

August 31, 2021

*International Overdose Awareness Day*



ONTARIO  
HARM REDUCTION  
NETWORK

In recognition of [International Overdose Awareness Day](#) the [Ontario Harm Reduction Network](#) (OHRN) recognizes and remembers the thousands of lives lost from preventable drug poisonings and overdoses. In Ontario, the number of overdose deaths (primarily from drugs deemed to be illegal) has gone up every year for over 20 years, with around 2,500 people lost in 2020. Just in the month of July 2021, there were 311 suspect-drug related deaths reported in the province.

As well, there are significantly more non-fatal overdose-poisonings that have emotional and health consequences for people and communities, and significant impacts on our healthcare system. In Toronto, for example, Paramedic Services have attended an average of 6 fatal and 107 non-fatal overdose calls per week for the past 12 weeks ([source](#)).

These overdoses are all the direct result of Canada's colonial, racist and classist drug prohibition laws. Federal policies that criminalize some people who use certain drugs (we do not criminalize alcohol or cannabis use for example) create stigma. Society pathologizes and paternalizes people who use drugs and views them as bad people who do not deserve support and should be punished. We prioritize spending resources on drug interdiction, police, lawyers, courts and prisons. But this has never stopped the supply of drugs, or deterred their use. As we continue in failed attempts to prohibit drugs, we inadvertently create an increasingly volatile, toxic and deadly supply.

Overdose numbers would be even higher without harm reduction services, naloxone distribution, overdose prevention sites, and (the limited number) of safer supply programs. Today, as well as remembering people we have lost, OHRN honours the tireless efforts of people working in harm reduction. The last several years have been incredibly challenging with relentless losses and constant justification of the work.

Consistently, the most effective responses, programs and policies are ones that have been initiated and designed by people who use drugs. Their experiences and voices must be included when developing programs and policies. To this end, we are pleased to recognize and support a newly forming group, the *Ontario Network of People Who Use Drugs (ONPUD)*. Please see their statement below.

While harm reduction efforts are a critical response, overdose numbers will continue to grow without addressing the root causes of prohibition and criminalization. We call on all levels of government to fundamentally change the status quo and try a new approach, by enacting decriminalization and designing a legal, regulated supply, informed by the people most impacted – those who use drugs.

*There are numerous local events happening across the province today:*

[www.ohrn.org/joad-2021-events-in-ontario](http://www.ohrn.org/joad-2021-events-in-ontario)

*We encourage you to reach out and support a harm reduction agency in your region:*

[www.ohrn.org/ton](http://www.ohrn.org/ton)

*Or connect with international or local drug user groups:*

[www.ohrn.org/connections-for-people-who-use-drugs/#networks](http://www.ohrn.org/connections-for-people-who-use-drugs/#networks)

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**Statement Released by Ontario Network of People Who Use Drugs (ONPUD):**

*In recognition of International Overdose Awareness Day, we would like to reflect and remember everyone who has lost their lives because of many factors including a toxic and illicit supply of drugs supported by failed drug policies. Today, communities across Ontario grieve over the tragedies of lives lost due to the overdose crisis, which during Covid-19 has been mostly ignored because of the stigma and criminalization that people who use drugs and their loved one's experience. People will continue to lose their friends, family and loved ones if the health disparities and harmful drug policies remain unaddressed and unchanged. We will continue to see the number of fatalities rise. People who use drugs have been on the front lines of this war for far too long and ask that during this upcoming election the Federal government responds meaningfully to our cries for support and properly addresses long-term policy changes including decriminalization and legalization of all substances and utilizing meaningful engagement with people who use drugs.*

*People who use drugs and their allies have been resilient, but we cannot continue to see our friends die. The time for talk is over, we need immediate action to ensure that change and we need it now. This is a public health crisis and health pandemic and should be recognized as such and addressed with evidence-based initiatives. Please join us in a moment of silence today to remember all the lives lost. We will continue to fight against black and Indigenous racism, homophobia, transphobia, and the ideology that people who use drugs don't have the right to life. We know and love people who use drugs and we are remembering over 22,000 Canadians who died from overdose since 2016.*

We can be reached by email at: [onpudwg@gmail.com](mailto:onpudwg@gmail.com)