



2023 Ontario Budget: Casey House Pre-Budget Submission ***Improving the health and well-being of Ontarians in high need***

February 10, 2023

Introduction

As a specialty hospital in Toronto providing care for people living with and at risk of HIV, Casey House serves clients who face multiple barriers to having their basic needs met. Mental health is the area of highest need for our clients, which is closely related to the quality of their housing, food, and access to health care. For people grappling with critical mental health and substance use challenges, the combined impact on their day-to-day functioning can be uniquely trying.

With the continuing drug poisoning crisis, housing crisis, and rising cost of living, the need to address the social factors that determine health and well-being is beyond urgent. While progress has been made in communities across the province, there is much more work to do. Our hospital's recommendations for the 2023 Ontario Budget seek to improve health care and outcomes for people in high need for housing, mental health, and substance use supports.

Recommendations for the 2023 Ontario Budget

As a hospital, Casey House encourages the Ontario government to prioritize resources in the *Roadmap to Wellness* to increase and improve access to:

1. Supportive housing for people coping with mental health and substance use challenges
2. Mental health and addictions care that doesn't *require* abstinence from substance use
3. Wide-ranging harm reduction services and supports as part of overall health care

1. Increase and improve access to supportive housing for people coping with mental health and substance use challenges

"For people without housing, managing their health requires so many things they just don't have access to." – Registered Nurse, Casey House

It is well known that chronic homelessness is at a crisis point in municipalities across the province, and that safe, affordable, and supportive housing is essential.

A lack of housing negatively impacts people's health and well-being, which is worsened by inclement weather, and could increase visits to emergency rooms;

recent research¹ has shown that people experiencing homelessness use the acute health system at higher rates than the general population.

In Toronto, the severe lack of shelter and housing affects the ability of hospitals like Casey House to safely discharge unhoused patients to best manage their health beyond their stay. For people experiencing homelessness, the absence of a safe, stable place to sleep and access to the necessities of life makes it difficult to attain stability and adhere to a daily routine. As a result, complex physical and mental health challenges are exacerbated and have a cumulative impact: chronic physical pain can intensify, emotions may become less regulated, and medication routines are easily disrupted – all of which can also make it difficult for people to have the wherewithal to access available care and services.

In addition, not having a place to safely store personal belongings can lead medications and critical documentation, including Ontario health cards, to be misplaced or stolen. This can negatively impact people’s adherence to treatment plans, which subsequently exacerbates chronic illnesses, and hinder their ability to attend to follow-up support – all of which disrupts the continuum of care.

As articulated in the *Roadmap to Wellness*, investments in supportive housing will alleviate pressure on the health care system and support people in high need for housing and income as they transition from hospital to the community.

2. Increase and improve access to mental health and addictions care that doesn’t require abstinence from substance use

“Don’t tell people they have to come off drugs right away.” – Client, Casey House

In addition to protecting and ensuring access to abstinence-only programs, it is vital to ensure access to programs and services that don’t *require* abstinence.

At Casey House, we build relationships through our harm reduction approach; we work with clients to reduce risks to their health and well-being *without requiring that they stop using drugs in order to receive support*. This patient-centred approach acknowledges that everyone’s journey is different, allows us to get to know our clients and their individual needs, and can offer a safe place for people to work towards recovery, if that is what they choose or are ready for. Through the trusting relationships we build with our clients, we enable them to access care for a range of

¹Jesse I.R. Jenkinson, Stephen W. Hwang, Carol Strike, Erica Di Ruggiero, “We don’t have a good system for people who don’t have a home and don’t need a hospital”: Contextualizing the hospital discharge process for people experiencing homelessness in Toronto, Canada, *SSM - Qualitative Research in Health*, Volume 2, 2022, 100056, ISSN 2667-3215, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmqr.2022.100056>.

purposes that is aligned to the reality of their lives – regardless of whether or not they are actively using substances.

By providing care within the context of people’s circumstances, including the reality of substance use, Ontario’s comprehensive system of mental health and addictions supports can reach more people wherever they are in their individual journeys of health and well-being, and work to achieve stability in their lives.

3. Increase and improve access to wide-ranging harm reduction services and supports as part of overall health care

“People are going to use either way, this [harm reduction] helps save their lives. All of us need help sometimes.” – Social Worker, Casey House

Since 2016, there have been more than 30,000 opioid toxicity deaths² in Canada, an accelerating crisis that is claiming lives in communities across the country. In 2021, Public Health Ontario reported 2,907 opioid-related deaths³. As recent research from the *Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario*⁴ shows, there is an urgent need for harm reduction – a suite of services and supports that is duly included in the *Roadmap to Wellness* to address addictions and overdose. From naloxone to supervised consumption services to safer supply programs, harm reduction saves lives (see page 5 for a frontline perspective).

While many harm reduction services are available across the province, access remains a critical gap in many communities; even in major urban centres, services are available, but limited. In Toronto, supervised consumption services (SCS) are contained to the downtown core; don’t always accommodate the range of drugs used or the varying effects they have on the mind and body; and often don’t include vital drug checking services, which help people make more informed decisions about their drug use. The few options for safer supply (prescribed alternatives to the illicit drug market) have long waitlists and are limited to opioids.

² Federal, provincial, and territorial Special Advisory Committee on the Epidemic of Opioid Overdoses. Opioid- and Stimulant-related Harms in Canada. Ottawa: Public Health Agency of Canada; December 2022. <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/substance-related-harms/opioids-stimulants/>

³ Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario). User guide: interactive opioid tool. Toronto, ON: Queen’s Printer for Ontario; 2019

⁴ Gomes T, Murray R, Kolla G, Leece P, Bansal S, Besharah J, Cahill T, Campbell T, Fritz A, Munro C, Toner L, Watford J on behalf of the Ontario Drug Policy Research Network, Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario and Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario). Changing circumstances surrounding opioid-related deaths in Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic. Toronto, ON: Ontario Drug Policy Research Network; 2021.

Providing a diverse range of harm reduction services across the health care system will improve health outcomes and make care more convenient for Ontarians in high need.

In closing

Casey House strongly encourages the Ontario government to meaningfully consider these lived realities when prioritizing resources for the upcoming year. We welcome the opportunity to discuss any of these items further and look forward to the final 2023 Budget.

About Casey House

Casey House is unlike any other hospital. We are a specialty hospital in Toronto providing ground-breaking care to people living with and at risk of HIV. We offer a growing mix of inpatient, outpatient and community-based services that meet clients where they are in their individual journeys of health and well-being. We provide a community and sense of belonging that connects people to care. The humanity of each client is at the heart of everything we do.

Our roots stretch back to the AIDS pandemic, when pervasive stigma and discrimination left people to die without access to care. Our founders believed that everyone deserves to be cared for with dignity, compassion, and respect. Today, our hospital is fulfilling that same mission for all people living with and at risk of HIV. In 2021, Casey House became the first hospital in Ontario to provide supervised consumption services (SCS) on-site.

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VIEW FROM THE FRONTLINES: HARM REDUCTION SAVES LIVES

“I help people not die from a toxic drug supply in an overdose epidemic, and give people the chance to regain parts of their lives.” – Registered Nurse, Casey House

Harm reduction is a lifeline. It prevents people from overdosing in alleyways, from being poisoned by a toxic drug supply, and from suffering from withdrawal – which some people go to great lengths to avoid.

For people stuck in a cycle of poverty, where they struggle to find work, safe housing, or a sense of belonging, drug use can be a way of connecting to community and coping with all that they’ve been through and continue to wrestle with in their daily lives. As the drugs that are available have become more and more contaminated, the risks of using them have increased.

Harm reduction allows people to seek care and support without hiding aspects of their identity or feeling ashamed; feel unconditionally loved and supported; and experience some joy and pleasure in their lives during challenging times. It involves health care providers sitting with people in their times of stress, talking to them honestly and openly, and observing them during and after they use drugs to make sure they are safe.

Countless people’s lives would have been cut short were it not for harm reduction. It provides people with safe ways and spaces to use drugs, equips those who use substances with the tools to respond to overdoses themselves in their own communities, and can offer a safe place for people to work towards recovery, if that is what they choose.

Harm reduction provides an entryway for people who use substances to access health care for a wide range of needs, whether or not those needs are related to drug use. When harm reduction is a meaningful part of health care, more people are kept alive, safe and supported.

“People are going to use either way, this helps save their lives. All of us need help sometimes.” – Social Worker, Casey House