

August 31st, 2017

International Overdose Awareness Day 2017 in Waterloo Region

International Overdose Awareness Day (IOAD) is a global event held on August 31 of each year to raise awareness of overdose and reduce the stigma of drug-related death. It also creates an opportunity to acknowledge the grief felt by families and friends who have lost a loved one as a result of an overdose or been impacted by overdose in some way.

In Waterloo Region, IOAD was marked by two events held on August 21st in Cambridge and August 27th in Kitchener. Both events included a free community barbecue, information about local supports and services, access to naloxone (an anti-opioid life saving medication) and other harm reduction supplies, and a prayer flag activity to remember those who have been lost to overdose. At both events, the message was clear: overdose can impact anyone's family and overdose deaths are preventable. In total over 300 people participated in these events across the Region.

Coming together to commemorate this important day is especially relevant this year. Overdose (both fatal and non-fatal) is increasing in Waterloo Region with Waterloo Regional Police Services reporting that there were approximately 42 suspected fatal overdoses so far this yearⁱ, compared with 23 opioid-related fatal overdoses for all of 2015ⁱⁱ. Calls to emergency services have also increased with Paramedic Services reporting that their overdose-related calls have increased 47.8% from the same time period last yearⁱⁱⁱ.

The Overdose Prevention Work Group (a work group of the Waterloo Region Integrated Drugs Strategy) organized and led the recent events. The Work Group is made up of community members and service providers and its goals are to improve overdose prevention programs and education, and increase access to naloxone in the community. In addition, the Work Group is spreading the word about the Good Samaritan Act (2017) which provides immunity from charges of simple possession of drugs for those who call 911 in the event of an overdose.

Overdose injuries and death are preventable and overdose does not discriminate – it can happen to anyone's family. If you suspect that someone is experiencing an overdose it is crucial to call 911 and administer naloxone.

The signs and symptoms of an overdose include: slow breathing or not breathing at all, snoring or gurgling sounds, cold clammy skin, pinpoint pupils, limp body, choking or vomiting and blue lips/nails.

For more information about where to get naloxone, preventing overdose, substance use, and local supports please visit www.waterlooregiondrugstrategy.ca or www.regionofwaterloo.ca/harmreduction.

“Being involved with the harm reduction group and participating in the IOAD events in the region has been a very eye opening experience. Addiction is a rapidly increasing issue

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and too many people are suffering through the loss of those closest to them. The number of individuals in our community alone that run the risk of meeting this fate is staggering. We have far surpassed the point in where "just saying no" is a responsible strategy to take on in our efforts to curb this issue. It is the group's greatest hope to spread the awareness, share the knowledge of what to do in the event an overdose is occurring and to maintain relationships and keep safe the people using substances of any nature. They are not monsters best left unseen, they are somebody's mother/father/son/daughter/sister or brother and deserve the kindest treatment and simple acts of humanity that we are all entitled to on a daily basis. If even a small percentage of visitors to these events are able to retain information learned and share what they know with others perhaps next year we can celebrate a change in the stigma surrounding substance related deaths and a decrease in these statistics." (Nick Fraser, Overdose Prevention Work Group Member)

ⁱ <http://kitchener.ctvnews.ca/roundtable-on-opioid-overdoses-in-the-region-1.3557005>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/dataandanalytics/pages/opioid.aspx>

ⁱⁱⁱ See Waterloo Region Overdose Bulletin, July 2017 (http://www.waterlooregiondrugstrategy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/DOCS_ADMIN-2461644-v2-Waterloo_Region_Overdose_Bulletin_-_July_2017.pdf)