

Examples of Existing Drug Checking Services

Following the emergence of nightlife drug checking services in Europe in the early 1990s, additional services have been introduced around the world. Most drug checking services in Canada have emerged through community initiatives and have not taken place as a coordinated effort led by public health authorities as a publicly funded overdose prevention service.

Here is an overview of a few Canadian examples.

Alberta

Calgary (scheduled to begin June 1, 2023)

- Alberta Alliance who Educates and Advocates Responsibly has received funding (\$672, 288) from Health Canada's Substance Use and Addictions Program to begin a drug checking pilot project (Project duration: August 10, 2022 to January 15, 2024).
- Their plan is to run a mobile drug checking service; it is a peer-led and peer-run project.
- Alberta Alliance who Educates and Advocates Responsibly has faced challenges due to delays in acquiring the section 56 exemption request approval and staffing changes thus delaying the launch of the program.
- Technologies used: FT-IR spectrometer, test strips (fentanyl and benzodiazepines).
- **Role of the municipality:** The City of Calgary has not been involved.

Banff

- Banff Library began distributing fentanyl testing strips in 2022 ahead of New Year's Eve through independent fundraising.
- They distributed an initial supply of 500 in less than a month; 100 went to the harm reduction team at Stoney Health Services in Morley, ~250 were distributed through clinics and pharmacies and the remaining 150 or so were distributed through the library. Clinics that put their test strips in their washrooms were by far the busiest distribution point.
- Banff Library staff included a QR code to a survey for people to submit the results of any of their tests; they did not receive any submissions.

- They recently became a distribution site through Alberta Health Services Community Based Naloxone Distribution Program and are planning to offer harm reduction workshops and other supplies.
- Technologies used: test strips (fentanyl)
- **Role of the municipality:** The municipality has not been involved.

Edmonton - Queer and Trans Health Collective (QTHC)

- Programming specifically focuses on 2SLGBTQ+ individuals.
- QTHC's Harm Reduction Supply Delivery Project uses a van that provides mobile harm reduction services, supplies, and education.
- QTHC received funding through the Neighbourhood Contribution Program¹ to purchase a Bruker FT-IR spectrometer; they recently began offering drug checking services.
- Technologies used: FT-IR spectrometer
- **Role of the municipality:** City of Edmonton has not been involved.

Edmonton - 4B Harm Reduction Society

- 4B Harm Reduction Society (4BHRS) was formed in 2022 and “responds to the systemic social health challenges that affect people who use drugs (PWUD), the unhoused, and other marginalized populations.”
- Funding from the Neighbourhood Contribution Program will be used to expand their outreach capabilities which includes: responding to drug poisonings, providing supportive care to community members, distributing naloxone and harm reduction supplies.
- Technologies used: test strips (fentanyl and benzodiazepines)
- **Role of the municipality:** City of Edmonton has not been involved.

Other Jurisdictions

Toronto

- The drug checking service coordinated by the Centre on Drug Policy Evaluation in Toronto was launched in 2019 and is funded through Health Canada's Substance Use and Addictions Program, the Public Health Agency of Canada, and St. Michael's Hospital Foundation.

¹ Funded by Health Canada's Substance Use and Addictions Program.

- This is unique in Canada as the services have been integrated within public health and community health agencies with existing supervised consumption services (combining harm reduction service delivery with access to other services including primary care, mental health care, social service programs, and scientific evaluation).
- Samples are collected at five harm reduction agencies in Toronto where supervised consumption services are also offered. The samples are then transported from the harm reduction agencies where they are collected to a nearby laboratory at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health or St. Michael's Hospital to be analyzed.
- In 2021, the Toronto Overdose Action Plan Status Report included recommendations from the Board of Health to the Provincial Minister of Health to “fund longer-term implementation of vital drug checking services and provide additional funding to create more locations in diverse settings to meet local needs”².
- Through funding from Health Canada's Substance use and Addictions Program, there are two recently completed projects through Unity Health Toronto (a Catholic healthcare network comprising St. Michael's Hospital, Providence Healthcare and St. Joseph's Health Centre). One initiative aims to finalize and pilot-test an emerging drug checking technology device called DoseCheck, while the other sets to evaluate the effectiveness of drug checking services in Toronto in harm reduction settings.
- Technologies used throughout the program: mass spectrometry (gas and liquid chromatography)
- **Role of the municipality:** Toronto Public Health (TPH) is a member of the drug checking service.
 - TPH reports to the Board of Health which is a local board of the City under the City of Toronto Act, 2006. The Board consists of 13 members appointed by City Council and comprises six public members and one education representative appointed through the City's Public Appointments process and six City Council members.

²Toronto Overdose Action Plan Status Report (2021). Retrieved from: <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2021/hl/bgrd/backgroundfile-167327.pdf>

Vancouver Island

- The Vancouver Island Drug Checking Project began in 2018 and operates in partnership with SOLID Outreach, AVI Health and Community Services, Port Alberni Shelter Society, Vancouver Island Mental Health Society, Duncan Lookout Housing and Health Society, Vancouver Island University, and the Island Health Authority.
- The project uses a distributed model: multiple sites host harm reduction workers where people can bring their substances to be tested; test results are sent electronically to a central hub site to be analyzed by technicians and then information is sent back to the remote sites.
- Funded by grants from Health Canada and the Vancouver Foundation, project partners include the B.C. Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions, Island Health, harm reduction services (STS Pharmacy, AVI, SOLID Outreach Services), and industry (Perkin Elmer, Cobalt, ProSpect Scientific, IBM).
- Clients can drop off samples at various sites located around Vancouver Island but online and mail access are also available for people located in regions with limited access to harm reduction sites.
- Technologies used: Test strips (fentanyl), FT-IR spectrometer, Raman and mass spectrometry.
- **Role of the municipality:** Municipal government has not been involved.

Montreal

- Drug checking services are operated out of the community organization GRIP (Groupe de recherche et d'intervention psychosociale), which is largely funded by provincial funds as well as the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and McGill University.
- GRIP runs a mobile drug checking service on the island of Montreal and also operates the service with other partner organizations, like Plein Milieu, Hotel Dieu, La Maison Benoit Labre, Centre SIDA-Secours, and Spectre de Rue; as well as attending music festivals throughout the summer and are available to bring the van to underground raves.
- Technologies used: Test strips (fentanyl and benzodiazepine), colorimetry, and FT-IR spectrometer.
- **Role of the municipality:** City of Montreal has not been involved.

Saskatchewan

- In 2021, Saskatchewan's Ministry of Health announced \$2.6 million is specifically for harm reduction initiatives across the province which included test strips for drug checking.
- Fentanyl and benzodiazepine strips available across the province at 30 locations which are listed on a Website³ as well as resources on how to use the test strips.
- Technologies used:
 - In Saskatoon, community organization Prairie Harm Reduction began using an FT-IR spectrometer in March 2023 with funding from the provincial government.
 - In Regina, the Newo Yotina Friendship Centre in Regina has also begun using an FT-IR spectrometer with funding from the provincial government
- **Role of the municipality:** In May 2022, a Regina City council-approved grant was launched as part of the Community Safety and Well Being Plan to aid in reducing harms associated with drug use; it is unclear if this includes drug testing services.

³

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/health/accessing-health-care-services/mental-health-and-addictions-support-services/overdose-information-and-prevention/make-a-plan-for-safer-drug-use#check-your-drugs>