

DRUG CHECKING PROGRAM

Collaboration with Homeless Serving Agencies

RECOMMENDATION

That the September 9, 2022, Community Services report CS01220, be received for information.

Requested Council Action	Information		
ConnectEdmonton's Guiding Principle	ConnectEdmonton Strategic Goals		
CONNECTED	Healthy City		
City Plan Values	LIVE		
City Plan Big City Move(s)	Inclusive and compassionate	Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities	Community safety and well-being
Corporate Business Plan	Transforming for the future		
Council Policy, Program or Project Relationships	<p>A short list of the most relevant items, including but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> CS_8189 (Opioid Update - May 2020; Community & Public Services Committee) CS_7589 (Opioid Update - November 2019; Community & Public Services Committee) CS_7031 (Opioid Update - May 2019; Community & Public Services Committee) CS_6323 (Opioid Crisis Update - October 2018; Community & Public Services Committee) CS_5763 (Opioid Crisis Update - April 2018; Community & Public Services Committee) CS_5449 (Opioid Crisis Update - January 2018; Community & Public Services Committee) 		
Related Council Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CS01242 Reducing Drug Poisoning Injuries - Recommendation and Draft Submission to Health Canada and Intergovernmental Advocacy (at CPSC first quarter 2023) 		

Drug Checking Program - Collaboration with Homeless Serving Agencies

Previous Council/Committee Action

At the April 4/5/6, 2022, City Council meeting, the following motion passed:

That Administration explore, in collaboration with homeless serving agencies and Alberta Health Services (AHS), the possibility of providing drug checking programs and provide a report with options to implement such a program.

Executive Summary

- Drug checking is a service to chemically analyze substances for impurities that may cause unexpected harm.
- Drug checking provides a meaningful avenue to other points of care for people who do not normally have access to tailored services.
- As with other strategies to address the drug poisoning crisis, drug checking is not a standalone solution but is one strategy that can provide information on substances individuals are taking.
- It is important to integrate drug checking services into existing services that already have relationships with the community.
- Any drug checking service must be co-designed with people who use substances.

REPORT

Drug checking is an evidence-informed, integrated harm reduction service that chemically analyzes substances for small quantities substances that cause death (e.g. fentanyl, heroin, cocaine, Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA), Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), ketamine, N, N-dimethyltryptamine(DMT)) and allows people using them to potentially take action to reduce the risk of any associated harms. It provides users with information about substances in a non-judgmental approach that increases their knowledge and understanding of the substance(s). "Drug checking" is an increasingly accepted replacement for the term "drug testing".

Historically, drug checking services have taken place at music festivals as a harm reduction strategy. In more recent years, it has become more widely used as a way of addressing the drug poisoning crisis. The three main objectives of a drug checking service are (1) public health and safety, (2) connection to harm reduction services and (3) data collection.

As the Government of Canada's Canadian Drug and Substances Strategy demonstrates with its four key pillars (prevention, treatment, harm reduction, enforcement), any approach to harm reduction must be multifaceted and holistic. Integrating this service into a more fulsome solution requires intentional coordination between different orders of government, community agencies, as well as community members and people with lived and living experience.

Drug Checking Models and Techniques

There are a range of different drug checking models which largely fall into five categories: on-site (at an event), fixed-site (in community), mobile, off-site and mail-in. Attachment 1 further details descriptions of these models as well as drug checking techniques.

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This report provides information on models currently in use. Identifying the best option for Edmonton will require further information gathering such as meaningful engagement and co-designing alongside people with lived and living experience and those who may use the service. This information gathering will also benefit from including learnings from the results and evaluation of the Alberta Alliance Who Educates and Advocates Responsibly organization's pilot project currently taking place in Calgary.

Summary of Drug Checking Benefits

The core pillars of a drug checking program are harm reduction service, technical service and integrated community services to provide wraparound support benefits including:

- Educational opportunities.
- Increased individual and community-level knowledge.
- Small-scale behaviour changes.
- One point of engagement for avenues to care.

Current Context of Drug Checking Services in Alberta

The Alberta Alliance Who Educates and Advocates Responsibly has received an 18-month grant from the Substance Use and Addictions Program from Health Canada to pilot a mobile drug checking unit in Calgary. This work began in June 2022. They are currently the only drug checking service in Alberta.

See Attachment 2 for an overview of drug checking models across Canada.

Current Context of Drug Checking Services in Edmonton

According to Alberta Health data, in 2021 in Edmonton, just under 50 per cent of accidental opioid poisoning deaths occurred in privately owned residences where the deceased lived permanently; meanwhile, around 20 per cent of deaths occurred in a public, non-secure location. These statistics show that in Edmonton it could be advantageous to consider how drug checking services could serve a larger demographic than solely those who are unhoused or precariously housed.

The Community Liaison Committee Partners in Drug Poisoning Prevention discussed drug checking at its July 2022 meeting. This committee is made up of diverse community partners, Alberta Health Services, homeless-serving agencies, community members and others. The homeless serving agencies consulted at this meeting include Homeward Trust, Boyle Street Community Services, Boyle McCauley Health Centre, and George Spady Society. The group expressed interest in developing a drug checking program in Edmonton and discussed the benefits of such a service; however they would require more information in order to make an informed decision. The main concerns raised related to liability and legal aspects of running the service. Further, agencies stressed the importance of anonymity and confidentiality for service users. The agencies also stressed the importance of using a harm reduction approach with intentional and transparent messaging where service users are aware of drug checking's limitations and staff are clear on how to interpret and communicate results.

Drug Checking Program - Collaboration with Homeless Serving Agencies

The Edmonton Police Service has convened bi-monthly meetings with the Psychoactive Substances Committee. Members include community agencies and partners, Alberta Health Services, Emergency Medical Services, and the University of Alberta among others. The committee has discussed purchasing a mass spectrometer in order to provide drug checking services; this would be run by the Edmonton Police Service rather than community agency staff; however, no decisions have been made regarding further exploring this option.

Provincial Context

The Government of Alberta's Select Special Committee to Examine Safe Supply recently released its final report which included eight recommendations. The report does not name drug checking in its recommendations and instead focuses on treatment and recovery options as well as education to address the over-prescription of opioids.

Conclusion

Administration's research, informational interviews and engagement with Alberta Health Services and homeless-serving agencies found that drug checking services are one potential option within a suite of approaches to address accidental drug poisonings in Edmonton. The complexity of this issue signals that significant further exploration and engagement would be required in order to bring forward options or a proposal regarding a drug checking program in Edmonton if directed to do so by Council.

After completing preliminary research into drug checking models in other Canadian jurisdictions, Administration identified three potential next steps, should this work be directed to move forward:

1. Conduct fulsome engagement with community agencies and those with lived and living experience.
2. Complete in-depth analysis to build understanding of programs in other jurisdictions that have been in service longer as well as the pilot project taking place in Calgary by the Alberta Alliance Who Educates and Advocates Responsibly.
3. Identify opportunities for alignment and coordinate with other initiatives underway in the City.

COMMUNITY INSIGHT

This information report is based on engagement with the Community Liaison Committee Partners in Drug Poisoning Prevention. This committee includes homeless serving agencies, Alberta Health Services, community members, as well as other community organizations. The committee applauded the City of Edmonton's efforts to work with others to address the accidental drug poisoning crisis in a holistic way. They stressed the importance of engaging people who use drugs as a next step for co-designing and moving this work forward. Additionally, Administration consulted with other jurisdictions. Stigma around substance use presents an anticipated challenge for engaging people with lived and living experience. This approach requires more sensitivity and time to build rapport with people who currently use substances.

Drug Checking Program - Collaboration with Homeless Serving Agencies

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There are gaps in Administration's current knowledge around drug checking. Administration will rely on insights from community partners, agencies and peer-led organizations such as the Alberta Alliance Who Educate and Advocate Responsibly.

If directed to move forward, Administration would need to engage with people who may use the drug checking service. While City Council requested that Administration engage with Alberta Health Services and homeless serving agencies, it is important to note the diversity of people who use drugs and the wide range of intersectional identities represented by those people. Data from the Alberta Substance Use Surveillance System could inform some of this engagement. This dashboard shows that the highest proportion of drug poisoning deaths often take place in privately owned homes rather than public spaces.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Drug Checking Models and Techniques
2. Overview of Drug Checking Across Canada