



CITY OF *Lethbridge*

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

May 1, 2017

Local coalition on opioid abuse informs City Council members about local scope, impact of addictions as well as collaborative response

Lethbridge, AB – City Council members were informed today about the provincial and local impacts of opioid addiction as well as the broad-based collaborative response that's being developed to respond to the situation in Lethbridge.

A rapid increase since 2013 in opioid addictions, including fentanyl – a dangerous and highly-addictive form of opioid – has resulted in increases locally in overdose deaths, emergency room visits, and treatment of overdose victims by emergency medical responders, members of the Executive Leaders Coalition on Opioid Use told Council. The coalition was formed to collaborate on addressing the issue of opioid abuse in Lethbridge and includes representatives from the health, police, justice, emergency medical, post-secondary, municipal, education and social service sectors.

Presenting on behalf of the coalition were Dr. Karin Goodison, Medical Officer of Health for Alberta Health Services-South Zone; Tom Mountain, Director of Addictions and Mental Health for AHS-South Zone; Deputy Chief Dana Terry of Lethbridge Fire and Emergency Services; Acting Deputy Chief Tom Ascroft of the Lethbridge Police Service; as well as Stacey Bourque, Executive Director, and Jill Manning, Managing Director, of ARCHES, a local agency which provides outreach, harm reduction services, education and support to people who use drugs.

According to Alberta Health Services (AHS) statistics, fentanyl overdose deaths across Alberta increased from six in 2011 to 117 in 2014 before rising sharply to 257 in 2015 and 349 in 2016. Province-wide, the rate of fentanyl deaths per 100,000 population doubled from 2.9 in 2014 to 6.1 in 2015 and then rose to 8.1 in 2016. In 2016, 80 per cent of all fentanyl overdose deaths were males, and nearly half of all deaths (48 per cent) were males aged 25-39.

Goodison emphasized that the rates of opioid addiction are epidemic in nature and a major public health issue for Alberta. She noted that addictions should be addressed like chronic illnesses, similar to diabetes, as individuals do not choose to be addicted, and the health impacts on individuals, families and communities are significant.

Mountain said a combination of medication with opioid replacements and counselling support is the most effective way to help people with addictions kick their drug habit and prevent relapses. He also emphasized that treatment for addictions is voluntary and that people can't be forced into it. At the

same time, he added, front-line mental health agencies must do what they can to limit the harms associated with addictions.

The need to administer Naloxone to reverse opioid overdoses used to be rare for local EMS responders but is now necessary virtually on a daily basis, Terry told Council members. Lethbridge Fire and EMS first responders administered Naloxone 88 times in 2015 and 83 times in 2016 compared to just 11 times in 2013. Nearly half of overdose patients treated with Naloxone by local EMS responders in 2015 and 2016 were treated for more than one overdose. Similarly, he said, requests to pick up used needles used to be rare but are now common.

Council members were told by the Lethbridge Police Service that corresponding rises have also been seen in property crime and drug-related violent crime as well as public intoxication, public drug use, aggressive and unpredictable behaviour, and the incidence of drug debris such as used needles being left in public areas.

Ascroft noted that arrests alone can't solve the problem of crime driven by addictions. He said increased crime and negative behaviour will continue until the cycle of addiction is broken with support services that help people with addictions, including health, social services, education and justice stakeholders.

Harm reduction efforts locally are led by ARCHES and focus on minimizing deaths, disease transmission and injuries associated with the use of street drugs. Bourque said fentanyl and methamphetamine are the most commonly used street drugs in Lethbridge and estimated there are 3,000 drug users in the city - of whom about 75 per cent use needles to inject.

The coalition is in the midst of a preliminary community needs assessment to determine whether a safe consumption site with comprehensive in-house support services would be an effective way to deal with the opioid addiction issue in Lethbridge. A report, including recommendations, is expected from the coalition by this summer.

The coalition includes Lethbridge representatives from:

- Alberta Health Services
- Alberta Children's Services
- Alberta Justice and Solicitor General
- ARCHES
- Canadian Mental Association
- City of Lethbridge
- Holy Spirit Catholic Schools
- Lethbridge College
- Downtown Lethbridge BRZ
- Lethbridge Fire and Emergency Services
- Lethbridge Police Service
- Lethbridge Public Library
- Lethbridge School District #51
- Sik-Ooh-Kotoki Friendship Centre
- Social Housing In Action
- University of Lethbridge

Council members meet periodically as Community Issues Committee to hear presentations and gather information on matters but do not make decisions during such meetings.

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