

July 18, 2022

Public Statement:

Government of Alberta Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (FOIP) Response with Local Level Drug Poisoning Data

Opioid poisoning deaths are preventable and tragic. We have received a response from the Government of Alberta to our FOIP request for local drug poisoning data. Below is our analysis of the FOIP data provided.

Call for Local Emergency Responses and Service Planning

It is clear from the data that every community in Alberta is affected, both urban and rural, with some communities affected more than others. Some locations require far more intensive supports than they are currently receiving, and in some cases, services are being CLOSED in the areas where they are most needed. We call on the government to implement emergency local-level responses and support community-centered service planning. We also recommend the reinstatement of recently closed supervised consumption sites (SCS), and the immediate opening of new SCS in areas of need. Supervised inhalation should be integrated into existing sites and all new programs.

Data Discrepancy

The impact of substance use related events on provincial EMS capacity is staggering. The provincial total for EMS calls for 2021 calendar year is listed as 8,263 on the online substance use dashboard (opioid poisonings only), compared to the total of 29,205 provided in response to the FOIP request (all drug poisonings). We know that most drug poisoning events involve opioids, but other substances such as benzodiazepines are increasingly contaminating the drug supply. We are concerned that this data discrepancy publicly underreports the true burden of the drug poisoning crisis on EMS. This is relevant information for Albertans who are affected daily by EMS delays. Our previously circulated policy recommendations could potentially result in a quicker response time, fewer EMS calls, fewer hospital admissions, and reduced healthcare costs. We call on the government to explain and remedy this data discrepancy.

Public Local Data Needed for Health Services Planning

Public-facing data is necessary to mount a commensurate emergency response, plan for longer term services, evaluate interventions, and—perhaps most importantly—provide accountability for public policy decisions. Many calls for timely and geographically specific poisoning data—by us and by others—have gone unanswered by the provincial government. It is unfortunate that these data required a FOIP request for acquisition. It is also puzzling that local-level EMS data were not provided despite public evidence of its existence in at least some of our larger cities.

We disagree with recent comments from the government that public release of information by local geographic area is stigmatizing. In fact, failure to disclose this information on a regular basis and respond with more intensive supports for affected communities is discriminatory. It leaves communities in the dark and grappling with deadly situations on their own, without key information which could be used to advocate for additional resources. This further perpetuates a cycle of trauma, shame and loss.

We reiterate our call for timely, local-level drug poisoning data and an immediate, evidence- and lived experience-informed emergency response to the ongoing drug poisoning deaths across Alberta, commensurate to the years of life lost in our communities. As physicians across the Edmonton Zone, we stand united in our call for immediate action, and are ready to assist the government in planning a response.