

MIDDLESEX-LONDON BOARD OF HEALTH

REPORT NO. 36-24

TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health
FROM: Dr. Alexander Summers, Medical Officer of Health
Emily Williams, Chief Executive Officer
DATE: 2024 May 16

**COLLECTIVE ACTION TO ADDRESS SUBSTANCE USE AND HARMS IN
MIDDLESEX-LONDON**

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Board of Health receive Report No. 36-24 re: “Collective Action to Address Substance Use Harms in Middlesex-London” for information.

Report Highlights

- The annual report from Ontario’s Chief Medical Officer of Health, [Balancing Act: An All-of-Society Approach to Substance Use and Harms](#), calls for an all-of-society, health-first approach to address the significant harms from substance use seen across the province.
- Addressing the harms of substance use continues to be a priority for the Middlesex-London Health Unit (MLHU), as reflected by local epidemiological data.
- The MLHU delivers evidence-based interventions to prevent and reduce substance use and harms as part of the requirements outlined in the Ontario Public Health Standards.
- The MLHU supports the Middlesex-London Community Drug and Alcohol Committee (CDAC) which aims to facilitate collective community action to reduce and eliminate the harms associated with drugs and alcohol in Middlesex County and the City of London.

Background

The 2023 Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH) Annual Report, [Balancing Act: An All-of-Society Approach to Substance Use and Harms](#), highlights the concerning number of substance-related harms, including deaths and hospitalizations related to tobacco, alcohol, cannabis, and opioid use in Ontario, along with specific strategies to reduce them. The CMOH report provides recommendations and promising practices related to health promotion, substance use prevention, regulatory measures, harm reduction, and treatment.

Substance use harms are a public health issue; however, the public health sector cannot solve the problems associated with substance use on its own. The report emphasizes collaboration

among key partners, including communities; local, provincial, federal and Indigenous governments and agencies; social services; organizations involved in substance work; researchers; people with lived and/or living experience; the public health sector, and the health care system. This approach recognizes substance use harms as a health issue, focuses on the factors that drive use, and calls for a balance between long-term upstream strategies to create healthy communities with more short-term actions to respond to substance-specific challenges.

Burden of Substance Use in Middlesex-London

Substance use has significant health impacts within Middlesex-London, across a variety of substances. In particular, the opioid crisis has significantly impacted Middlesex-London, with morbidity and mortality rates surpassing those of Ontario and the Peer Group from 2017 to 2022. In 2021, emergency department (ED) visits for opioid poisonings significantly impacted males, individuals aged 25-44, and individuals living in urban areas. Opioid-related deaths have been on the rise since 2014, with Middlesex-London experiencing significantly higher rates compared to Ontario and the Peer Group in 2021. In 2021, the rate of opioid-related deaths was significantly higher for males, and those in the 25-44 and 45-64 age groups.

Cannabis-related ED visits increased from 2013 to 2019 in Middlesex-London, primarily among individuals under the age of 25. In 2022, the hospitalization rates for cannabis were significantly higher for Middlesex-London compared to Ontario and the Peer Group.

Middlesex-London reported lower ED visit rates for alcohol-related conditions compared to Ontario, with the highest rates among males and individuals aged 15-24. Additionally, daily smoking rates among adults have been decreasing, accompanied by an increase in the percentage of adults who have never smoked from 2015/16 to 2019/20. Nevertheless, the long-term health impacts of alcohol and tobacco remain critical to address.

The MLHU Response to Health Impacts of Substance Use

Addressing the harms of substance use continues to be a priority for the Middlesex-London Health Unit (MLHU). The CMOH report provides a framework for MLHU to assess and prioritize substance related programs and interventions. MLHU delivers a wide spectrum of evidence-based interventions to prevent and address substance use harms, including:

- Clinical Services Delivery (e.g., early childhood home visiting programs);
- Community and Partner Mobilization (e.g., Middlesex-London Community Drug and Alcohol Committee);
- Healthy Public Policy Development (e.g., guidance pertaining to municipal alcohol retailer density);
- Communication and Social Marketing (e.g., regional campaigns such as [Rethink your Drinking](#));
- Surveillance (e.g., collect, analyze, and interpret population-level health substance-related data);
- Inspections (e.g., enforcing legal requirements of the Smoke-Free Ontario Act, 2017);
- Investigations (e.g., progressive enforcement activities related to Cannabis);
- Health Resource Inventory Management (e.g., needle exchange program and naloxone kit distribution and tracking).

Collective Community Action: The Middlesex-London Community Drug and Alcohol Committee

The [Middlesex-London Community Drug and Alcohol Strategy](#) (CDAS) was launched in 2018. It was the result of collaboration of many local partners concerned about the harmful effects of substance use in the community. The Strategy was based on a Four Pillars approach (prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and enforcement). In 2023, 83 of 98 actions were assessed as advancing or completed through comprehensive efforts and collaboration in the community.

Despite this progress, and the emergence of other critical strategies and tables, the burden of problematic and harmful substance use continues to negatively impact individuals, families, and the community. It has been determined that there remains a need for a strategic leadership table to support and coordinate the community's approach to substance use, independent of the 2018 Strategy. Earlier this year, the former CDAS Steering Committee was re-established as the Middlesex-London Community Drug and Alcohol Committee (CDAC), reflecting a shift from a strategy-steering committee to a strategic coordination committee. The Committee is currently co-chaired by the Executive Director of the London Intercommunity Health Centre and the MLHU's Medical Officer of Health. The MLHU also provides secretariat support to the Committee.

CDAC membership is being reviewed, along with the vision and priorities for the committee moving forward. The Committee aims to facilitate cooperation and alignment among community partners and leaders, identify priority issues and facilitate action, and liaise with and support other strategies and tables. The collaborative efforts of the CDAC strongly align with the recommendations in the CMOH report calling for an all-of-society, health-first approach to reduce the burden of substance use and harms.

Next steps

The MLHU will continue to collect and analyze relevant data to monitor trends over time, emerging trends, priorities, and health inequities related to substance use and harms; and deliver effective public health interventions that meet the needs of Middlesex-London.

Health Unit staff will identify recommendations from the CMOH report applicable to the Middlesex-London community and identify opportunities to enhance existing work or address gaps.

The MLHU will facilitate collective community action through support of the CDAC and continue to provide updates to the BOH on substance use work.

This report was written by the Municipal and Community Health Promotion Team of the Family and Community Health Division, and the Population Health Assessment and Surveillance Team of the Public Health Foundations Division.



Alexander Summers, MD, MPH, CCFP, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health



Emily Williams, BScN, RN, MBA, CHE
Chief Executive Officer

This report refers to the following principle(s) set out in Policy G-490, Appendix A:

- The Substance Use and Injury Prevention, Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-being, and Health Equity standard as outlined in the [Ontario Public Health Standards: Requirements for Programs, Services and Accountability](#).
- The following goal or direction from the [Middlesex-London Health Unit's Strategic Plan](#):
 - Goal: Our public health programs are effective, grounded in evidence and equity

This topic has been reviewed to be in alignment with goals under the Middlesex-London Health Unit's [Anti-Black Racism Plan](#) and [Taking Action for Reconciliation](#), specifically recommendations:

Anti-Black Racism Plan: Engage in Healthy Public Policy (collection of race-based data, initiatives that mitigate or address, at an upstream level, negative and inequitable impacts of the social determinants of health and ensure the policy approaches take an anti-Black racism lens)

Taking Action for Reconciliation: Relationships (Incorporate strategies and recommendations from the Relationship with Indigenous Communities Guideline, 2018 (Population and Public Health Division, Ministry of & Long-Term Care), as appropriate to MLHU context).