

Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy Responds to Mayors request to Premier

The Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy (WGDS) is deeply concerned about the request from [13 of Ontario's Big City Mayors](#) formally asking the Premier to use the notwithstanding clause to override the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This action would allow municipalities to evict people who are surviving in encampments within municipalities across Ontario.

In Guelph and Wellington County, there is a housing, mental health and substance use crisis, and we are experiencing increased pressures on our health and social support systems. We know there are strong links between people experiencing mental health and addictions concerns and their housing status. It is important that elected officials – including Mayors – also recognize these links, however, we are concerned by the assertions that those who are unhoused and living in encampments are assumed to be a danger to themselves or others.

Community Safety is essential and has always been a key focus of the WGDS. We recognize that elected officials face complex challenges managing and responding to concerns related to safety in their communities. As municipalities address this challenge, there is a need to ensure that responses to address concerns about community safety are appropriately balanced with the health, wellbeing and rights of community members who are unhoused.

Recently, there have also been conversations about 'mandatory treatment' as an approach to address community safety, but our focus should be on increasing access to *voluntary* treatment options. People who are actively seeking to make a change need access to voluntary crisis stabilization, withdrawal management, treatment and recovery supports. Currently, there are not enough options for people who want to change their substance use and the options that exist have frustrating waitlists and delays due to capacity issues.

While we recognize the pressures faced by municipalities across the province, research shows us that some forms of mandatory treatment can lead to higher risk of harms. Time spent in mandatory treatment can reduce people's tolerance to substances, increasing their risk of fatal overdoses upon release. Additionally, this approach will not address core issues such as lack of income, housing, and inequitable access to health and social services; it will only deepen current challenges in our community.

This letter also comes at a time when evidence-based services are at risk or are being forced to close their doors. Essential programs, including Guelph's Consumption and Treatment Services (CTS), have been mandated to close on March 31, 2024. Additionally, the Welcoming Streets Initiative, which responds to businesses and community members safety concerns in Guelph's downtown core, is in jeopardy of losing its funding due to proposed municipal funding cuts.

November 7th, 2024

The Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy urges elected officials to use their influence to meaningfully engage with those closest to this crisis, and work toward policy changes and supporting solutions that are health and housing focused.

We all want to see members of our community housed and well. We all want to feel safe in our communities. The use of the notwithstanding clause will not get us closer to reaching this shared goal. If our municipal leaders truly have the ear of provincial decision-makers, it will benefit us all to advocate for properly funded permanent housing solutions and increased access to *voluntary* substance use care. We know these evidence-based solutions are effective for supporting community members who are struggling and will lead to building a more compassionate, safer community for all.

About the Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy

The Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy is a coalition of partner agencies and members of the lived and living experience community, who are working to implement a 4-pillar drug strategy in the municipalities of Wellington County and the City of Guelph. The pillars include prevention, community safety, harm reduction and treatment & recovery.