

Date: Thursday, April 4, 2019
Subject: Letter of Concern to Mayor Jeff Lehman and Barrie Councillors

On Monday, March 25, 2019, we appeared as part of a deputation to City of Barrie Council. We represented a growing number of Simcoe County Families who have lost a loved one to opioid overdose. We also spoke on behalf of **Moms Stop the Harm**, a Canada-wide advocacy group with over 800 members who have either lost a family member to opioid overdose or have a family member at serious risk of overdose.

Given that Council had already decided **not to declare a local emergency**, our purpose was to present up-to-date facts, and urge visible and measurable action by Council regarding the Opioid Overdose Crisis. We believe positive change can happen at lightning speed when there is strong political leadership and accountability.

We proposed the appointment of a **Special Advisor on the Opioid Crisis** (to be accountable to the Mayor, and through the Mayor to Council) to coordinate information-sharing and action on the Opioid Crisis, across Barrie, and with shared stakeholders throughout Simcoe County. We proposed that Counsellor Natalie Harris be appointed to that volunteer role because she has already demonstrated her interest and expertise on this topic.

Our deputation was not based on emotions or feelings. It was based on FACTS.

FACT: *Between January 1, 2016 and December 31, 2018 there were more than 11,000 opioid overdose deaths across Canada. The majority of those who died were young, between the ages of 18 and 45. In addition, there were thousands of overdose victims who survived due to the administration of the antidote Naloxone.*

FACT: *In 2017, there were 81 opioid related overdose deaths in Simcoe County, 36 in Barrie. In 2017, the City of Barrie was listed as the third highest in hospital overdose visits for municipalities in Ontario with populations over 100,000. In 2017, an average of 11 lives were lost across Canada each day from opioid overdose.*

FACT: *Between 72% and 80% of those opioid overdose deaths were attributed to a toxic chemical – Fentanyl – being added to other drugs, without knowledge or consent of many victims. Most deaths were recorded as ‘unintentional’.*

FACT: *In 2018, Opioid-related overdoses and deaths in Ontario continued their upward trend. In the first 6 months of 2018 there were 629 deaths (80 more than in the same period in 2017). There were 6,688 opioid-related emergency room visits in the first 9 months of 2018, up from 5,909 in the same period in 2017.*

FACT: *Cause of death statistics are not reported by the Coroner’s Office in ‘real time’, sometimes delayed by 6 months or more. Local overdose statistics are aggregated to protect confidentiality, leading to a sense of complacency and the incorrect belief that this ‘problem’ will resolve itself over time. Opioid overdose related deaths and overdoses are reported to be continuing in 2019.*

As affected families, we have witnessed and experienced gaps in local protocols, programs and services related to the Opioid Crisis. We recognize there are many dedicated individuals and organizations working on anti-opioid overdose initiatives throughout Barrie and Simcoe County. We also recognize there is no overall coordination or political accountability to ensure people at risk don't fall through the cracks. We have observed that many stakeholders are operating in their own 'silos' and 'pillars'. No person or organization is in charge.

We expect our elected officials at all levels to be **CHAMPIONS** who will drive urgent, innovative action to reduce the impact of this Opioid Crisis. We believe Barrie Council and all elected politicians throughout Simcoe County have the legal responsibility to act immediately and collectively to make our communities safer.

The community has a **RIGHT TO KNOW** about the severe, local impact of the Opioid Overdose Crisis. We believe elected Councillors, have an **OBLIGATION TO INFORM** their communities by providing timely, up-to-date information and statistics to residents of Barrie about this continuing local and Canada-wide crisis. **How has Council done this to date?**

OUR FEEDBACK:

As parents who lost a child to unintended Fentanyl overdose, we were saddened and disappointed by comments made by some Councillors following our deputation. We concur with letters of concern sent to you by Melissa and Gary Hurst, and by community leader Ken Robertson, regarding our deputation to Council on Monday, March 25, 2019.

We were not seeking condolences. Our purpose was to urge immediate action. We introduced a win-win recommendation to increase Council's accountability and to coordinate action to try to save lives. Instead, Council chose no action, and decided to refer issues related to the Opioid Crisis to committees for discussion about how Council resources could be allotted to this crisis.

The following condescending, dismissive comments and excuses were made by some Councillors:

*"Would we be undermining staff if we appointed a Special Advisor?" I suggest ...
"remedy that Counsellor Natalie Harris is welcome to be a member of the new Public Safety and Well-being Committee ...of course, we would have to agree to add her."*

"We can only do what we can do. We are giving the message we are going to do more than we can. There's little we can do." Same Councillor quoting words of another Councillor spoken in private before our deputation, "Another Councillor told me I think these people have false expectations and I just want this to go away."

"Tough night quite honestly...can't express our sorrow enough ... but...not sure how much we can do...perhaps you have false hopes that we are going to be your silver bullet."

“This has to be done at a much higher level than we are at Municipal level.”

“It would be raising false hopes to do something because nothing can be done to stop this crisis.”

In response to our question “why, if the Simcoe Muskoka Opioid Strategy Report was launched on July 5, 2018, did the SMOS Committee not present their report to Council until March 5, 2019 (8 months after it was launched). The surprising response: “We had to invite SMOS, and Council didn’t meet for 3 months over the summer... so we decided to wait until after the new Council was elected ... there was no room on the agenda.”

Mayor Lehman spoke in favour of a **Special Advisor on the Opioid Crisis** and welcomed the possibility of appointing Councillor Natalie Harris, recognizing her interest and expertise. Councillor Natalie Harris **volunteered** to accept this appointment.

It was eye-opening to listen while several Councillors treated Councillor Natalie Harris, the only woman on Council, like a novice who they could direct to sit on committees with no power. Several Councillors made amendments to weaken her motion to the point of removing her name to make her motion meaningless.

We remind you that Councillor Natalie Harris was equally elected by her constituents, has equal authority and is equally accountable. She has shown through her actions to date, that she is clearly prepared to take the lead and accept responsibility and accountability regarding actions related to the Opioid Crisis.

Though the Mayor and four Councillors voted in favour of the watered down “amended amendment”, five Barrie Councillors voted to defeat the motion.

The status quo is not good enough. Doing nothing new about the Opioid Crisis is not an acceptable option. Some City Councillors are complicit in sweeping a serious issue under the rug, hoping it will go away on its own.

We urge Council to reconsider the original motion to appoint a Special Advisor on the Opioid Crisis to the Mayor’s Office.

Young people in Barrie, Ontario, and across Canada are overdosing and dying at an alarming rate. Councillors who are naysayers need to get their heads out of the sand. You are accountable to the public to make the community a safer place.

Submitted by
Evelyn Pollock and David Pollock MD

on behalf on many affected families in Barrie and Simcoe County