

An Open Letter to Premier Doug Ford, Health Minister Sylvia Jones
and Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions Michael Tibollo
From Faith Leaders in Ontario

10 May 2024

We are leaders of faith communities from many different denominations, religions, and traditions, all witnessing the harmful impact of the toxic drug crisis. Our voices are gathered from across the province, urging you to take immediate action to fund Supervised Consumption Sites in Ontario.

As faith leaders, we are some of the many witnesses to the suffering of Ontarians during this public health emergency. We counsel the grieving, lead the funerals, and guide the prayer services amid deaths from toxic drugs. We have distributed naloxone kits and provided public education in worship gatherings. We've come to know this crisis affects the housed and unhoused, the rural and the urban, the young and the old. We are all touched by it. As people of faith, we know we are at our best when we focus on loving and supporting the most vulnerable among us. It's clear to us that people who use drugs are vulnerable during this toxic drug crisis and that harm reduction is love.

Please fund Supervised Consumption Sites awaiting approval immediately. Four cities - Barrie, Sudbury, Timmins and Windsor - are waiting for provincial funding. Timmins' application was submitted 14 months ago, Windsor's 20 months ago, Barrie's 29 months ago, and Sudbury's 31 months ago. Our trust in you is eroding as our communities wait for basic healthcare. Your government initiated a review of all Supervised Consumption Sites in October of 2023. Since then, the Government of Ontario and The Ministry of Health have not offered timelines, answers, or details of this review. Your lack of transparency concerns us.

This *is* a public health emergency, and we need you to *act* like it is a public health emergency. As drug toxicity worsens, the need for safe, strong, and nuanced harm reduction practices only climbs. Without this, the pressure on our first responders and emergency rooms becomes overwhelming. Supervised Consumption sites strengthen an already fragile healthcare system we all rely on.

These Supervised Consumption sites are basic healthcare, and withdrawing or delaying essential healthcare leads to deaths. It is your responsibility to provide healthcare for *all* Ontarians. Onsite nurses, social workers, and referrals to treatment are just a few of the ways these sites provide focused and strategic healthcare. Some sites even have foot-washing stations, and most offer drug-checking services to determine if substances unknowingly contain fentanyl or other deadly opioids. But most importantly, these locations provide emergency healthcare in case of overdose, which saves lives.

The truth is that we need more trauma-informed spaces where people who use drugs will not be stigmatized while in care and can build supportive relationships with familiar and safe faces. Faith leaders believe in the power of caring communities. Supervised Consumption Sites are an example of building those communities of care.

We have heard some say that funds should be spent on treatment rather than harm reduction. We affirm that both of these approaches are necessary to address the emergency, but without places like Supervised Consumption Sites, people die – and the dead cannot recover. We are listening to the voices and lived experiences of experts, practitioners, and all those whose lives have been touched by the toxic drug crisis. We must call on you to do the same.

At a rally in Timmins in March, some supporters of Safe Health Site Timmins held a sign that read, "They Talk – We Die." A man yelled from a passing car, "Let them die!" There is a deep stigma attached to drug use, addiction and drug-related deaths, which causes some to blame the victims of this crisis. When life-saving

healthcare is withheld, withdrawn or delayed, you send the message that some lives are deemed less valuable than others. We cannot accept that. We are urging you to send a different message. We pray that you will approve and fund these sites across the province. Please recognize the toxic drug crisis for what it is – a public health emergency – and act. People who use drugs are beloved by God.

We are requesting a meeting with you to discuss our concerns in person.

Respectfully,

Rev. George Bozanich (Minister, Emmanuel United Church, Windsor)

Rev. Laura Hutchison (Minister, Covenant United Church, Timmins)

Rev. David LeGrand (Minister, St. Andrew's United Church, Sudbury)

Rev. Rielly McLaren (Windsor Mennonite Fellowship, Windsor)

Rev. Christine Nayler (Co-founder and Director, Ryan's Hope, Barrie)