



**Meeting of The Toronto Board of Health July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018**  
***A Public Health Approach to Drug Policy***

**Presentation: Angie Hamilton, Executive Director, Families for Addiction Recovery**

Thank you for this opportunity to address the Board. I'm Angie Hamilton; retired lawyer and Executive Director of Families for Addiction Recovery, or FAR. FAR is a charity founded by parents whose children have struggled with substance use disorder, or SUD, from their early teens. We know first-hand that SUD is not a moral failing but a chronic illness. FAR exists because the needs of our families are not being met. We expect our children to receive treatment, not punishment, for being ill. That does not happen today.

We support both of Dr. De Villa's recommendations with one suggested amendment. We'd like to see the stakeholder groups in Recommendation 2 expanded to include families of people who use drugs and also people in recovery.

I've learned a lot on my journey with my son. I would like to share some "Aha" moments I've had along the way to inform your deliberations. If someone told me years ago that I was going to be here today, saying what I am about to say, I would not have believed it.

According to the Canadian Community Health Survey, over 10% of Canadians aged 12 years or older reported using illegal substances in 2016 (3.2 million). Over 6% of youth aged 12-17 reported illegal substance use.

Prohibition (aka criminalizing drug use) is not preventing a lot of Canadians, including teenagers, from using illegal drugs. It sends a message to our children with SUD that they are bad and deserve punishment instead of being ill and needing treatment. If we tell our children that people who use illegal drugs are criminals, are they really going to come to us when they are considering use or once they have a problem? The answer we received from youth at MP Rob Oliphant's Roundtable in May is "No".

Even law enforcement is saying we can't arrest our way out of this.

How is substance use criminal? The primary purpose of criminal law is to protect people from **other** people, not to protect them from themselves. There is nothing inherently criminal in consuming a substance or in self-harm. If it were inherently criminal then alcohol use would be prohibited.

Addiction, the severe end of SUD, is the very definition of self-harm. It is compulsive alcohol or other drug use, in spite of adverse consequences. Those struggling with addiction can lose everything that matters to them, including their lives. It's clear that fear of punishment, such as incarceration, will not deter use.

By analogy, prior to 1972, it was illegal in Canada to attempt suicide. We look at that law today and think it's ridiculous. How could we ever help someone struggling with their mental health by punishing them? It's time we realized it's the same for people with SUD, whether to a legal drug like alcohol, or illegal drugs.

Further, the vast majority of people can use legal, illegal and prescribed substances without developing SUD. Dependency rates run in the 5 to 25% range. That means 75% to 95% will not become dependent. SUD is not about drugs. It is about the person.

How do we justify criminalizing non-problematic users? It is a waste of taxpayer dollars and extremely harmful to the person.

How do we justify criminalizing people with problematic use? They are ill and need treatment. A criminal record only harms them by putting a legal problem on top of a medical condition. It impedes recovery by affecting job prospects and cross border travel.

The sooner we treat all drug use as the health issue that it is, rather than the criminal justice issue that it is not, the more lives (and taxpayer dollars) will be saved.

Finally, I'd like to address the part of the recommendation to scale up treatment.

The Office of The Child and Youth Advocate Alberta released an investigative report in June about the deaths of 12 youth aged 15-19 from overdose. They recommended that Alberta develop a youth-specific opioid strategy, including a review of the Protection of Children Abusing Substances Act. This legislation does not even exist in Ontario.

As part of a comprehensive approach to the opioid epidemic, we would like to see the federal and provincial governments ensure a uniform approach across Canada on this critically important topic.

We have a duty to protect youth with SUD, both those seeking treatment and those who are not. Those taking illegal substances need treatment on demand because their next use can be fatal. There is no strategy in place to keep them alive and not criminalized while they wait for treatment. The same is true of those not seeking treatment.

It is ironic that we care so much about keeping cannabis out of the hands of youth, but we are allowing youth dependent on illegal drugs to play Russian Roulette with their lives.

To conclude, we need *every* tool in the toolbox. This graph shows that decriminalization is an evidence-based tool. Some will be afraid to decriminalize drugs and look at regulating illegal drugs. We're much more afraid of the status quo.

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