

Open letter to Ontario Minister of Health about the newly proposed “Consumption and Treatment Services” model

October 31, 2018

Dear Minister Elliott:

We write to you as organizations concerned about the health and welfare of some of the most vulnerable Ontarians, in response to the October 22 announcement that your government plans to replace supervised consumption sites (SCS) and low-barrier overdose prevention sites (OPS) with “Consumption and Treatment Services.”¹

While we welcome the stated commitment to maintain existing SCS and OPS in Ontario, we are deeply concerned that your government’s new approach to supervised consumption services is creating more barriers instead of facilitating the rapid scale-up of a diversity of much-needed supervised consumption services across the province. This is especially troubling in the context of the public health crisis in which we now find ourselves.

In particular, we are concerned by the decision to impose one “Consumption and Treatment Services” model on service providers and essentially terminate low-threshold, flexible OPS. These life-saving services are part of a continuum of service models that should be made available to all people who use drugs who need them, including the most marginalized. Thousands of overdoses have been reversed using this model, and no deaths recorded at these sites.

As you know, OPS were created in response to the urgent need for rapid roll-out of these vital services. A specific legal regime under a federal class exemption issued to Ontario was put in place to allow for their rapid implementation in response to the current crisis. The requirement for both OPS and SCS, including already authorized ones, to undergo a new application process for funding is sapping concerted efforts from the federal and provincial governments to respond to the overdose crisis. Not only does the new application process replicate the onerous federal exemption process for SCS (such as requiring applicants to engage in ongoing community consultations), it will also impose additional requirements including requiring applicants to provide treatment and rehabilitation services and to conduct seemingly more extensive data reporting, monitoring and evaluations — all without dedicating additional funding to allow organizations to adequately comply. Moreover, the requirement for service providers to provide treatment and rehabilitation services is not in line with harm reduction values of meeting people where they are.

At the same time, the arbitrary decision to cap the number of sites at 21 without any justification means people who do not reside near existing or impending sites will be denied access to life-saving care, at a time when overdose deaths in Ontario are at an all-time high, with more than three people dying every day in 2017.² Denying funding to new sites will undoubtedly mean more preventable overdose deaths and new HIV, hepatitis C and other infections.

We agree that there are inadequate drug treatment, mental health services and supportive housing options available for people who use drugs, and providing greater support for these services is laudable. But this should not come at the expense of life-saving supervised consumption services, including low-threshold services that are varied, responsive and meet the needs of their communities. We urge you to reconsider the decision to create new hurdles for service providers to receive funding to provide supervised consumption services and to limit the number of sites to 21. We call on you to work with people who use drugs, community organizations and other health service providers to ensure greater, equitable access to SCS and OPS for the people of Ontario. Lives are at stake.

Sincerely,

Richard Elliott, Executive Director, Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network

Ryan Peck, Executive Director, HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario

Dr. F. Gigi Osler, President, Canadian Medical Association

Michael Villeneuve, Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Nurses Association

Ian Culbert, Executive Director, Canadian Public Health Association

Sarah Ovens, Coordinator, Toronto Overdose Prevention Society

Cc. The Honourable Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario

¹ Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care News Release: Ontario Government Connecting People with Addictions to Treatment and Rehabilitation, October 22, 2018, online: <https://news.ontario.ca/mohltc/en/2018/10/ontario-government-connecting-people-with-addictions-to-treatment-and-rehabilitation.html>.

² Public Health Ontario, “Opioid-related morbidity and mortality in Ontario” (May 23, 2018), online: <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/dataandanalytics/pages/opioid.aspx#/trends>.