

Overdose deaths on the rise in North Hastings

By Nate Smelle

Over the past year, the vast majority of the human population has spent most of its time social distancing from others to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With most of the world's health-care resources focused on eliminating this unprecedented and potentially catastrophic global public health crisis, another deadly epidemic - the opioid crisis - has been wreaking havoc and taking lives.

Tragically, although residents of North Hastings have managed to keep the number of COVID-19 cases down, locally the number of overdose deaths has more than doubled in the past year. Since March 2020, seven people in North Hastings have died of an overdose. Many of these deaths have been linked to the powerful opiate fentanyl.

To shed light on this crisis, over the course of several weeks, Bancroft This Week and The Bancroft Times will investigate how the opioid epidemic is impacting people here in North Hastings.

On any given day since its inception, North Hastings Community Trust has been working closely with the community's most vulnerable to give them a hand up in their time of need. Throughout the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened each of the crises the Trust is addressing - opioid, homelessness, income inequality, food insecurity, to name a few - making it even more challenging to provide the community with the essential services they offer.

Throughout the duration of the pandemic, NHCT peer engagement worker Nicole Powers and her colleague community support and outreach worker Victoria Burke have been on the front-lines dealing head-on with this unprecedented compounding of public health crises.

Speaking from her experience, Powers explained how the pandemic has negatively affected the opioid crisis locally.

"It has definitely compounded the issue," she said. "I think people in isolation are vulnerable to begin with because we are social creatures. When you try and isolate somebody that is struggling with substance use issues, the most dangerous place for them to be is alone in their own minds. Also, if they are using alone, they are more likely to overdose because there's nobody there with them."

Because COVID-19 restrictions and recommendations have compelled people to stay away from others to prevent the spread of the virus, Burke said some substance users who had friends or family stopping to check on them have lost that support. Furthermore, she said the stigma surrounding substance use only adds to the problem because the network of support is extremely limited, especially in small communities such as those located in North Hastings.

"If people were able to be more open about their substance use, and not feel the judgment and stigma, the more people would know what they are doing," Burke said.

"Then more people would be there looking out for each other, instead of keeping quiet."

Too often, Powers said the solutions being pitched to solve the opioid crisis are coming from people who have no ideas about the needs of substance users. To deal with the deadly opioid epidemic effectively, she said a three-fold solution is needed.

First, Powers said there needs to be drug policy reform which decriminalizes the personal possession and use of all drugs. Secondly, she said there needs to be an overdose prevention site where people can use substances safely. And third, Powers is calling for there to be a safe and legal supply for substance users to access a pharmaceutical equivalent to their drug of choice. Unfortunately, the current approach of treating users as criminals is making the situation worse. Instead, Powers said "We need to be allocating more

funds to first responders - mental health workers, addictions workers, peer support workers. The police end up on site and they don't belong there. Traditionally, there has not been a good relationship between substance users and the police. I can't understand why it is a crime to consume a substance into your own body. I don't know why personal use is a criminal act. The fact that it [substance use] is all considered criminal activity is what makes it so dangerous. That's why crime happens ... because they don't have a safe supply and they have to be out on the streets hustling. They have to rob Paul to pay Peter. They are breaking into houses because that's the only means they have supporting their own habit.?

If substances users had access to a safe and legal supply, Powers said it would greatly reduce the amount of crime because they would not need to steal from others to support themselves and their habit. Acknowledging the scope of the transformation required to start implementing this solution, she said "It's the entire system that needs to change."

"It's not going to get rid of the illegal supply," added Burke.

"As we all know, there are still people who make moonshine. That still does happen, but we have a safe supply at the liquor store; we have the safe consumption sites, which are called bars. There's even a professional bartender that is not supposed to over serve you. They have everything in place."

Burke said it is vital for people to understand that substance use is a health issue, not a criminal issue. Noting how no one would ever consider denying somebody the opportunity to go "underground" to get their chemo or radiation treatment, she said it is wrong on every level to criminalize people for a health issue.

Making substance users even more vulnerable to the opioid epidemic and COVID-19 is the fact that many of them are also forced to face these intersecting crises, while also dealing with homelessness and a lack of affordable housing.

"It puts them at higher risk, because they are going from couch to couch, and they don't know where they are going to be from one minute to the next," Powers said.

"It's a really scary place for people to be in. What we need first, and it's the first step in helping people recover, is affordable housing."

Expanding on what Powers said, Burke highlighted how the type of affordable housing needed must be geared towards the income of those who plan to live there, opposed to the government's definition of "affordable" which is considered to be 80 per cent of a property's market value.

During the pandemic, restrictions in terms of the number of people allowed to attend funerals and social gatherings that have been put in place to protect the public, have also prevented people from grieving the loss of their friends and family members to the opioid crisis. Both Powers and Burke agree that this lack of ability to grieve the loss of loved ones together has exacerbated the situation.

According to Powers, when society sends this message to substance users it often leads them to become more depressed, which in turn leads to even heavier drug use. With a more toxic illegal drug supply on the market during the pandemic as a result of the border closures, she said substance users are now even more at risk of overdosing.

"That message just reinforces the belief that they are not worthy, and that their life doesn't matter," said Powers.

"Because nobody is talking about the staggering amount of deaths [overdoses], it reinforces the fact that society has forgotten about these people. They are almost invisible in some ways. People don't even have the ability to grieve their friends anymore, because they have lost so many people, and they have been conditioned by society to believe that these lives don't matter.; and, that they don't matter as a result. They have no voice, and no platform to use the voice."

The most important message needing to get out, Powers said is that, "These people matter. Their lives matter. They're human beings and they have worth. People should be able to celebrate and talk about their lives and share their grief. We need to create a society that cares about these people, because they are not going away, and the problem is not going away. So the question is, how do we create a society that makes the appropriate accommodations for them to thrive in society, and the community in general?"

Acknowledging how there will always be people who use substances, Powers said it is best for everyone that substance users have a safe place for them to use, and a safe supply. People at least need the option to use safely, she said, because every day that they are alive is a new opportunity for them to change their life, and to get well. As long as substance users are driven underground, Powers said they are just going to keep dying and being forgotten.

"We want to make sure that we are honoring people's lives, giving our community members a place to grieve," Burke said.

"We need to let people know that their life matters. And, that everybody has worth, and everyone deserves dignity and respect. Everybody should have the opportunity to be heard."

To remember and honour the lives of the seven people who have lost their lives to the opioid crisis in the past year, the Trust is launching its Healing Together Grief Support Group. Every Friday at noon starting on April 9, Burke said community members are welcome to drop by the Trust at 23 Bridge St. West in downtown Bancroft to take part in a group session dedicated to helping people cope with their grief. During the Healing Together group, she said attendees will have the opportunity to work together on a community art project to pay respect to those who have died too soon.

As part of the initiative, which is being led by artist Rocky Dobe and the Hastings Highlands Worker Co-op, Burke said participants will be able to create images and messages to honour their loved ones. Once enough content has been gathered, she said the group's creations will be etched into a large piece of bronze, that will eventually be put on display permanently in a public place.

"It's so they can be together collaboratively, so they can work together, they can share together, they can create together, and they can grieve together," said Powers.