



Statement from The AIDS Network's Board of Directors in support of expanded Safe Supply programs and decriminalizing possession of illicit substances in quantities for personal use.

The AIDS Network provides programs and services rooted in the evidence-informed philosophy of Harm Reduction in Hamilton, Halton, Haldimand, Norfolk and Brant. We are committed to Harm Reduction as the basis on which our activities are conceived, and delivered across our regions to people living with, affected by and vulnerable to HIV infection. It is on this basis that The AIDS Network strongly supports and advocates for policy advancement based in harm reduction principles and call on policy makers at all levels of government to work towards expanded access of safe supply programs, and the decriminalizing possession of illicit substances for personal use.

We acknowledge that the foundation of the War on Drugs is rooted in racism and colonialism, and that the continued criminalization of drug use perpetuates racial injustice, disproportionately harming Black, and Indigenous communities (1)

We acknowledge that within Canada, between 2016 and 2018, more than 11,500* unique individuals have died due to overdose (2a) (2b). In just the first three months of 2020, there were 1,018 opioid related deaths recorded in Canada, the vast majority of which (96%) were accidental.

The number of opioid-related deaths increased quickly in the weeks following the state of emergency declaration in Ontario on March 17, 2020. Overall, there was a 38.2% increase in opioid-related deaths in the first 15 weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic (695 deaths; average of 46 deaths weekly) compared to the 15 weeks immediately prior (503 deaths; average of 34 deaths weekly).

Nationally, in the six months following the implementation of Covid-19 prevention measures there were 3,351 apparent opioid toxicity deaths representing a 74% increase from the six months prior and a 120% increase from the same timeframe in 2019. 96% of apparent opioid related deaths from January to September 2020 were accidental (unintentional) (3)

As overdose rates continue to rise, we understand that issues such as an unregulated drug supply and unpredictable toxicity, places People Who Use Drugs at great risk of overdose. As such, we believe that an increased access to a Safe Supply of pharmaceutical-grade medication is a key to reducing harms and saving the lives of People Who Use Drugs within our communities.

Safe supply is an approach that focuses on saving lives by prescribing pharmaceutical grade substances such as opioids and stimulants to individuals at risk of overdose, and

does not include substitution or opioid agonist treatments, such as methadone, buprenorphine/suboxone, or slow-release oral morphine, as these therapies do not contain the mind/body altering properties that people seek in recreational drugs (4).

In Ontario, an open letter signed by 111 organizations and 693 individuals was sent to the Deputy Premier and Minister of Health and the Associate Minister, Mental Health and Addictions in April 2020, calling for expanded access to emergency safe supply in the province (5). As an organization, we join this call for action.

The AIDS Network also calls on all levels of government to take bold action towards decriminalizing possession of illicit substances for personal use. Harmful drug laws rooted in prohibitionist ideologies compound the fatal effects of the overdose crisis, and do not reflect evidence-based best practices. Communities that have adopted decriminalization policies have seen positive impacts such as reduced drug-related deaths, reduced transmission of Hepatitis C and HIV, lower drug use among youth, increased access to treatment, improved relations with law enforcement and reduced criminal justice overcrowding and costs (6).

The opioid overdose crisis has caused preventable death on an unprecedented scale in Canada, and new risks arising from the Covid-19 pandemic compound threats to the health and wellbeing of people who use drugs. Now is the time to take bold action and create policy that saves lives and prevents avoidable harms to thousands of people in Canada. We call on policy makers at all levels of government to support safe supply and the decriminalization of drug possession.

Sources and further reading:

1: <https://idpc.net/blog/2020/06/the-war-on-drugs-is-built-on-racism-it-s-time-to-decolonise-drug-policies>

2a: <https://www.ohtn.on.ca/rapid-response-possible-benefits-of-providing-safe-supply-of-substances-to-people-who-use-drugs-during-public-health-emergencies-such-as-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

2b: <https://www.allianceon.org/Harm-Reduction>

3: <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/o/2020/opioid-mortality-covid-surveillance-report.pdf?la=en>

4: <https://www.ohtn.on.ca/rapid-response-possible-benefits-of-providing-safe-supply-of-substances-to-people-who-use-drugs-during-public-health-emergencies-such-as-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

5: <https://www.ohtn.on.ca/rapid-response-possible-benefits-of-providing-safe-supply-of-substances-to-people-who-use-drugs-during-public-health-emergencies-such-as-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

6: <https://www.allianceon.org/Harm-Reduction>