

Overdose deaths reveal a 'pandemic within a pandemic'

Dear North Hastings Community,

On Feb. 11 we wrote to the funders, service providers and health agencies in North Hastings about the dramatic increase in overdose deaths in our community since December 2020. We have not received any formal responses to our letter. Because we believe this is a conversation the entire community must have, we are submitting this letter as public follow up to the first.

We can appreciate that some may feel helpless in the face of this tragedy. We are sympathetic to that feeling. But our town cannot thrive if we do not address the 'pandemic within a pandemic' which is that people - with kids, families, jobs, aspirations and potential - are dying of drug overdoses at an alarming rate in 2021. We cannot sustain our economic growth, nor can we attract the professional talent we need, if we do not create a community where we care for each other through tragedy. There is a moral and economic imperative pointing in the same direction.

We have very practical ways for you to help:

Homelessness contributes to increased risk taking with drugs. Not the other way around. People need homes to recover. We need a Housing Strategy which recognizes rents are unaffordable for most people, even people with jobs. Purchasing a home is now impossible for those with below average income. The inequality is killing us. Housing values and the attractiveness of our community is affected by our rampant homelessness. We have been discussing the need for housing for over a year in North Hastings and there has not been a single new unit of affordable housing added to the stock this year.

Are you a landlord?

Consider working with [Addiction Supportive Housing](https://hopedreamrecover.ca/services/addictions-treatment-services/) (<https://hopedreamrecover.ca/services/addictions-treatment-services/>)

Consider a lower rent to support the recovery of a person with an addiction, and their re-entry into the community.

Are you a builder or developer?

Consider employing people with addictions. We know that many of the people in our community with addictions serve on day labour crews. Employing them has some unique challenges, but we are willing to work with you to help you identify ways to offer a hand up but also help them improve their accountability to you and their lives.

Consider working with the North Hastings Community Trust and the Town of Bancroft on housing options for people with addictions. We must be creative with our skills and solutions.

Town of Bancroft: <https://bancroft.civicweb.net/portal/members>

North Hastings Community Trust: <https://northhastingscommunitytrust.org/>

We need a safe supply of drugs to allow people more chances at recovery. Naloxone reverses narcotics, but it doesn't stop all overdoses. Our local drug supply is being tainted with benzodiazepines, which are sedatives that slow breathing and cause people to die. The opiate reversal agent, naloxone, is available for free at our pharmacies, hospital, clinics and many places around town. But people are still dying, even with naloxone, because the drugs are tainted.

Consider Basic CPR training.

CPR will help keep people who have overdosed alive longer. <https://www.heartandstroke.ca/how-you-can-help/learn-cpr>

Are you using drugs?

Suboxone and methadone are narcotics that have good evidence for treatment of opiate use disorders. They can be prescribed by doctors and nurse practitioners, including those in our community. Dr. White is accepting patients with addictions to her practice, as long as they don't already have a local doctor. You can request help here: <https://www.drashleywhite.com/addiction>

Some people have different drug addictions, and need different help. Some people can't take suboxone or methadone. Please connect with [Addictions and Mental Health Services](#) in North Hastings to get connected to counselling and other addictions help.

People who use drugs need their care back. The front line services that existed before the pandemic need to be started again. In-person mental health and addictions services are required because more people are dying of overdose than of COVID-19, and our most vulnerable community members with addictions cannot make it to pre-scheduled appointments and need flexible solutions. We must be able to walk and chew gum at the same time.

Public health was providing a health clinic to reach people who were street involved. Now, the Public Health office is essentially shuttered.

Addictions and Mental Health Services had staff in Bancroft who were able to meet with clients directly. This has stopped. There is a safe way to offer in-person essential services, and the physicians and NPs in the community are doing this. It will become easier as vaccination rates go up.

We need dedicated funding for outreach. Street-based outreach is a key way to be able to reach people who are using drugs, especially if homeless.

Between the Bancroft Community Family Health Team and North Hastings Community Trust we have operated Rural Outreach Community Kindness (ROCK) with no designated funding for the last year, providing harm reduction supplies, ensuring a steady supply of Naloxone in the community and maintaining connections with people who are using substances or street-involved.

We could use dedicated funding for this work. If you would like to donate to support street outreach, please donate to:

North Hastings Community Trust: <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/dn/10581>

Bancroft Community Family Health Team: <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/dn/16184>

Stop banning people with addictions from your stores. We know that theft is really hard on business owners. We are business owners too. But we know that our patients with addictions are disproportionately banned, among the pool of people who steal. When you ban people from your store, it limits their treatment options and deepens stigma. We are happy to work with you to help people become accountable for their theft, or to incentivize them not to steal. We have access to gift cards that we use to help compensate people for their time spent in treatment activities, and they can be used in your store to avoid theft.

Safe consumption sites save lives, improve lives and improve community safety. We all benefit when people can use drugs with privacy, safe supplies, and options for reducing infections and overdoses. We have applied for approval for a supervised consumption site. The site would be mobile, and offer health services and drug testing. However, the next phase of the application is very laborious and we could use some help.

If you have skills in planning, engineering, government relations, health program development, budgets, we could use your help pursuing the site. We simply don't have the dedicated staff we need to pay attention to all of the simultaneous crises, and so we will rely on in kind community support.

We are having a virtual planning meeting on Tuesday, May 11 from 6-8 p.m. If you are interested, please email slee-popham@bancroftfht.com. Join the meeting here: <https://meet.google.com/umq-hcst-uci>

Since our initial letter, we have been able to secure funding from Metaphi (<http://metaphi.ca/>), an addictions medicine network based out of Women's College Hospital, to improve opiate agonist therapy (OAT) prescription starts in the Emergency department (ED) in Bancroft. This funding will help to better support people presenting to the ED in need of OAT and help to build and smooth the pipeline from hospital to the community. The program will be operational by June and the pilot phase will complete in September.

Our elected representatives will continue to pretend that this is a niche issue - one that no one votes on and only affects a few people - unless we let them know that our economic future depends on opportunities for recovery for our young people, and the prevention of avoidable harms of drug use.

Tell town council that this matters: <https://bancroft.civicweb.net/portal/members>

Tell Daryl Kramp MPP that this matters: <https://www.darylkrampmpp.ca/contact>

Tell Derek Sloan MP that this matters: <https://www.dereksloan.ca/>

In hope, and shared grief,

Dr. Ashley White MD MPH CCFP, Sean Lee-Popham, RN