

April 22, 2021

Calls for response to silent public health crisis

Yukon's chief medical officer of health, Dr. Brendan Hanley and the Yukon's chief coroner Heather Jones are calling for swift action in response to two additional opioid overdose deaths earlier this month. The deaths of these two people bring the number of Yukoners who have died of an opioid overdose this year to seven in less than four months.

There have been 40 opioid related deaths in Yukon since 2016, 32 involving fentanyl.

The CMOH is calling for the updating of the Yukon Opioid Action Plan 20-18 – 2020 which includes a supervised consumption site, safe drug supply, and the consideration of alternate drug policy options. There is also a need for continued and improved treatment and support services, and ongoing surveillance.

Both the CMOH and the Coroner agree that working with partners across the spectrum is the only way to address the problem, along with strong support from government and government programs.

Substance use disorders are complex issues that require comprehensive and multi-faceted approaches to meet the needs of Yukoners struggling with substance use and addiction.

Several key harm reduction approaches have been introduced in Yukon over the past several years, through collaboration between community partners, Yukon First Nations and Governments of Yukon and Canada.

Yukon needs to further develop the continuum of harm reduction services and supports, to more effectively support people who use drugs, to be able to use them safely and reduce barriers to accessing services, supports and treatment.

Quote:

This is a persistent public health crisis that has been overshadowed by COVID-19. Since January 2020, we have seen 17 opioid deaths in Yukon; 16 since the COVID-19 pandemic began and seven in the first four months of this year. Although much has been done to date, it is time that we augment our efforts and open our toolbox to address this crisis more effectively. Evidence shows that criminalizing people who use drugs does more harm than good. Decriminalization is an additional way to help people living with addiction connect to the support they need. Innovative and expanded harm reduction approaches, supervised consumption, and safer drug supply are other areas where we need urgent action to support people when and how they need it.

Yukon's Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr Brendan Hanley

The Yukon, like many jurisdictions in Canada, continues to navigate through the tragic loss of lives due to toxic illicit drugs. In these early months of 2021 seven more Yukon families are suffering the devastation of losing their loved ones to opioid involved deaths. Our communities are grieving. We can no longer be blinded by the stigma surrounding drug use and overdoses. We must recognize that without a safe drug supply, the risk to individual users is extreme and the heartbreak will continue.

Yukon's Chief Coroner Heather Jones

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Background:

- Under Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services, the Opioid Outreach Prevention Coordinator is working in partnership with community mental wellness hubs and First Nations to provide harm reduction workshops, naloxone kits and harm reduction supplies to communities. Initial roll out of the opioid treatment services began in Dawson City in November 2020 with the addition of a mental health nurse to provide services.
- Yukoners continue to have access to drug testing services through Blood Ties Four Directions at its location on Ogilvie Street and through the Outreach Van.
- An opioid outreach prevention coordinator delivers harm reduction workshops and materials in Whitehorse and rural Yukon communities, as well as distributing take-home naloxone kits.
- In January 2021, Blood Ties expanded their drug testing hours through the Outreach Van until 9:30 p.m., seven days a week, including holidays.
- The Referred Care Clinic in Whitehorse offers opioid treatment services for clinic clients.
- The Referred Care Clinic has been providing drug checking services to clients since December 2020.
- Withdrawal Management, Intensive Treatment programs, and day programming are available through Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services.