

December 15, 2022

To members of Region of Waterloo Council and the Waterloo Region Police Services Board:

Waterloo Region continues to experience a drug poisoning crisis of historical proportions, with preventable harms, including death, affecting both individual and community health, safety and well-being. The Coroner data, among other key indicators, reflect the absence of an urgent, proportional and coordinated response at the municipal level to address this crisis affecting everyone across our communities. I write this letter to support the implementation of *de facto* decriminalization measures for the possession of illicit drugs. This will not only save lives, but it will also save money which is essential in an era of financial vulnerability.

Local governments have a key role in accelerating novel policy and programmatic interventions that prevent and reduce harms locally, including decriminalization measures. As you are likely well aware, the province of BC is decriminalizing the possession of illicit drugs, commencing January 2023. This policy directive is based on scientific evidence that demonstrates the health and societal harms associated with drug criminalization.<sup>1</sup> The previous Council, following a recommendation by their Advisory Committee - the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council (WRPC) - and a subsequent staff report, endorsed decriminalization. While a formal application to Health Canada for a s. 56 exemption from the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* remains an unused local option, *de facto* decriminalization is a more immediate opportunity within local jurisdiction, and consistent with broad support from the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, among many other organizations.<sup>2</sup>

Aside from the health and social harms of criminalization, there are substantial policing and legal costs associated with criminalization. According to StatsCan 2020 data, Waterloo Region was identified as the jurisdiction with the **6<sup>th</sup> highest rate** of opioid-related offences in Canada, with the majority of police-reported incidents related to drug possession.<sup>3</sup> A WRPC study<sup>4</sup> among people who use illicit drugs reported that 42 participants had cycled in and out of prison 12 times each, at an estimated cost of more than \$1,000,000 per person, with no evidence of effectiveness.

Locally, status quo approaches are placing significant and undesirable financial strains on local taxpayers, municipal services, policing services, public health providers, and other systems of care. Rather than doing nothing, *de facto* decriminalization via a directive from the Chief of Police for officers not to arrest individuals for drug possession nor confiscate their drugs offers immediate benefits.<sup>5</sup> While neither the Police Services Board nor Regional Council can direct police operations, this is also a budget issue, and we therefore encourage leadership to embrace a novel, world class approach that is respectful of health and equity considerations and serves the interest of the community as a whole.

As the Co-Chair of the Drug Action Team of the WRPC Transition Group, we look forward to putting the Regional values into practice, advancing community health, safety and well-being, and serving the public interests via *de facto* decriminalization. Given the scale of death and other harms in the Region, and the significant policing costs, we look forward to assisting in advancing evidence-based and life-saving drug policy and practice immediately.

Sincerely,



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<sup>1</sup> <https://bit.ly/3PwSLOv>

<sup>2</sup> <https://bit.ly/3GXf2Tu>

<sup>3</sup> <https://bit.ly/3H0xeeZ>

<sup>4</sup> <https://bit.ly/3j8g6K2>

<sup>5</sup> <https://bit.ly/3Uhp1Ru>