

Nova Scotia's Opioid Use and Overdose Framework Update

COVID-19 Response

The emergence of COVID-19 in Nova Scotia in 2020 required Public Health measures to reduce its spread. Several actions were taken to ensure Opioid Use Disorder Treatment (OUDT) services and supports would continue to be provided in a safe manner during this time. These actions included:

- Nova Scotia Health Authority (NSHA) Mental Health and Addictions Program (MHAP), with the support of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia, Nova Scotia College of Nurses, Nova Scotia College of Pharmacists, and the Department of Health and Wellness, put in place modified province-wide guidelines for OUDT. These modified guidelines will ensure access to Opioid Agonist Therapy (OAT) continues and have been adopted as a template by other primary care practitioners providing OAT. There was no interruption of OAT.
- Nova Scotia Health Authority MHAP increased access to virtual care (e.g. telephone, video-based care) for clients in their specialized OUDT programs.
- In April, the NSHA Primary Health Care, Atlantic Mentorship Network for Pain and Addiction (AMN-PA) implemented an online Provincial OAT Prescriber Forum for physicians, nurse practitioners and community pharmacists. This forum has provided a platform for health care practitioners to work together to find solutions to complex problems, with the goal of optimizing access to OAT in as safe a manner as possible in the context of COVID-19.
- In March, Health Canada's Office of Controlled Substances issued a short-term class exemption from the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act. In response, the Government of Nova Scotia, the Nova Scotia Prescription Monitoring Board, and the regulatory colleges issued guidance to support healthcare practitioners in the provision of OAT. This led to innovative ways to ensure access to medication such as increasing utilization of home delivery; allowing prescribers to issue verbal orders for monitored drugs including OAT; and expanding pharmacists' authority to prescribe controlled substances including extending or renewing an existing monitored drug prescription in accordance with the Health Canada exemption.

Understanding the Issue

- Monthly reporting on opioid-related deaths and naloxone distribution in the province is posted to novascotia.ca/opioid/.
- Provincial surveillance of opioid- and stimulant-related harms continues and is contributed to national reporting (see health-infobase.canada.ca/substance-related-harms/opioids-stimulants/).
- More detailed data on confirmed acute drug toxicity deaths since 2009 can be found here: data.novascotia.ca/Health-and-Wellness/Numbers-and-rates-of-substance-related-fatalities-/iu6y-z4n3
- As of November 2020, NS Health has been sharing timely information on drug-related harms in Nova Scotia to their social media accounts. Here is a link to their Twitter feed: twitter.com/HealthNS?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor
- New data collection software has been implemented with community-based harm reduction organizations.

Prevention

- Work with community-based harm reduction organizations to raise awareness on opioid overdose among high-risk populations continues.
- AMN-PA is supporting, in collaboration with Doctors Nova Scotia, the delivery of the Safer Opioid Prescribing Program in Nova Scotia. The program assists physicians, medical residents, and nurse practitioners to acquire knowledge and new skills in chronic pain management and opioid prescribing.

Harm Reduction

- Since January 2016, more than 16,500 naloxone kits have been dispensed to Nova Scotians.
 - Naloxone provided to Nova Scotians was used to reverse the effects of at least 151 overdoses since 2016. This number is likely an underestimate as reporting of overdose reversals to the Take Home Naloxone program is not required.
- \$2.76 million (\$1.38 annually over the last two years) has been provided via NSHA Public Health for community-based harm reduction – Mainline Needle Exchange (\$711,000), Northern Healthy Connections Society (\$220,000), and Sharp Advice Needle Exchange/Ally Centre (\$453,000). Some highlights of work happening include:

- Improved data collection and program monitoring processes that allow for better understanding and service to clients. This process counts the number of individual people who access needle distribution and disposal services in Nova Scotia, while protecting their anonymity and confidentiality, which is of highest importance.
- Enhanced peer outreach at all sites.
- Enhanced hours and modes of service delivery at all sites.
- Increased number of clients reached across all sites.
- Purchase of a bus to provide flexible enhanced service delivery in Eastern Zone.
- 1-year demonstration project of outreach street health in Cape Breton, with mentorship from Mobile Outreach Street Health.
- NSHA Public Health will receive an investment of \$500,000 to support Overdose Prevention Sites in the province. A request for proposals to establish new or support existing sites in the Halifax and Sydney area is expected to be issued in 2021/2022 by NSHA Public Health.

Treatment and Prescribing

- In partnership with the Federal Emergency Treatment Fund, DHW provides \$1.8 million annually for opioid use disorder treatment expansion through NSHA MHAP as well as the Halifax-based low-threshold OUDT program, Direction 180. As of November 30, 2020:
 - There were 2,005 active clients receiving treatment across Nova Scotia
 - 55 new clients began treatment in November 2020
 - 12 individuals were on the waitlist for treatment, a substantial decrease from September 2017 when there were 248
- In addition to the 15 NSHA program sites and Direction 180 for OUDT, six sustained satellite clinics have now been set up in Chester, New Germany, Bridgewater, New Glasgow, Antigonish, and Port Hawkesbury.
- Buprenorphine (Sublocade) has been added to Provincial Pharmacare in May 2020. Nova Scotia Health Authority MHAP will soon have a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for Sublocade to ensure safety and quality in the use of this medication.
- Education for physicians to discuss selected drug therapy topics with a health professional has been developed through the Academic Detailing Service. This started November 2020.

- Nova Scotia Health Authority MHAP and AMN-PA continue to partner with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) to deliver the OUDT course. The course prepares physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and counsellors to provide comprehensive care for people with opioid use disorder.
- Work continues with the Prescription Monitoring System to establish and monitor first opioid prescriptions, and concurrent opioid/benzodiazepine prescriptions.
- Work continues to enhance access to OUDT by increasing Primary Care Capacity. This includes the launch of the Addiction Medicine Consultation Service in July 2020, the Opioid Use Disorder Practice Support Program (PSP), and training for Emergency Department Staff.
- The Government of Nova Scotia introduced the Opioid Damages and Health Care Costs Recovery Act on March 3, 2020. This Act ensures Nova Scotia has the option to proceed with action against opioid manufacturers and distributors.

Criminal Justice and Enforcement

Nova Scotia's criminal justice and law enforcement agencies continue to support the province's ongoing opioid strategy. Since the ***Opioid Use and Overdose Framework*** was released in 2017 in response to Canada's overdose epidemic; Nova Scotia law enforcement have received extensive training on the use of Naloxone. Furthermore, Naloxone kits are now held in all Sheriff vehicles and courthouses, while RCMP and Municipal police are continually purchasing new kits and training their members on opioid response. Police and prosecutors continue to take a firm stance on those trafficking of opioids in the province and have utilized investigative training and partnerships to combat those causing harm within Nova Scotia.