

# The Regional Municipality of York

Board of Health  
Community and Health Services  
September 12, 2019

Report of the Medical Officer of Health

## York Region Public Health's Opioid Action Plan

### 1. Recommendation

The Regional Clerk share this Council Report and the Opioid Action Plan with all nine local municipalities.

### 2. Summary

This report presents information on the development and initial implementation of the Opioid Action Plan (Attachment 1) for York Region.

- York Region is experiencing the growing impacts of the opioid crisis. While the Region has one of the lowest opioid overdose rates in Ontario, emergency department visits for opioid overdoses have steadily increased over the last decade
- The Opioid Education and Response Workgroup, co-chaired by York Region Public Health and York Regional Police, developed and have begun implementation of the Opioid Action Plan to deal with the opioid issue before it becomes a crisis in the Region
- Stigma surrounding opioid use and addiction creates barriers to accessing services and supports and contributes to isolation and marginalization of those using substances, creating further harm

### 3. Background

The Ministry of Health (MOH) 2018 Ontario Public Health Standards mandate public health units to use harm reduction policies, programs and practices which focus on reducing harms from drug use. Harm reduction is a public health approach that helps mitigate the negative consequences of drug use on individuals and communities.

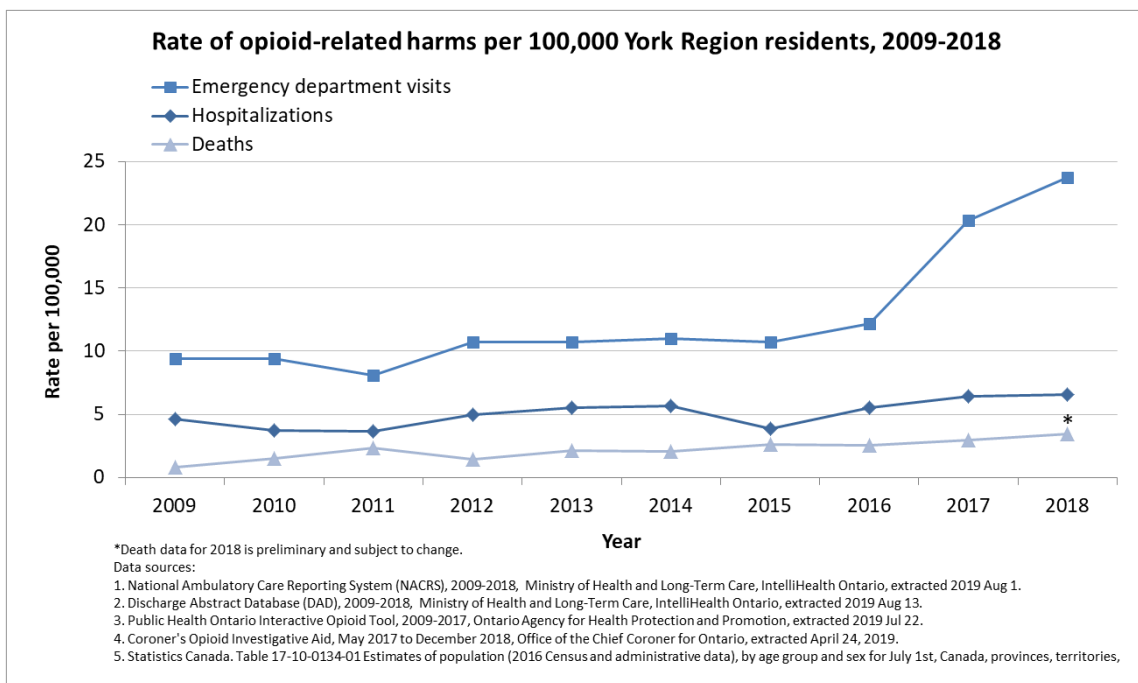
On [April 20, 2017](#), an update on the opioid situation in York Region and York Region Public Health's opioid response was received by Council. On [October, 19, 2017](#) York Region Council authorized York Region Public Health to receive funding from the then Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care to expand the Harm Reduction program to support local opioid response initiatives, including distribution of naloxone kits to eligible community organizations

and service providers, as well as development of a system for surveillance and early warning of opioid overdoses in York Region.

## Opioid harms impact communities across York Region

Since April 2017, Ontario hospitals have been required to report emergency department visits for opioid overdoses to the MOH and Public Health. There has been a steady increase in the rate of emergency department visits for opioid overdoses from 2009 to 2016, with a sharp increase in 2017 of 68% and another increase in 2018 of 16%. The sharp increase that occurred in 2017 could partially be due to the enhanced reporting requirements that began in this year. The rate of opioid-related hospitalizations and deaths has also been increasing slowly over the past decade (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Trends in rate of opioid-related harms in York Region residents**



Overall rates of opioid related-harms and other indicators in York Region are consistently lower than Ontario (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**Opioid-related indicators in York Region and Ontario, 2018**

Indicator	York Region	Ontario
Rate (per 100,000 population) and number of opioid-related emergency department (ED) visits	23.7 (273 visits)	63.9 (9150 visits)
Rate (per 100,000 population) and number of opioid-related hospitalizations	6.6 (76 hospitalizations)	14.7 (2,106 hospitalizations)
Rate (per 100,000 population) and number of opioid-related deaths	3.5 (40 deaths)	9.5 (1,363 deaths)
Proportion of students (grade 9-12) who report using prescription opioids for non-medical reason in past year	10%	12%
Rate (per 1,000 population) and number of individuals dispensed an opioid for pain	80.8 (97,091 individuals)	104.9 (1,515,295 individuals)

Of all opioid-related deaths in York Region in 2018:

- 85% were accidental which is slightly lower than the 90% in Ontario
  - 74% of accidental opioid-related deaths in 2018 occurred indoors in a private residence (76% in Ontario)
  - 71% of accidental opioid-related deaths occurred at the home of the deceased (71% in Ontario)
- Fentanyl directly contributed to 50% of opioid-related deaths in York Region (70% in Ontario). Oxycodone and hydromorphone directly contributed to 23% and 20% of opioid-related deaths in York Region, respectively (each 11% in Ontario)

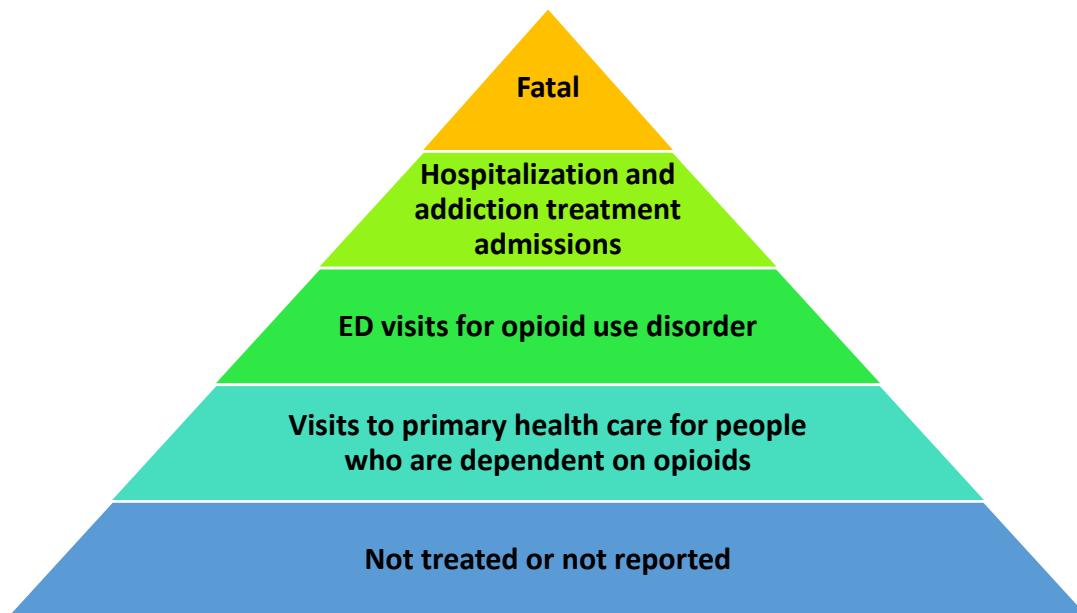
The burden of opioid-related harms varies among age groups and by sex in York Region. Males between 25 and 44 years old experienced the highest rates of opioid-related emergency department visits, hospitalizations and deaths in 2018. These rates are significantly higher compared to those occurring among females. With regards to opioids dispensed for pain, more females were dispensed an opioid for pain compared to males. For both sexes, those 45 to 64 years old had the highest number of opioids dispensed for pain compared to other age groups.

The burden of opioid-related harms in York Region varied across geographical areas. For 2018, Georgina, Aurora, Newmarket and East Gwillimbury experienced the highest rates of opioid-related emergency department visits. Although these municipalities experienced the highest overall rates, every municipality in York Region was impacted (see Attachment 2). Furthermore, while some municipalities had low overall rates, certain neighbourhoods in these areas experienced high rates of opioid-related emergency department visits in 2018.

While the rates of opioid-related emergency department visits, hospitalizations and deaths in York Region in 2018 were lower compared to other areas of the province, it is important not to be complacent.

Opioid-related emergency department visits, hospitalizations and deaths represent only a portion of opioid harms. Figure 2 represents a visual depiction of how opioid fatality is just the tip of the pyramid. For each fatality there are hospital admissions, numerous emergency department (ED) visits, even more visits to primary care and many more opioid injuries which are not reported. It is estimated that many people with an opioid use issue have not sought treatment and their numbers are not recorded. The full number for the lowest tier in the pyramid is difficult to determine until opioid users encountering problems access health services. In addition to the impact on the person's health and health system, there are also other ripple effects such as stigma and social harms experienced by people who use opioids as well as by their families, friends and communities.

**Figure 2: Opioid Injury Pyramid for Every One Death**



### **Development of the Opioid Action Plan is informed by federal and provincial efforts and local partnerships**

The Opioid Education and Response Workgroup, co-chaired by York Region Public Health and York Regional Police, worked with more than 20 community partners to develop the

Opioid Action Plan. The Opioid Action Plan is a guidance document that reflects current and future programs and partnerships in York Region around opioids. It provides recommendations for action that speak to four distinct pillars: prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and enforcement. The recommendations were developed in consultation with York Region agencies and York Region residents who have lived experience with opioids. The four pillar approach to address a substance issue is guided by the Health Canada's Canadian Drugs and Substances Strategy (Figure 3). Recommendations in the Region's Plan mirror many best practices outlined in the *Recommendations on the Mayors' Task Force on the Opioid Crisis* developed by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

**Figure 3: The Four Pillars of the Canadian Drugs and Substance Strategy**



#### 4. Analysis

##### **York Region Public Health and community partners have begun implementation of the Opioid Action Plan**

York Region Public Health continues to co-lead development and implementation of the Opioid Action Plan with York Regional Police through the Opioid Education and Response Workgroup. The Opioid Education and Response Workgroup has been steadily improving

information sharing and communication among community partners. In 2019, the Opioid Education and Response Workgroup and partners identified the following priorities for implementation:

- Increasing understanding of opioid use, use of other substances and addiction and reducing stigma surrounding their use
- Supporting healthcare provider education on opioid prescribing, dispensing and pain management through the Public Health Matters newsletters and an education forum in Fall 2019
- Increasing awareness, dissemination and implementation of the Opioid Action Plan and engaging community partners in joint action through sharing of the plan with partners, social media and community workshops in the Fall 2019

Additionally, since the launch of the naloxone distribution program and the surveillance and early warning system in Spring 2018 until the end of June 2019, York Region Public Health:

- Signed 17 agreements to distribute naloxone to seven community agencies, seven fire services, York Regional Police, Markham Stouffville Hospital and St. John Ambulance
- Distributed over 3,000 naloxone kits either directly to clients, to community agencies for distribution, and emergency services. 2,380 of the naloxone kits were distributed to 1,868 residents
- Sent out 12 opioid safety bulletins and 15 enhanced communications to community contacts as part of the opioid surveillance and early warning activities
- Developed and launched a Report Bad Drugs online tool in July 2019 for York Region residents to anonymously report bad reactions to street drugs and overdoses

Pharmacies throughout the Region also distribute naloxone through the Ontario Naloxone Program for Pharmacies. There are approximately 222 pharmacies that distributed 3,559 naloxone kits in 2018 and up until March of 2019.

York Region Paramedic Services do not access naloxone from York Region Public Health, but purchase naloxone directly from a medication supplier, the Ontario Medical Supply, for administration only.

## **Reducing the stigma surrounding opioid use requires working with people with lived and living experience to reduce opioid harms**

The stigma people face around opioid use and addiction impacts their quality of life and well-being and can interfere with obtaining health care. Stigma also creates barriers and undermines access to other basic needs such as access to safe and stable housing, employment opportunities and social services.

Involving people with opioid lived and living experience in the planning, implementation and evaluation of activities under the Plan to reduce stigma around substance use and addiction was determined to be foundational to the work of reducing opioid harms in the Region.

## **The Opioid Action Plan supports York Region’s Vision and the Healthy Communities strategic goal of the Regional Official Plan**

The Opioid Action Plan supports the Community and Health Services department’s vision statement “*working together for inclusive, healthy and resilient communities*”. It also supports York Region’s vision of strong, caring, safe communities, and mission “*Working together to serve our thriving communities today and tomorrow.*” Lastly, reducing opioid-related harms also links to the Region’s Healthy Communities strategic goal in The [2019 to 2023 Strategic Plan: From Vision to Results](#)

## **5. Financial**

This program is managed within the 2019 approved operating budget for the Public Health Branch with direct costs of \$68.4 million Gross (\$18.4 million net tax levy). The program costs approximately \$684,000. There are no financial actions required from Council at this time as a result of the actions set out in the attached Opioid Action Plan.

## **6. Local Impact**

Although York Region is experiencing lower rates of emergency department visits, hospitalization and overdose deaths from opioids compared to other jurisdictions in Ontario, opioid overdoses have occurred among residents of all nine local municipalities. Opioids have tragically cut short many lives and have seriously harmed the health and social well-being of many who have used them, as well as their family, friends and the general community. Implementing the Opioid Action Plan recognizes the continuum of opioid use and provides York Region and its municipalities a range of options and relevant actions to reduce harms associated with the use of opioids and to support the optimal well-being of York Region residents.

## **7. Conclusion**

As the incidence of opioid harms continues to increase in Ontario and the Region, the Opioid Action Plan for York Region provides recommendations for actions to maintain and strengthen prevention, harm reduction, surveillance and early warning, treatment and enforcement efforts. Decreasing stigma around opioid use and addiction remains a high priority to reduce barriers to services and to create a safe, caring and supportive environment for individuals, families and groups experiencing harms from opioid use. The Plan is an evergreen document to ensure the actions undertaken shift with emerging evidence and need. York Region Council’s endorsement and dissemination of the Opioid Action Plan will

support its continuing implementation and enhancement to prevent and reduce harms from opioid use in the Region. It will also enhance community awareness, support and engagement in implementing recommendations in the Plan to address the impact of opioid harms.

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For more information on this report, please contact Cathy Jaynes, Director, Healthy Living at 1-877-464-9675 ext. 74141 or Dr. Richard Gould, Associate Medical Officer of Health at ext. 76401. Accessible formats or communication supports are available upon request.

Recommended by: **Katherine Chislett**  
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Medical Officer of Health

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Chief Administrative Officer

August 29, 2019

Attachments (2)  
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