

## Saving Lives – Overdose Prevention Site (OPS)

Ontario-wide, 2426 opioid-related deaths occurred in 2020, a 60% rise from 1517 deaths in 2019.

Public health reports released this past summer have confirmed a staggering increase in the number of overdose deaths since the beginning of COVID-19. The pandemic and the poisoned street drug supply have resulted in a lethal situation for those who are marginalized. Unfortunately, this situation shows no sign of stopping.

### Almost 1 in 6

opioid-related deaths during the pandemic occurred among people experiencing homelessness.

Opioid-related deaths among people experiencing homelessness increased by **139%** during the pandemic:

 **135 deaths** pre-pandemic →  **323 deaths** during the pandemic



Nearly **1 in 10** of these deaths occurred within shelters or supportive housing.



**1 in 7** of these deaths occurred within hotels providing emergency shelter services.

<https://odpm.ca/research/publications/opioid-related-deaths-in-ontario-during-covid/>

At Street Health's OPS we are seeing the illicit opioid supply contaminated with benzodiazepines which has changed the frequency of, presentation of, and response required to reverse overdoses. This contaminated supply leads to prolonged periods of unconsciousness and gaps in peoples' memory, which increases their vulnerability and necessitates monitoring them for hours at a time. We also know that withdrawal from benzos can lead to seizures (potentially fatal), all the more frightening if people are not aware of what they are taking.

In addition to our lifesaving OPS service and offering a Safer Opioid Supply program, Street Health is also exploring the possibility of expanding our partnership with the Centre on Drug Policy Evaluation to become one of the drop-off sites for Toronto's Drug Checking Service. This service offers people who use drugs timely and comprehensive information on the composition of their drugs using the most sophisticated lab-based technologies. With streamlined access to this service our clients will have another tool to reduce the harms of the toxic drug supply.

## Offering Guidance and Insights

The Board of Directors at Street Health brings invaluable perspectives and background to their role providing guidance, oversight and hands-on contributions through committees and working groups.

We recently asked our board members to share why they have made a commitment of time and expertise. Here is what some of them had to say:

"I lost my only sibling in May 2016 to an overdose, which led me to produce *Weathered*, an overdose awareness campaign that raised funds for Street Health's OPS. Throughout my time working with Street Health, I felt the need to continue supporting them in any way I could." Megan

"I was drawn to Street Health during those years of homelessness when I was living with such utter despair and depression. Street Health was an accessible place where I was accepted for who I was at that time and treated with respect and dignity. I believe that Street Health's nurse-based community care is an invaluable asset, supporting those who are largely overlooked in our society." Peter

"Flexible, low-barrier models of health care are essential to ensuring access to services that support health and wellbeing. As a social worker I've witnessed COVID deepening the disparities in our current health care system. The work that Street Health does both in service provision and system advocacy is critical for our city." Amanda

"As a lawyer and health policy advisor, I have been motivated to volunteer with Street Health because of the immediate positive impact its initiatives, programs and decisions, has at the ground-level on both the clients it serves and the community as a whole." Tamara

See over for more perspectives

## Insights from our Board, continued

"I see Street Health as a leader in the area of community-based health care in Toronto – a grassroots organization that makes a tangible difference to people's lives. It does so by offering non-judgmental care to folks who are marginalized. I am proud to be a part of the innovative, responsive community work being done!" Kim

"As an inner city hospital business manager, I'm motivated to volunteer because I see the data showing the increasing numbers of those who are disadvantaged. I also see individuals who have benefitted from programs such as those at Street Health. The need in our community is there and the work being done makes a positive difference in people's lives." Edmund

"I have been a defence lawyer for over 30 years. I routinely see first hand the devastating and pointless consequences of criminalizing drug use instead of treating this as a health issue. I hope through Street Health I can contribute to this important legal, health, and policy issue." Paula

"Street Health supports the city's most vulnerable and advocates for policies that save lives. Volunteering is a way for me to play a small part in helping to create a world that will be more equitable and just." Hormuz

"As a long time social worker I have worked in partnership with Street Health since it's earliest days, and for the last seven years have been a board member. Street Health provides much needed systemic advocacy together with highly accessible health, harm reduction and mental health supports. I can truly say that Street Health has remained true to it's vision and mission over all these years." Sheryl

For all of their insights and commitment,  
Street Health applauds our Board of Directors.



## Donor Spotlight

Throughout COVID our city's homeless have felt the brunt of the pandemic-related difficulties more than anyone due to stigmas and barriers to resources. Street Health's goal is to support all individuals impacted by homelessness. This is a focus shared by our many donors and contributors who take significant steps to support Street Health's efforts. Carmen Bourbonnais and Loretta McDonald, are among the many whose generous contributions and compassion have helped Street Health deliver on its promise to provide quality care to our clients.



**Carmen** has been a long-time supporter of Street Health. She first became aware of the organization while working at a women's shelter. She witnessed the struggles of those with mental health and substance use challenges, all of which is compounded by the lack of affordable and supportive housing. She began making yearly financial donations to Street Health and, since the pandemic began, she has handmade and delivered more than 1,000 re-usable facemasks to Street Health and other community groups across the city.

When asked about the best way to get involved, Carmen answers, "Advocacy! Add your voice to those who are fighting for affordable housing. It may seem like a problem too big to solve, but the best thing you can do to start, is show up and be counted because we are all a heartbreak away from that situation. It could happen to anyone." Carmen continues to "show up" and offer support.



**Loretta** has been supporting Street Health for more than five years. In addition to knitting hundreds of scarves, toques and mittens to keep clients warm in winter, she also makes hand woven plastic mats from used milk bags. Loretta was drawn to the idea of making these mats because they are ideal for keeping belongings dry for those sleeping outside, and creating these mats prevents the plastic from being thrown in a landfill. She posted a request for milk bag donations on her neighborhood Facebook page, and the community responded by dropping off materials at Loretta's front door so she can continue making care packages. When asked how to best effect change, Loretta asserts, "The best way to start is by doing what you already enjoy. If you like to bake, start a bake sale and donate the proceeds to charity. If you like to read, start a book drive. I have always loved knitting and crocheting, so it was natural for me to support in that way."

The generosity of Carmen, Loretta and others too numerous to list here continues to inspire us every day. Your contributions help meet clients' needs and promote well-being. From all of us at Street Health, we extend our sincere thanks.

coldest  
\*night  
OF THE YEAR

We are pleased to announce that Street Health will be participating in

**Coldest Night of the Year 2022**

Stay tuned for further details. In the meantime,

**SAVE THE DATE — February 26<sup>th</sup> 2022**

#cnoy22