

Ontario's supervised drug consumption sites are closing. Are HART hubs the right solution?

Somerset West Community Health Centre in Ottawa's Chinatown neighbourhood officially closed its supervised consumption site on March 1, due to its proximity to schools and childcare centres, in line with a recent rule change by Ontario's Progressive Conservative government.

This centre's "consumption and treatment services" program has been fully operational since 2018, providing a safe and hygienic environment for people who use drugs to consume them under the supervision of medical staff.

Drugs for consumption are not provided by the staff.

The transition started in August 2024, with the conservative government demanding the closure of 10 supervised consumption sites across Ontario, in line with a rule that stipulated sites within 200 metres of a school or child-care centre would be forced to close or transform into Homelessness and Addiction Recovery Treatment hubs.



The Somerset West Community Health Centre, which has recently closed its CTS and will transition into a HART hub. (Photo © Laura Arenas)

While no one from the SWCHC was available to comment, a statement posted online stated that: "While our CTS is coming to a close, our dedication to harm reduction, equity, and system change remains firm, and we will continue working to address the root causes of substance use challenges."

Chris O'Gorman, director of communications at Ottawa-based Cornerstone Supportive Housing for women, said that the loss of the SWCHC safe consumption site is "devastating" for their organization and for the broader community, too.

"This site brought individualized health care and support to people who are using substances in the community," said O'Gorman.

Cornerstone, which is located steps from SWCHC, is the largest emergency shelter and supportive housing provider for women in the city

"In those cases, we were able to refer them across the road, so they can use substances in a safer manner using the (consumption site)," O'Gorman said.

The (consumption site) at the SWCHC provided non-judgmental services regularly to individuals that lived on the Eccles street location, said O’Gorman. He said they were using these services once or multiple times a day, or sometimes just once a month depending on various factors such as mental health.

“To many people this might be the only interaction they have with a healthcare professional,” O’Gorman said. “Most of these individuals don’t have a family doctor and don’t feel safe or feel judged if they go to an emergency room, which is often the case.”



Tamara Chipperfield, executive director of the Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre. They applied in collaboration with other organizations for the HART hub funding. (Photo Courtesy of Tamara Chipperfield)

Cornerstone residents have said that in traditional health care settings they are often told that their problems are caused by their drug usage and that their problems will go away if they quit their use, which is not true according to O’Gorman.

Kayla Hagerty, founder of Solidarity and Alliance of people who use drugs, said the fallout from closing the CTS at Somerset West are going to be much scarier than what people were seeing in the neighbourhood when the consumption site was open.

“People are used to seeing needles and pipes on the streets, but eventually it is going to be dead bodies and people overdosing,” Hagerty said. “I am genuinely scared of what the future holds.”

The Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre in west-end Ottawa developed their Homelessness and Addiction Recovery Treatment hub funding proposal with multiple partners, part of a separate competitive process stream for organizations that do not have a consumption and treatment service.

Somerset West and Pinecrest-Queensway community health centres separate proposals were both approved by the Ontario government.

Despite concerns, Tamara Chipperfield, executive director of the PQCHC said that the planned HART hubs will provide a range of services offered in a warm and welcoming environment, stigma-free, and where the client is leading the treatment.

“There is a need for additional services for people living with substance use disorders in the west Ottawa area,” Chipperfield said.

This HART hub is going to be a stand-alone location separate from the PQCHC, to include housing and other supports.

“As a city, we welcome the investment that HART hubs are bringing with much-needed housing services and much-needed services around mental health and addictions, but harm reduction should be a part of the structure,” Chipperfield said.

Ontario Health Minister Sylvia Jones said that HART Hubs won't offer supervised consumption services, safer drug supply or needle exchange programs. Needle return or collection "may be considered," according to the news release on Jan. 27.

Harm reduction is all about reducing harm to individuals and the community at large, and supervised consumption services sites like the CTS at Somerset West are a huge part of harm reduction, said Chipperfield.

Cornerstone Supportive Housing follows a harm reduction model in all their programs, and the elimination of these services at SWCHC is going to be “detrimental” for their clients, according to O’Gorman.

“We are really concerned about the lack of clean needles and safe supply of paraphernalia, such as inhalation pipes,” O’Gorman said.

With consumption and treatment services shutting down and with no overdose prevention nearby, it is unlikely that these individuals will use public transportation to get to the two remaining consumption sites in Ottawa. Both of those locations in Lowertown are far from both Cornerstone locations.

“If we can support people to make healthier choices then we can eventually support them to reduce their substance use and then hopefully eliminate their substance use, but we can’t do that if they are dead,” O’Gorman said.

“Something is always better than nothing,” he added. “And the HART hub will still be a public resource that will be across the street from Cornerstone, and we will be able to use the services they provide.”

Danielle Rolfe, co-founder and director of the mental health support organization Soul Space Ottawa, said she’s worried about the repercussions of shutting down harm-reduction sites.

“I think based on the evidence that is out there, and people’s lived experience, is that without harm-reduction and safe consumption as part of the continuation of care, (it) is not going to be necessarily a positive outcome for clients,” said Rolfe.

Soul Space Ottawa is a community organization that provides mental health support for frontline healthcare and social services workers with social gatherings, monthly cafes, as well as clay workshops and weekend retreats.

“I haven’t heard (frontline workers) be hopeful and I’ve heard from Somerset West for example, putting on a brave face and trying to be positive,” said Rolfe. “But through the back doors, there is a feeling of ‘I don’t know how to do this,’ because it is such a shift in how they do care.”

The homeless service sector and the harm reduction sector is in “crisis,” added Rolfe, and there is a high rate of employee turnover. The turnover rate, he noted, is ten times higher than average in these workplaces — meaning the average employee, within a year, is leaving the workplace.

“If we want to talk about real comprehensive care, we should talk about caring for the workers, too,” said Rolfe. “They are the ones who provide continuity of care for the clients, and many times clients don’t get well unless they have a trusting relationship with caregivers.”

Frontline workers are having a hard time shifting gears yet again, with such a massive upheaval in policy and practice, argued Rolfe.

“I would love to see the HART hubs including care for frontline workers, and that might mean working with us. But that can also mean working with their own initiatives to care for their staff,” said Rolfe. “But it is an essential element for their success, because the client care suffers when there is turnover.”

The HART hub locations for both the PQCHC and the SWCHC were formally approved on Jan. 2, and were intended to be fully operational by April 1, closely after the closure of the Somerset West consumption site.

Due to the recent provincial election campaign, funding for the HART hubs from the Ontario Ministry of Health has been delayed. That has caused the opening of the hubs to be delayed, as well, with an undetermined opening date.

Chipperfield said that they are currently waiting on a funding letter with more details from the provincial government, leaving many substance users and care providers in a state of uncertainty.

Hagerty, who interacts regularly with individuals who use drugs, said members of this community are very used to living in fear and crisis.

“People were using drugs outside and they found a way to take care of one another, so we know we have each other’s back, yet we are prepared for the worst,” Hagerty said.

“We survived before and we will survive again — not all of us, but some of us.”