

REPORT

Development Services

To: Mayor Cote and Members of Council **Date:** September 13, 2021

From: Emilie K Adin,
Director of Development Services **File:** 13.2630.07

Item #: 2021-333

Subject: Broken Drug Policies: Inter-Municipal Strategic Action Committee

RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council direct staff to participate on the Broken Drug Policies Inter-Municipal Strategic Action Committee.

THAT Council direct staff to pause the work of the City of New Westminster Interdepartmental Working Group on the Overdose Epidemic until spring 2022, while continuing to participate on the New Westminster Overdose Community Action Team.

PURPOSE

To seek Council direction for staff participation on the Broken Drug Policies Inter-Municipal Strategic Action Committee.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

April 2021 marked five years since the Province of British Columbia declared a state of emergency related to the overdose crisis. Provincial medical experts have reported an increasingly toxic drug supply, a higher propensity to use drugs alone, declining mental health, and increased substance use during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2014, New Westminster has lost over 170 residents to the overdose crisis. In the first six months of 2021, there were over 1,000-drug toxicity (overdose) deaths in BC and 24 drug toxicity deaths in New Westminster.

In December 2019, the City established an Interdepartmental Working Group on the Overdose Epidemic, with a mandate to coordinate City actions to respond to the

overdose epidemic, including, continuing to participate on the New Westminster Overdose Community Action Team (NWOCAT) and developing a City Overdose Response Plan. The latter included working with Fraser Health towards the implementation of a Safe Supply Program and an Overdose Prevention Site in New Westminster. In April 2021, a Health Contact Centre, operated by the Lower Mainland Purpose Society, which includes drug checks and witnessed consumption, opened in New Westminster.

POLICY CONTEXT

For information on the policy context, please refer to attachment 1.

DISCUSSION

Overdose Deaths in New Westminster

Since 2014, there has been a significant increase in drug toxicity (overdose) deaths in New Westminster (see Table #1). Between 2014 and 2020, New Westminster’s drug toxicity death rate was higher than the provincial average in six out of seven years.

Although there was a significant drop in drug toxicity deaths in both British Columbia and New Westminster in 2019 from previous years, these improvements were erased during 2020, with British Columbia having its highest number of drug toxicity deaths (1,733) and New Westminster having its second highest number of drug toxicity deaths (35). Provincial medical experts have reported an increasingly toxic drug supply, a higher propensity to use drugs alone, declining mental health, and increased substance use during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table #1: Drug Toxicity Deaths and Death Rate (per 100,000 people), New Westminster Local Health Area and British Columbia, 2014-2021

Jurisdiction	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021 (Jan – June)	2014-2020 % change
New West - deaths	9	12	10	24	36	20	35	24	288.9%
New West - death rate	12.6	16.5	13.4	31.5	46.1	24.9	42.4	N/A	
BC - deaths	369	529	991	1,495	1,546	984	1,733	1,011	369.6%
BC - death rate	7.8	11.1	20.4	30.4	31.0	19.4	33.7	N/A	

*BC Government Coroners Service

For every drug toxicity death, there are many drug toxicity events (i.e., helping those who are at imminent risk of death due to drug toxicity) responded to by paramedics and first responders. According to Fraser Health, there were 814-drug toxicity events

responded to by BC Emergency Health Services (ambulances) in Fraser Health in June 2021, a record monthly high. Of these drug toxicity events, 45 of them were in New Westminster.

New Westminster Overdose Community Action Team

The New Westminster Overdose Community Action Team (NWOCAT), established in May 2018, involves multiple partners, including people with lived and living experience, first responders, local community service providers, the health authority, and government staff. Membership is open to anyone with a reasonable stake in the crisis. City representation on the NWOCAT includes staff from Fire, Library, Parks and Recreation, Planning, and Police. Since 2018, the NWOCAT has: produced an asset and gap analysis; established a peer network and mentorship program; launched an anti-stigma campaign; focused attention on expanding and coordinating services; and developed guiding best practices for participants. For more information on the NWOCAT, please see attachment 2.

Interdepartmental Working Group on the Overdose Epidemic

In December 2019, the City established the Interdepartmental Working Group on the Overdose Epidemic with a mandate to coordinate City actions to respond to the overdose epidemic, including, continuing to participate on the NWOCAT and developing a City Overdose Response Plan. The latter includes working with Fraser Health towards the implementation of a Safe Supply Program and an Overdose Prevention Site in New Westminster. In April 2021, a Health Contact Centre, operated by the Lower Mainland Purpose Society, which includes drug checks and witnessed consumption, opened in New Westminster. Representation on the working group includes staff from Development Services (Integrated Services and Planning), Engineering Operations, Fire Service, Library, Parks and Recreation, including Youth Services, and Police. For more information on the Interdepartmental Working Group, please see attachment 3.

Broken Drug Polices: Inter-Municipal Strategic Action Committee

Recently, the City was approached by the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition to participate in an initiative titled, 'Broken Drug Polices: Inter-Municipal Strategic Action Committee' that will focus on education and advocacy related to the legalization and regularization of drugs from a public health and human rights model approach. The outcome will include developing a proposal with the participation of Pivot Legal Society and an advocacy role with regard to the senior levels of government.

Committee membership is open to municipal politicians and/or staff and will involve bi-weekly meetings, approximately two hours per meeting over a six-month period. In addition, one-to-two hours of preparation will be required for each of the twelve meetings. Proposed topics include:

- Naming the Problems
- Mapping the Policy Landscape
- Evaluating Decriminalization
- Introducing Legal Regulation
- Possible Models of Legal Regulation
- Cannabis: A Canadian Case Study
- Pathways to Legal Regulation
- Strategic Planning
- Meaningful Consultation with People with Lived/Living Experience of Illegal Drug Use
- Public Relations in Government and Beyond

For more information on the Broken Drug Policies: Inter-Municipal Strategic Action Committee, please see attachment 4.

Given ongoing drug toxicity deaths and the increased risks for vulnerable individuals now facing dual public health emergencies, there is benefit in the City participating in this initiative and it is staff's opinion that the Housing/Social Planner is best positioned to participate. Given current work program priorities and resources, staff are seeking Council direction to participate in the Broken Drug Policies: Inter-Municipal Strategic Action Committee and to pause the work of the City of New Westminster Interdepartmental Working Group on the Overdose Epidemic until spring 2022, while continuing to participate on the New Westminster Overdose Community Action Team.

OPTIONS

There are three options for Council's consideration:

1. That Council direct staff to participate on the Broken Drug Policies Inter-Municipal Strategic Action Committee.
2. That Council direct staff to pause the work of the City of New Westminster Interdepartmental Working Group on the Overdose Epidemic until spring 2022, while continuing to participate on the New Westminster Overdose Community Action Team.
3. That Council provide staff with other direction.

Staff recommends options 1 and 2.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 – Policy Context

Attachment 2 – New Westminster Overdose Community Action Team

Attachment 3 – July 13, 2020 Report to Council “Interdepartmental Working Group on the Overdose Epidemic Update”

Attachment 4 – Broken Drug Policies: Inter-Municipal Strategic Action Committee
Project overview

APPROVALS

This report was prepared by:

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This report was reviewed by:

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This report was approved by:

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