

Local overdose awareness committee launches new campaign

Written By **Paula Brown**

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The Dufferin Overdose Awareness Committee is launching a new anti-stigma campaign, in honour of International Overdose Awareness Day (Aug. 31).

The local group, made up of a number of Dufferin and Caledon based organizations, announced the launch of the anti-stigma campaign called "People who use drugs are real people: Stop the blame. Stop the shame. Stop the stigma", on Aug. 19.

The campaign focuses on the drug-related stigma that individuals who use drugs may experience as well as educates the community on the impact of drug use stereotypes.

"This isn't a big city problem, it happens here in our small community and we're trying to bring more awareness to the community around overdose and addiction resources here," said Kristy Fearon, addiction outreach counsellor at Family Transition Place. "Also providing some supports to families that it's not a taboo subject that we're willing to talk about it, willing to honour those people and try and bring that awareness."

The Dufferin Overdose Awareness Committee was launched in 2017 as an attempt to bring attention to the addiction services available in Dufferin County and Caledon. After losing two clients to overdose in 2017, Fearon said herself and another co-worker sat down with Family Transition Place to come up with a way to honour August 31, International Overdose Awareness Day, in the community.

For the last five years, the Dufferin Overdose Awareness Committee has honoured August 31 with an awareness event. In March of this year the committee received roughly \$10,000 in funding from the Hills of Headwaters Ontario Health Team (OHT), which Fearon said was used to purchase the rights of the new campaign.

As part of the anti-stigma campaign, the committee will be releasing six videos featuring individuals lived experiences with substance use, addiction, and stigma they've experienced in the community or ways they were trying to get help.

"Their stories help bring a face to addictions, trying to break down that stigma and those stereotypes. Everyone that uses, they're not the stereotypical drug users that we see in movies or T.V. shows, they're real people and addiction is not picky of who it takes hold of," said Fearon.

From January 1 to August 24 of this year, Dufferin EMS has recorded 68 drug/alcohol overdoses, 37 suspected opioid overdoses, 79 alcohol intoxications, and 30 non-opioid overdoses.

According to data from the Government of Canada, in 2020 there were 6,214 apparent opioid toxicity deaths (approximately 17 deaths per day), of which 96% were accidental. The data also shows that from January 2016 to December 2020 there were 21,174 apparent opioid toxicity deaths.

Fearon noted that getting statistics on overdoses is tricky because there a number of factors including how a coroner deems death, how an individual presents in hospital or to paramedics, friends/family administering Naloxone, or not seeking medical help.

Despite the difficulty, Fearon said the Dufferin Overdose Awareness Committee is working on creating and launching a system with Public Health for more localized data, but it was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The anti-stigma campaign will also provide a number of accessible resources or information on addiction in the community.

International Overdose Awareness Day will be recognized on August 31, with details shared on the Dufferin Overdose Awareness Committee's Facebook page.

?Hopefully, we can start more conversation around addictions, maybe it [can] become not such as scary topic for people to talk about, and maybe we can lessen some of the stigmas that people experience with certain medical fields, agencies, or policing,? said Fearon.