

MAKING OUR VOICES HEARD

A summary of two pop-up sites
and an urgent call for warming
shelters and overdose
prevention sites in Alberta

January 2022

“People are freezing to death on the street - not only from the cold, but from a toxic supply. We need safe places for these people.”

-Pop-up Site Visitor

NEVER IN ALBERTA'S HISTORY HAVE WE SEEN SO MANY PREVENTABLE DEATHS IN PUBLIC SPACES.

Alberta is in crisis. We need to step up, rather than step away.

Like much of the country, Alberta is battling a drug poisoning crisis exacerbated by a worsening housing crisis. Every day, vulnerable Albertans are exposed to harsh and unliveable conditions and to a toxic drug supply. These challenges are often compounded by factors such as trauma and social inequities and require a concerted and coordinated community-led response. As public policy continues to drive the closure of health services such as supervised consumption sites, and as public spaces such as transit stations become overcrowded, it has become abundantly clear that vulnerable Albertans need more safe spaces for connections and support.

We recognize the desperation that drives people to use public spaces for warmth, for sleep, and where needed, for substance use.

On December 16, 2021, community leaders, healthcare providers, and people with lived and living experience of homelessness and substance use, united in the inner cities of Calgary and Edmonton to set up temporary, tent-based warming stations with food, clothing, medical care and overdose response teams. Equipped with only a few tents and challenged by exceptionally cold weather, our teams connected with over 300 vulnerable Albertans and saw first-hand the critical nature of the situation. More importantly, we witnessed the urgent need for local leadership to support this important work and to drive forward coordinated community-led solutions.

We propose a flexible, low-cost and scalable solution to improve the safety of public spaces.

In an effort to improve the safety of public spaces, we are calling for a coordinated community response and for the deployment of warming stations. Not only do warming stations improve access to public spaces and increase public perceptions of safety, they also reduce open drug use, reduce drug poisoning, and deliver medical care and resources to people who need them most.

In reviewing this summary of our December 16th pilot, we encourage you to consider how this model can be scaled for the benefit of all Albertans.

Dedicated warming shelters and overdose prevention sites would allow communities to:

Prevent overdose and drug poisoning

Prevent frostbite as well as hypothermia

Connect people to community supports

Create safer spaces for all Albertans

“In light of the reality on the ground, it is absolutely necessary for outreach groups to come together to support the community to collaborate and provide support for people affected by this poisoning crisis”

Shanell Twan
Canadian Association of People Who Use Drugs

Understanding the Crisis

CONTEXT

The Alberta winter emergency has shelters operating at maximum capacity, pushing an already underfunded and under-resourced system over the edge. For people who are sleeping outside, this means they have nowhere to go during extreme cold conditions and puts them at greater risk of harm.

The winter shelter emergency is compounded by the drug poisoning crisis. Drug poisoning events continue to increase as the illegal drug supply becomes more toxic and unpredictable. Alberta recorded its deadliest year in 2021. Despite the fact that harm reduction services are proven to save lives, they have been closed, canceled and criticized under the current provincial government.

As both the housing and drug poisoning crises continue, it is clear that a coordinated community-driven response is required to provide a safe space for vulnerable Albertans to receive support and care. Over and over again, research has demonstrated that the implementation of safe spaces such as overdose prevention sites (OPS) and warming shelters save lives.

OPSs increase opportunities for early intervention in the event of an overdose, reduce trauma for staff and service users, and facilitate organizational transitions from provision of safer supplies to safer spaces. Providing a safe space to consume drugs also removes the barriers of stigma and shame associated with substance use and allows for greater opportunities to re-enter the health and social system.

Warming shelters provide much-needed shelter from extreme cold conditions, reduce rates of morbidity and mortality for people experiencing homelessness, and provide opportunities for people who experience homelessness to connect with vital resources.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

On December 16th, 2021, community organizers from various sectors gathered in Calgary and Edmonton in temperatures as cold as -35 degrees Celsius, to take action against the drug poisoning crisis and housing crisis. These were their goals:

- To provide warming tents and a temporary reprieve from Alberta's housing and drug poisoning crises
- To demonstrate the dire need for supervised inhalation site capacity in our cities
- To improve the public's understanding of people who use substances and people who experience homelessness
- To strengthen relationships with people who experience homelessness and people who use drugs
- To demonstrate the power of community-led efforts in the absence of government intervention

By pitching a few tents and mobilizing a few resources, these two teams created a temporary reprieve for people affected by the winter shelter emergency and the drug poisoning crisis. Their message was clear: More must be done to value and protect the lives of people experiencing homelessness as well as people who use substances.

With this report, we hope to demonstrate how these two pop-up community sites exemplify the effectiveness and feasibility of these interventions in Alberta. By adopting a robust community response including outreach, harm reduction, and advocacy, we can fight against the winter shelter emergency and drug poisoning crisis that is claiming far too many of our community members.

Drug War Armistice Day
WARM
IM ↑ HERE



“Overdose prevention sites are an opportunity to save a life and educate people about harm reduction. They are a place for community to come together without judgement and support each other.”

Patrick Keeler
Sharp Foundation

The Response

CALGARY

In Calgary, where temperatures reached a bone-chilling -30 degrees, volunteers set up two modest tents in a small public square in the city's downtown. Battling strong winds, these warming tents glowed in the blustery night and offered a safe space to gather and receive care. Calgary's hardy outreach volunteers from Street Cats and AAWEAR connected with people in need of shelter and services and directed them to the warming tents. Volunteers on site provided soup, coffee, clothing donations, and connections with service providers. Some visitors stayed many hours to help the volunteers hand out coffee and food. The group was well-equipped for onsite monitoring of people at high risk of overdose and rapid response could be provided if necessary. The team also dispensed harm reduction supplies and provided safe disposal receptacles, overdose response training, and facilitated referrals to mental health, transportation to shelters and supervised consumption and safer withdrawal (detox) services.

EDMONTON

In Edmonton, volunteers set up a small tent in a snow packed parking lot providing winter gear such as warm clothes, hand warmers, gloves and toques as well as drinks and food for a steady stream of around 250 attendees over 7 hours. Boots on Ground and CAPUD outreach expert Shanell Twan demonstrated grit and leadership in creating a compassionate, resource-rich, and friendly environment at Edmonton's warming tent.

Though only in service for a day, visitors passing through both sites were grateful to receive the care, counselling, and services. Volunteers expressed satisfaction at spending meaningful time in solidarity with their community. Overall the atmosphere at both sites was warm, fun, and inviting - a rare joy amidst the drug poisoning crisis that is so very heavy, and even more sad during this season. Thankfully, there was much joking and humour to warm folks up - conversations were shared over donated soup, pizza, and coffee, ranging from books everyone was reading, to comparisons between Suboxone and methadone to tips on the use of hand and foot warmers. It is clear that these interventions do much more than provide care - they give hope.

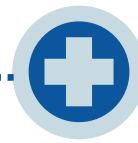
Services and Resources Provided



Warm clothing, blankets, and sleeping bags were distributed to 30 visitors



Hand and toe warmers distributed to all including volunteers (cold injury prevention in extreme weather)



Direct education and instruction on overdose response to 10 people who use drugs (PWUD)



Referral to grief support programs



Hot food and warm drinks plus bottled water



Techniques for staying warm



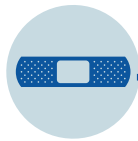
Supplies for safer drug consumption and safer sex were distributed to 20 people



Nutrition counselling



Information on detox, treatment, grief supports, options for opioid agonist treatments, medical resources



Wound assessment and wound care was provided to 2 visitors



DOAP (Downtown Outreach Addictions Partnership Transit) provided transportation to shelter and other community resources (Calgary only)

OUR PARTNERS:

This community response was a joint initiative by the following organizations:

- AAWEAR
- Street Cats
- Bear Clan
- Boots on Ground Harm Reduction Society
- Canadian Association of People Who Use Drugs (CAPUD)
- EACH&EVERY: Businesses for Harm Reduction
- Moms Stop The Harm
- Water Warriors
- Street CCRED

Our Impact in Calgary

IN JUST **ONE DAY**, WITH **ONLY TWO TENTS**,
WE ACCOMPLISHED THE FOLLOWING:

56

VISITORS

15

STAFF

10 Volunteers

5 Outreach Workers

15

OPS CLIENTS

1 Injection Event

14 Inhalation Events

1

OVERDOSE EVENT

1 Attendee experienced a “soft” overdose (defined as, lowered level of consciousness without a decrease to oxygenation) requiring monitoring and was fine.

Our Impact in Edmonton

IN JUST **ONE DAY**, WITH **ONLY ONE TENT**
WE ACCOMPLISHED THE FOLLOWING:

250

VISITORS

14

STAFF

4 Volunteers

10 Outreach Workers

