

## **Standing Together for Life: International Overdose Awareness Day 2025**

**August 31, 2025**

On *International Overdose Awareness Day*, we remember the many lives lost to overdose, honour those living with grief, and recommit ourselves to action against this preventable tragedy.

This year, our reflections come in the midst of a deeply troubling reality. Ontario is in the grip of an ongoing toxic drug crisis, one that has claimed tens of thousands of lives and continues to devastate families and communities with death rates surpassing the height of the AIDS crisis<sup>1</sup>. The death rates related to overdose are not only persisting, they are worsening<sup>1</sup>. For the survivors of the toxic drug supply and overdose, there is an increase in acquired brain injuries and complex wounds; these are substantial concerns that impact the quality of life of Canadians while also raising healthcare costs and pressure on an already strained healthcare system<sup>1</sup>.

In Ontario, closures and defunding of supervised consumption and overdose prevention sites, coupled with restrictive policy changes such as Bill 6<sup>2</sup> and Bill 10<sup>3</sup>, are eroding access to the very services proven to save lives and further criminalizing those who use drugs.

For people who use drugs, these actions are not abstract policy shifts; they are matters of survival. They deepen existing inequities, reduce access to critical health and community supports, increase the risk of overdose, amplify stigma, and disproportionately impact those already marginalized.

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<sup>1</sup> Office of the Chief Coroner (OCC) Data effective August 12, 2025: <https://www.phsd.ca/health-topics-programs/alcohol-drugs/community-drug-strategy/research/opioid-surveillance/deaths/#annualized-rates-of-opioid-related-deaths>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.ola.org/en/legislative-business/bills/parliament-44/session-1/bill-6>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ola.org/en/legislative-business/bills/parliament-44/session-1/bill-10>

Organizations serving people living with and at risk of HIV across Ontario have long been at the intersection of HIV work and harm reduction, providing life-saving services, trusted relationships, and essential linkage to care. We see first-hand the human cost of these policy decisions: preventable deaths, fractured support systems, traumatic child apprehensions, and communities left to grieve without adequate resources for healing or prevention.

- These human costs impact some communities more than others. **Northern communities in Ontario continue to be disproportionately impacted by drug toxicity deaths, consistently experiencing death rates triple that of the rest of the province<sup>5</sup>**
- ***Pregnancy-associated fatal and non-fatal opioid toxicity rates have increased by 150% and 220% respectively, between 2013 and 2020, and continue to be at an all-time high in 2022<sup>4</sup>.***
- Since 2021, the majority of opioid toxicity deaths have occurred among **individuals living in private residences**, despite public perception that these deaths are mostly among people facing homelessness<sup>5</sup>.

We refuse to accept a future where evidence-based harm reduction is diminished or disregarded. We know that supervised consumption sites, access to safer supply, and low-barrier harm reduction services save lives, reduce stigma, help prevent new cases of HIV/HCV, and build pathways to needed care. We know that criminalization, surveillance, and moral judgment only perpetuate harm. And we know that every overdose death is preventable.

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<sup>4</sup>A.Camden, T.Gomes, H.Brown, R.Schmidt, A.Patrikar, H.Lu, A.Buttman. "Trends in Pregnancy-Associated Opioid Toxicity and Mortality". International Journal of Population Data Science. September 2024:<https://ijpds.org/article/view/2810>

<sup>5</sup> Office of the Chief Coroner (OCC) Data effective August 12, 2025: <https://www.phsd.ca/health-topics-programs/alcohol-drugs/community-drug-strategy/research/opioid-surveillance/deaths/#annualized-rates-of-opioid-related-deaths>

On this International Overdose Awareness Day, we call on all levels of government to:

- Reverse Bills 6 and 10 and work to end the displacement of people who use drugs, particularly those who are unhoused or living in encampments, by supporting safe, stable housing and community-based solutions.
- Protect and expand safer consumption and overdose prevention services across Ontario, particularly for northern communities, those who are pregnant, those in both private residents, and those without stable and adequate housing
- Invest in community-led, culturally relevant, low-barrier harm reduction programs that are evidence-based and human rights-based.
- Prevent the criminalization of people who use drugs by shifting away from punitive approaches, reducing harmful surveillance practices (including those targeting pregnant and parenting people who use drugs)<sup>6</sup>, and ensuring access to life-saving health and social supports.

Today, we remember. We grieve. And we renew our commitment to fight for a world where no life is lost to a preventable overdose.

**In solidarity,**

Ontario AIDS Network / Drug Policy and Harm Reduction Working Group

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<sup>6</sup> Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Matters and Women & HIV/AIDS Initiative. Pregnancy, Opioid Toxicity, & Death. Toronto, ON; 2025.