

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

A NEW SUPPORT FOR THOSE FACING DRUG ISSUES

By Joe Mancini, September 2018 Good Work News

The Working Centre has purchased a house on Water Street that will support people who are dealing with drug use. It will be a place of rest, where people will access harm reduction supports, primary care, and a relationship-based approach to mental health and addiction supports. We will embed transitional housing and respite beds into this house, as well as meals, showers, and laundry. The main goal will be to create meaningful connections to help people to be as well as they can be.

This house may become a Safe Consumption Site, but that is not the main reason for The Working Centre's purchase of this property. It has been increasingly clear that a community-based response to growing drug addiction is needed. We have identified that we need a place that is different than an addiction treatment centre, rather more like a place where people could start to plan or imagine how they can be well and less subjected to the power of their addiction.

The first use of this house is to immediately address the growing reality of injection drug use. Our goal is to establish a house that is a welcoming place. Drug use is a subculture and those who use already feel marginalized. The obvious telltale signs of deep drug addiction - carrying one's belongings, the disheveled look, are obvious signs of high social displacement. Also there is a strong degree of mental illness that is both soothed and made worse through drug use. Our hope is to create a place of welcoming that provides a wide range of supports and services.

Waterloo Region already has high injection drug use dominated by easy access to crystal meth touched up with fentanyl. Municipalities and non-profits are struggling to deal with the reality of drug use in public spaces throughout the downtown. We see the effects of increased drug use daily at St. John's Kitchen and in our other community spaces as are groups and organizations throughout the Region. In Cambridge growing drug use is front page news.

The idea for this house came together when Waterloo Region Public Health was struggling to find a location to host the Safe Consumption Site. Public Health's stated reason for establishing Safe Consumption Sites is to defend the health of our community by reducing the increased risks of HIV and hepatitis C through injection needle use and also to reduce the growing number of drug overdoses caused by the addition of fentanyl and now carfentanil into the cocaine, crystal meth and opioids drug supply.

Ideally, a full community response means this house would need 24 hour supports in place. We think this house can also provide a kind of detox place for those picked up by WRPS/Emergency Services in the middle of a drug overdose. This means freeing the police, EMR, and hospitals from a service that is consuming hundreds of hours by transferring these supports.

No location for such a service is completely ideal. The Water Street house is on a thoroughfare road. We envision the site with a tall fence surrounding three sides of the property. The front will be restored to its heritage look with a new entrance along the driveway at the back. We are looking forward to working with neighbours, partners and WRPS to create a place that complements this neighbourhood area.

We are actively developing the idea of an Inner City Health Alliance (Sanguen, KDCHC, Centre for Family Medicine, House of Friendship, WWLHIN, and others) that integrates harm reduction services, primary care and a relationship based approach to mental health and addictions support. The Inner City Health Alliance will integrate with the supports that are already part of St. John's Kitchen medical clinic where we have a doctor, a nurse practitioner, psychiatric outreach nurses and outreach workers to provide support along with the dental clinic. A visit to St. John's Kitchen medical clinic quickly identifies why this work needs to be rapidly addressed.

This approach is uniquely designed to support those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The St. John's Kitchen medical clinic has developed a unique relationship-based approach for those who are most disadvantaged in our community. Understanding this issue is the challenge we have opened ourselves to - how do we see right action and hospitality as a response to this growing community issue? We welcome community partners in continuing this conversation.

An important aspect of this work is to widen the access to addiction/recovery supports. We are working closely with Sanguen Health, and addiction supports (Sanguen, CMHA, Stonehenge, House of Friendship) to commit to exploring the challenges faced by this population. How can we break down some of the barriers faced by those dependent on substance use, helping them to access recovery supports as needed, and to build more supports and meaningful relationships in their lives? What does community-based recovery support look like?

We are committed to providing a relationship-based place that will reduce harm and increase access to primary care. It is well known that recovery starts by having a place of reflection, a place of quiet to develop the strength to get access to supports and find ways to address the addiction.

Increasingly, as neighbourhoods notice the impact of the wide availability of addictive drugs, it is clear that our communities must address this issue. One step is to create a place that has strong relationships, that is welcoming and has practical supports. We hope this initiative will add to our community's response.