



August 2, 2024

Subject: Urgent Need for Compassionate and Effective Responses to Substance Use and Homelessness in Guelph

Dear Mayor Cam Guthrie,

We are writing to address the recent social media post and statement you made concerning open-air drug use in public spaces in Guelph. As organizations dedicated to supporting vulnerable members of our community, we believe it is crucial to respond to the points you raised.

Public drug use is a visible symptom of a much larger, national public health crisis. Since 2016, over 44,000 Canadians have lost their lives to opioid-related causes. This crisis necessitates a compassionate, informed, and coordinated response across all levels of government, including municipal leadership.

While we understand your concerns about safety in public spaces, we must emphasize that rhetoric which labels individuals who use substances as “criminals” or “a source of decay” is incredibly harmful. Public statements that criminalize individuals for their health conditions will only serve to perpetuate stigma and discrimination.

As an elected official, you have the power to influence public perception as well as policy. It is essential to use this influence to promote understanding and support for vulnerable populations. Such language as what you chose to use in your post stigmatizes and marginalizes our fellow citizens who are struggling with complex health issues, including substance use and mental health challenges. It also undermines the work being done in addressing these issues through evidence-based practices and supportive services. To put this simply - you have not only harmed the folks who you are calling out in this post but also all the dedicated residents of your community who spend their days trying to help these folks with limited resources and support.

Municipal leadership plays a crucial role in addressing these challenges. You have the capacity to allocate resources towards essential services, including healthcare, mental health support, and affordable housing. Rather than reducing funding or supporting the closure of emergency shelters, municipal leadership has the opportunity to expand these critical services. This commitment is essential to ensure that individuals experiencing homelessness and substance use issues receive the support they need to regain stability and health.

While we echo your call for federal and provincial assistance we feel the need to also emphasize that municipal commitment and action are equally crucial. Effective solutions depend on a collaborative approach, where every level of government takes responsibility and works together to address these complex issues.

All individuals living in your city, regardless of their housing status, deserve access to basic human rights, including healthcare, shelter, and freedom from degrading treatment. Let us repeat that - ALL individuals living in your city, regardless of their housing status, deserve access to basic human rights, including healthcare, shelter, and freedom from degrading treatment. Public spaces should be safe and welcoming for all, which includes creating environments where individuals can safely receive the support they need without fear of criminalization, harm or exclusion.

The response to the drug poisoning crisis and associated challenges requires adequately funded resources and evidence-based solutions including safe consumption sites, outreach programs, and mental health services. Agencies like Sanguen Health Centre are on the front lines of this growing crisis, yet we often struggle with inadequate funding and support to respond.

Call to Action:

We invite you to engage in a constructive dialogue with us to explore solutions that prioritize the health and well-being of all Guelph residents. Together, we can advocate for increased funding for mental health, harm reduction services, affordable housing, and comprehensive outreach programs.

Let us work collaboratively to create a city where every individual, housed or unhoused, can thrive. By fostering an environment of understanding and support, we can address the root causes of public substance use and build a safer, more inclusive Guelph.

Sincerely,

Sanguen Health Centre Team & Board of Directors

Contact: info@sanguen.com