

Nova Scotia's Opioid Use and Overdose Framework 2022 Update

COVID-19 Response

- The continued presence of COVID-19 in Nova Scotia in 2021 required Public Health measures to reduce its spread. To ensure that Opioid Use Disorder Treatment (OUDT) could be provided in a safe manner, actions taken in 2020 were continued. These actions included:
 - Nova Scotia Health (NSH) 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, continued using modified province-wide guidelines for OUDT, which ensured access to Opioid Agonist Therapy (OAT) could continue during the COVID-19 pandemic. These modified guidelines have been adopted as a template by other primary care practitioners providing OAT.
 - Due to a reduction in in-person training options because of the pandemic, training for the Take Home Naloxone (THN) program moved largely online in the fall of 2021. Using the NSH online learning system, external partners could access the required Naloxone training modules to become authorized implementers to distribute kits. This included a “classroom” where people could choose a date and time that fit into their schedules to complete live virtual training with the program coordinator. This shift in access provided greater opportunity for emergency departments, clinical staff, and new external organizations to be able to complete the training and begin offering kits. As a result, 38 additional, non-pharmacy sites were added for a total of 100 non-pharmacy sites.
- Health Canada’s Office of Controlled Substances continued to extend exemptions from the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, allowing healthcare practitioners to continue to work under the guidelines developed the previous year. Clients could access medications using home delivery; prescribers were allowed to issue verbal orders for monitored drugs including OAT; and pharmacists’ authority was expanded 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
- New data collection software has been implemented with community-based harm reduction organizations.
- The Atlantic Mentorship Network for Pain and Addiction (AMN-P&A) continued to support small group meetings and the OAT providers' forum to allow front line practitioners in the fields of harm reduction, OUDT, and community-based chronic pain management to share what they are seeing and hearing from their clients about near miss overdoses and changes in the illicit drug supply market. The AMN-P&A's community of practice continues to share solutions to the challenges of providing safe care, which mitigates the risk of prescribing opioids and other potentially lethal substances (e.g., benzodiazepines).

Prevention

- Continued work with community-based harm reduction organizations to raise awareness of opioid overdose among high-risk populations.
- The AMN-P&A, in collaboration with Doctors Nova Scotia, continues to support the delivery of the Safer Opioid Prescribing Program in Nova Scotia twice per year and is currently training Nova Scotia providers to deliver the program. In 2021-2022, 35 physicians, medical residents, and nurse practitioners completed the program to acquire knowledge and new skills in chronic pain management and opioid prescribing.

The AMN and the Nova Scotia Prescription Monitoring Program have incorporated the 2017 Canadian Guidelines for Opioids for Chronic Non-Cancer Pain into their training programs and supports, resulting in improved prescribing practices. Safer, more evidence-based prescribing of opioids has led to a trend towards more prescriptions of smaller quantities of opioids and an overall reduction in oral morphine equivalents prescribed per capital over the past ten years.

Harm Reduction

- Between Sept 2017 and March 31, 2022, more than 23,492 naloxone kits have been dispensed to Nova Scotians.
- Naloxone provided to Nova Scotians was used to reverse the effects of at least 164 overdoses between Sept 2017 and March 31, 2022. This number is likely an underestimate as reporting of overdose reversals to the Take Home Naloxone program is not required.
- Recent changes to Take Home Naloxone Program forms have improved kit usage reporting. They continue to ensure confidentiality but allow distribution sites to submit data in multiple ways, making it easier to capture when a kit is used, even if the individual does not wish to complete the entire form. Changes have improved kit usage reporting by more than 10%:
 - From 2017 to 2021, 138 kit usages were reported. Between January 2022 and mid-May 2022, there have been 51 kit usages reported.
- \$4.17 million (\$1.38 in operational funding annually over the last two years) has been provided via NSH 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), plus additional provincial programs funding. Highlights of new and continuing work include:
 - Enhanced peer outreach at all sites.
 - Increased number of clients reached across all sites. At least 1,252 unique individuals received services in 2021-2022.
 - Over 2.4 million needles were distributed in Nova Scotia in 2021-2022.
 - A one-year demonstration project of outreach street health in Cape Breton, with mentorship from Mobile Outreach Street Health and funding via NSH Public Health, concluded in 2022. Work is ongoing to explore the sustainability of this program.
 - Additional investments are being provided via NSH Public Health to increase the annual operational budgets for community-based harm reduction organizations to a total of \$1.848 million - Mainline Needle Exchange (\$910,000), Northern Healthy Connections Society (\$400,000), and Sharp Advice Needle Exchange/Ally Centre (\$538,000). This will support the increased demand for services.

- NSH Public Health received an investment of \$500,000 to support Overdose Prevention Sites in the province in 2021. Funding was awarded to Direction 180 in Halifax and Ally Centre of Cape Breton in Sydney to operate sites. The site in Halifax was pre-existing and will continue operations for two years with this funding. The site in Sydney is new and opened in the Spring of 2022.
- The AMN-P&A sponsored educational talks about a range of interventions that are traditionally viewed as “harm reduction”, such as the provision of naloxone, the distribution of drug using paraphernalia, and the role of overdose prevention sites/safe consumption sites. The AMN-P&A’s initiatives highlight the array of social determinants of health for those living with addiction which, when addressed or considered in clinical care, reduce the harms associated with addiction and/or chronic pain.

Treatment and Prescribing

- In partnership with the Federal Emergency Treatment Fund, the Department of Health and Wellness provides \$1.8 million annually for OUDT expansion through NSH MHAP as well as the Halifax-based low threshold OUDT program, Direction 180.
- The NSH MHAP operates 21 OUDT clinics across the province, including three new clinics in Shelburne, Yarmouth, and Digby that opened in April 2022. For more information and a listing of OUDT Clinics in the province visit <https://mha.nshealth.ca/en/services/opioid-use-disorder-program-oudp>
- MHAP OUDT programs and Direction 180 combined, as of April 18, 2022, had:
 - 2,186 active clients receiving treatment across the province, an increase from 1,824 active clients in September 2017.
 - 5 individuals on waitlists for treatment across the province, a substantial decrease from 248 individuals in September 2017.
 - Consistently over the last year there has been no wait to access OUDT programs in Central and Northern Zones and the wait times fluctuate for Eastern Zone (between 1-7 days) and Western Zone (between 0-25 days).
 - MHAP OUDT programs and Direction 180 combined had 667 new registrations in fiscal 2021-2022.

- The AMN-P&A continues to partner with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) to deliver the OUDT course. The course prepares healthcare providers to deliver comprehensive care for people with opioid use disorder. In 2021-2022, 53 medical residents, nurse practitioners, nurses, clinical nurse educators, social workers, case managers, and counsellors participated in the course.
- The AMN-P&A has developed a competency framework to provide healthcare professionals with the knowledge, skills, judgment, and behaviors required to deliver high-quality pain and addiction care based on the best available evidence. The framework consists of six domains with foundational and advanced competencies that highlight specific learning objectives and a corresponding multi-modal resource list.
- Planning is underway for the AMN-P&A to host an Alcohol Use Disorder and Benzodiazepine Workshop in the Fall of 2022, which will provide healthcare providers with practical, office-based tools and strategies for managing Alcohol Use Disorder and Benzodiazepine prescribing.
- A two-day knowledge and skills-based training workshop in Motivational Interviewing (MI) will be held in Fall 2022. Learners will become familiar with MI core elements and overall communication style, as well as practice skills and strategies to increase engagement and motivation; decrease discord; and initiate and guide change conversations across a range of chronic pain and addiction topics.
- Monthly Virtual Learning Webinars offered by the AMN-P&A use instructive presentations and case-based learning to help community healthcare providers improve their competence in providing pain and addiction care.
- The AMN-P&A partners with Pain BC to offer the Pain Foundations Course annually to its Nova Scotia members. In 2021-22, 24 NS healthcare providers participated in the self-directed online course. The course is designed to address the challenges faced by all healthcare providers when assessing and treating people living with chronic pain and includes a module dedicated to practical guidance in safe opioid prescribing.
- Ongoing activity related to the monitoring of benzodiazepines and best practices for opioid prescribing in the Prescription Monitoring Program.
- Nova Scotia Health MHAP has increased access to virtual care (e.g., telephone, video-based care) for clients in their specialized OUDT programs.

- Nova Scotia Health MHAP's Addictions Medicine Consult Service (AMCS) provides rapid Addictions Medicine consultant advice to community pharmacists, as well as physicians and nurse practitioners working in MHAP (including Correctional Health Services), Primary Care, Emergency Departments, Long Term Care, and Acute Care in Nova Scotia. Available Monday to Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., AMCS provides evidence-informed clinical advice and guidance to:
 - Diagnose and manage substance use disorders in adults, adolescents, and children.
 - Manage medications related to substance usage.
- Primary Health Care's (PHC) Opioid Use Disorder Practice Support Program continues to provide training and support for primary care providers and teams across the province to build competencies for the care of patients with opioid use disorder (OUD), including the safe prescribing of buprenorphine/naloxone.
- Suboxone film was added as a benefit in the Pharmacare Programs and Sublocode moved to full benefit to accelerate access to this therapy.

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, Nova Scotia law enforcement has received extensive training on the use of Naloxone. Naloxone kits continue to be held in all Sheriff vehicles and courthouses, while RCMP and Municipal police ensure their members are equipped with kits and provide access to training on the opioid response. Police and prosecutors continue to take a firm stance on those trafficking opioids in the province and have utilized investigative training and partnerships to combat those causing harm within Nova Scotia.
- AMN-P&A directs its members to resources that reinforce the accepted scientific literature that substance use disorders are health issues at their root, rather than criminal activities. In supporting access to the CAMH OUDT course, AMN-P&A members come to learn that drug-related criminality is frequently a result of the drive to gain access to opioids and that when access to OAT is provided, the drive to engage in criminal behaviour is eliminated for most individuals with opioid use disorder.