local force last August.

Earlier in 2021, police also concluded a seven-month investigation dubbed Project Lynx, which centred around a sophisticated drug trafficking network police say was responsible for supplying cocaine and fentanyl throughout the Greater Toronto Area, including Halton.

One of the individuals arrested was sentenced in January to 13 years and 222 days for possession for the purpose of trafficking fentanyl, along with a 10-year concurrent sentence on two counts of possession for the purpose of trafficking cocaine.

HRPS Deputy Chief of Regional Operations Jeff Hill said this sentencing "sends a strong message that those who put some of our most vulnerable community members at risk will be held accountable."

"This type of activity will never be tolerated in our community and our members will remain relentless in battling the ongoing opioid crisis and bringing those

involved in trafficking to prosecution."

While the reasons behind drug use are always complex, including past trauma and mental health, Hartman said the pandemic has "absolutely devastated" an already bad situation, with more people using drugs alone, thereby increasing their chances of dying due to an overdose.

The year-to-date numbers for overdoses are "much worse" than in 2021, said Hartman, with police responding to 73 suspected drug poisonings in January and February alone, 11 of which were fatal.

"We're seeing a significant upwards trend in the number of suspected overdoses that our officers are attending," she said.

Of those calls police responded to in 2021, at least a third of them were known to involve the powerful opioid fentanyl, explained Hartman, while non-opioid calls can be related to substances such as methamphetamine, prescription drugs, etc.

"A lot of overdoses are accidental because they consumed something that was cut with fentanyl and they just didn't know, and they don't necessarily have naloxone on hand," said Hartman.

With fentanyl being the substance most likely to cause death in an overdose situation, Halton police have been carrying naloxone, which reverses or blocks the effects of opioids, since 2016 when it was first deployed to specialized units. By 2018, naloxone was provided to every frontline officer as the number of overdoses locally continued to rise.



Metroland file photo

The use of naloxone has been a big help in preventing fatal outcomes when it comes to opioid overdoses.

Police reported a 52 per cent increase between 2020 and 2021 in naloxone being administered by officers.

On a positive note, Hartman said there's also been a huge increase in the number of bystanders intervening in overdose situations with naloxone. Police documented 65 such occurrences in 2021.

"If that hadn't happened, we would have had well in excess of 100 fatalities last year," she said. "We continue to encourage members of the community to carry naloxone if they or someone they know uses drugs. It's easy to access and easy to use."

The devastating impact fentanyl has on addicts and their loved ones is felt by many in the community, like Kathleen and Steve Boose of Georgetown.

Their youngest son has been dealing with his addiction for many years while also being in and out of jail — a vicious cycle that's so hard to break.

His plight, which has threat-

ened to tear the family apart, was the inspiration behind the couple's 2019 support workshop geared to family and friends of addicts. From there, they started a local Nar-Anon group that meets weekly in Georgetown, both in person and online.

"It (the meetings) has been a lifesaver for us as well," said Kathleen. "It's a heartbreaking spot to be in, to have a loved one addicted to opiates."

The local mom also belongs to a group called Mothers Stop the Harm, which she said is pushing for the decriminalization of personal drug quantities to make it easier for an addict to reach out for help.

According to Hartman, helping those with addictions is also the goal of Halton police.

While officers have attended over 600 suspected drug overdoses in the past two years, she said no simple possession charges were laid at any of those calls.

"It's just not what we're there for. We want people to call 911 because our officers carry naloxone," she said. "All we want to do is save a life, that is it."

Police encourage those who use drugs to never do so alone, but if they do, to download the Brave app, which connects those at risk of an overdose with the help they need. Local residents are also urged to contact emergency services if they see someone in distress from a potential overdose, with the Good Samaritans Act offering broad protections for those who make the call.

"The Halton Regional Police Service remains committed to taking a harm reduction ap-

HALTON SUPPORT PROGRAMS

- Support House: 1-833-845-WELL (9355), supporthouse.ca
- Halton ADAPT: 1-855-211-0898, haltonadapt.org
- Local Nar-Anon groups: naranonontario.com
- One-Link: 1-844-216-7411, one-link.ca
- Crisis Outreach and Support Team (COAST): 1-877-825-9011
- Distress Centre Halton: Oakville – 905-849-4541, Burlington – 905-681-1488, Halton Hills – 905-877-1211.
- Brave app: brave.coop/besafe

proach to this crisis, knowing that every overdose is preventable," said Hartman.

She noted that police also want to keep the conversation going on the topic to help remove the stigma around drugs and drug use.

"We want everyone to support people who use drugs — that's actually what they need," she said. "Every life saved is an opportunity for recovery in the future."

The sentiment was echoed by Steve Boose.

"There are a lot of people out there who think they (addicts) are bad — that they're evil. But it's a much greyer situation," he said. They're all somebody's child, they're all somebody's loved one. They've lost their way, but there are those who want them back."

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



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