

Why do we need an Ontario Drug Strategy?

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Substance abuse is a very serious problem in Ontario

The economic costs of substance abuse are enormous. Ontario incurs over \$2 billion each year in policing and corrections costs attributable to alcohol and other drugs. Over \$1.5 billion in health care costs is attributable to the harmful use of these substances. The human cost is also extraordinary. Alcohol and drugs are a factor in over 50% of all criminal activity. In 2002, there were over 1000 alcohol-induced deaths from intentional or unintentional injury.

Most disturbing is the evidence that high-risk behaviours associated with alcohol and drug abuse are growing: young people are using drugs and alcohol earlier, and more young people are driving under the influence of illegal drugs such as cannabis.

There is a way to combat drug and alcohol abuse in Ontario. We need a plan to make it happen.

The problems caused by alcohol and other drugs will not be solved by one sector, one ministry, one approach, or even by the most effective public information campaign. Research tells us that *coordinated* efforts are required to address this problem effectively.

There is one area where strategies have worked to address harmful substance use. Although tobacco remains a serious problem with harmful health consequences, smoking rates are going down. The recipe for success in this area has brought together research evidence, advocacy, healthy public policies and a wide range of public information efforts. Underscoring all of these strategies has been political will and leadership.

Ontario needs a comprehensive plan that gives communities all the tools they need to address substance abuse.

Substance abuse is everyone's problem, and there are many resources communities call upon to address the problem. Law enforcement personnel play a critical role in reducing the production and trafficking of illegal drugs, and addressing the illegal use of alcohol. Addictions agencies and the self-help movement provide support to those who have made the call for help. Health promotion professionals advocate for policies that support the health of our communities, while educators and others provide information in our schools and communities to support healthy choices about drugs and alcohol. Community agencies and health providers offer harm reduction strategies aimed at improving health and engaging those with addictions, by providing services such as methadone maintenance and needle exchange.

No one strategy can work in isolation. That is why representatives of over 30 key provincial organizations have already begun meeting to develop a provincial drug strategy. This coalition brings together the law enforcement community, addictions treatment agencies, addiction researchers, health and education specialists, and advocacy organizations.

The problem was not created over night; it won't be *solved* overnight.

It won't make any headlines, but an Ontario Drug Strategy must be firmly rooted in broad leadership, sound information, and a stronger addictions treatment system. Drug strategies are often driven off-course by celebrity rehab stories or drug-of-the-month hysteria. We can't let this happen in Ontario. There is no substitute for sustained and focused efforts based on the best available data. In other words, we need a political commitment to building the infrastructure in law enforcement, treatment, prevention and harm reduction required to address this problem.

The foundation of an Ontario Drug Strategy must be evidence-based approaches that target the highest risk behaviours, and populations most at risk.

The harms caused by substance abuse can be identified and documented. The use of alcohol and other drugs plays a key role in chronic and infectious diseases, as well as injuries resulting from crashes, falls, fires, assault and suicide. Interventions must target high-risk situations and environments.

The risks of harm related to alcohol and other drugs are as diverse as Ontario. The enforcement, treatment, prevention and harm reduction strategies need to be crafted to the particular circumstances of certain populations. The addiction needs of young people, for example, are very poorly served. In some communities, particular enforcement and health strategies must be developed to address the epidemic of diverted pharmaceutical drugs. In other communities, the issue of methamphetamines has raised serious concerns about the capacity of law enforcement agencies to address a growing problem.

What can the Government of Ontario do to help?

A network of law enforcement, health, health promotion, education, addictions and community representatives has been meeting to develop a comprehensive, coordinated, and multi-faceted provincial strategy. This network needs leadership and commitment from the Province of Ontario, including a lead minister and lead ministry. The network needs a commitment from the Government of Ontario that it recognizes the size and scope of the substance abuse problem, and an assurance that the Government will make a sustained and meaningful commitment to working in partnership to address the problem.

For more information, please contact:

Reggie Caverson, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, (705) 675-1195