

Creating a safer downtown for all: Improving services for people who use drugs in Ottawa

The Sandy Hill Community Health Centre conducted research to better understand what has led to decreased safety and sense of safety in downtown Ottawa for people who use drugs, organizations that work with them and local neighbourhoods that provide services to them. This summary overview details the project and results.

Project description

The project was done in two phases:

PHASE 1

In 2020, we identified actions that looked promising. Our organization and community are now working on initiatives that we think will help to ease the challenges of offering downtown services for people who use drugs, neighbours, staff and service providers.

PHASE 2

In 2021, we created an advisory group of people who use drugs who have been marginalized. They helped us to create and carry out a survey of 99 people who use drugs to get their ideas and feedback.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY

72%

of respondents (people who use drugs) either don't feel safe or only sometimes feel safe from violence in Ottawa

- **Recurring themes** in our survey of people who use drugs included safe places, a sense of belonging and practical support (food, clothing and other items)
- **Strategies known to help** include drug use with others, safe consumption sites and security services
- **Systemic solutions** include more affordable housing, more safe consumption sites and decriminalizing or legalizing drug use and possession
- **Ideas for community intervention** include check-ins for vulnerable people, personal storage for the belongings of street-involved people and more capacity and supplies for street outreach
- **Key strategies to create a safe environment** for people who use drugs include maintaining a consistent client base, providing practical care and ensuring that people have a quiet space to be themselves
- **Suggested measures to keep service providers physically safe** include training in non-violent crisis intervention, providing personal protective equipment and establishing prevention control measures such as sharps disposal

Recommendations for potential projects to improve safety

We recommend the following projects be considered for implementation. We suggest doing more consultations on these project ideas to set priorities, improve practices and generate new ideas. It is important to recognize that these recommendations come within the context of the existing criminalization, stigma and poverty of marginalized people who use drugs, and that continued advocacy to address the root causes of these harms is necessary.



Expand safe spaces for people who use drugs

Because some drug use remains stigmatized, create more safe spaces where people who use drugs can gather. Ideas include:

- Improve safety of existing programs through enhanced staff support
- Add security and lighting around drop-in facilities
- Expand supervised consumption services outside the downtown core
- Increase service availability on weekends and evenings to both indoor and outdoor spaces
- Involve people who use drugs to design and implement safe spaces



Implement a peer ambassador program

Start an outreach program staffed by people who use drugs that connects with people in public spaces. Goals could include:

- Connect people to the services they need
- Meet their practical needs, such as access to food, naloxone kits or referrals to services
- Reset community standards about discarded needles



Develop a peer-involved training program for security and police

While some drug use remains criminalized which leads to stigma, involve people who use drugs to develop and pilot a training program for security and police. Focus on the impacts of criminalization on safety and how to interact with people who use drugs in an effort to help improve safety and minimize harm.



Run education and training on working with people who use crystal meth

Investigate best practices from other regions and develop strategies to improve the safety of people who use methamphetamines and staff who work with them. Crystal meth is a recent arrival to the unregulated drug market in Ottawa. We don't have a lot of experience in how to meet the needs of people who use it.



Provide storage for the belongings of people who are homeless

In the absence of access to housing, provide personal storage for homeless people. Theft of personal belongings is a significant form of victimization for people who use drugs and are living in shelters or living rough. This can often lead to violence. Access to public lockers has been reduced with the closing of the Greyhound Bus station. Offer fanny packs or money belts to protect high-value personal belongings like phones, cash or drugs.



Plan community clean-ups by people who use drugs

Organize community clean-ups by people who use drugs. The service could include garbage and harm-reduction equipment to support local communities that experience an increase in drug-related litter.



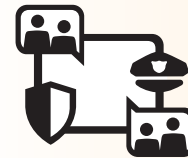
Offer recreational activities for people who use drugs

Provide opportunities for people who use drugs to get involved in recreational activities such as art, sports and music.



Hold monthly memorials for staff and community members at different agencies

Create more opportunities for staff and community members to come together to remember and to celebrate those who have died. Explore an online legacy project where people can go to remember loved ones.



Provide safe spaces for people who use drugs and police to learn more about community concerns and talk about how to improve safety

Within the context of criminalization, stigma and poverty, coordinate small group discussions between people who use drugs and frontline Ottawa police officers. Focus on safety for people who use drugs and how police activities either support or hinder this priority.

To read the full report and learn more about Sandy Hill Community Health Centre programs: shchc.ca/programs/oasis and Crime Prevention Ottawa: crimepreventionottawa.ca

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