



Medical Officer of Health Report to the Board

Tuesday, January 28th, 2025

HEALTH PROMOTION

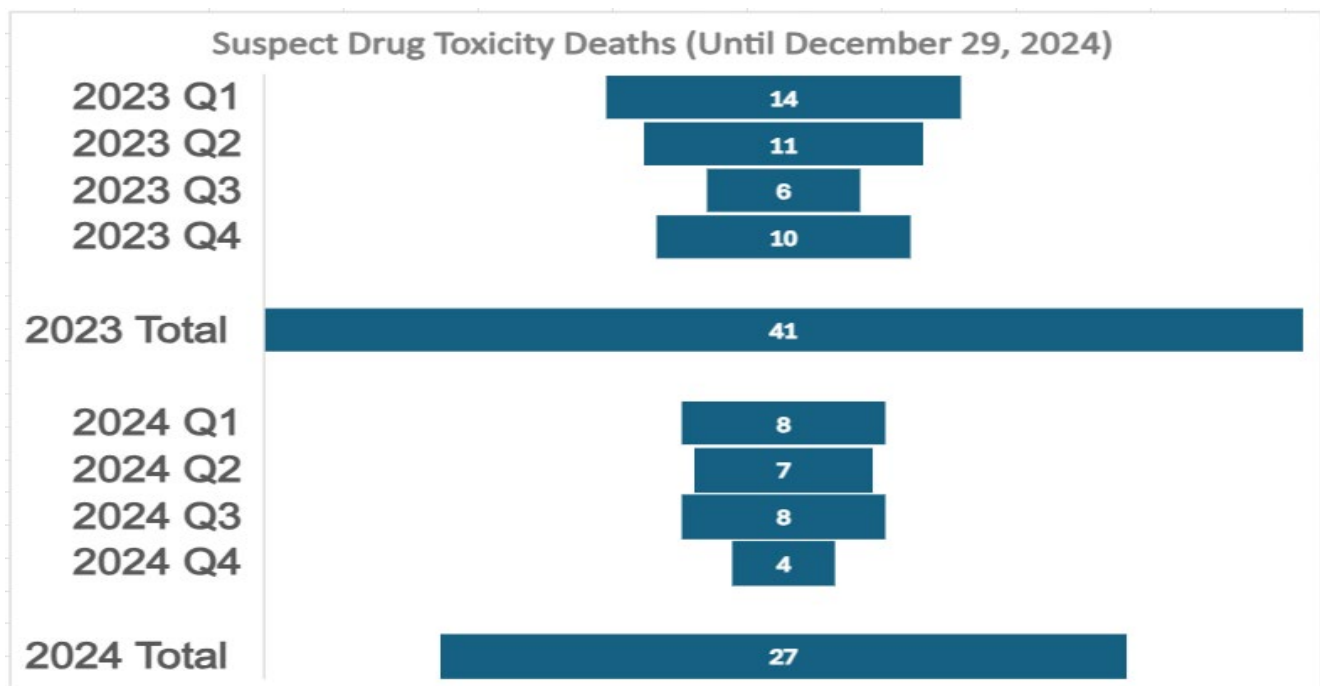
Renfrew County and District Drug Strategy

At the November Renfrew County and District Drug Strategy (RCDDS) steering committee meeting the harm reduction pillar report was presented and the priorities and structure were approved. The three other pillars are adapting the structure to provide their reports, with prevention and treatment pillar reports presented earlier this month.

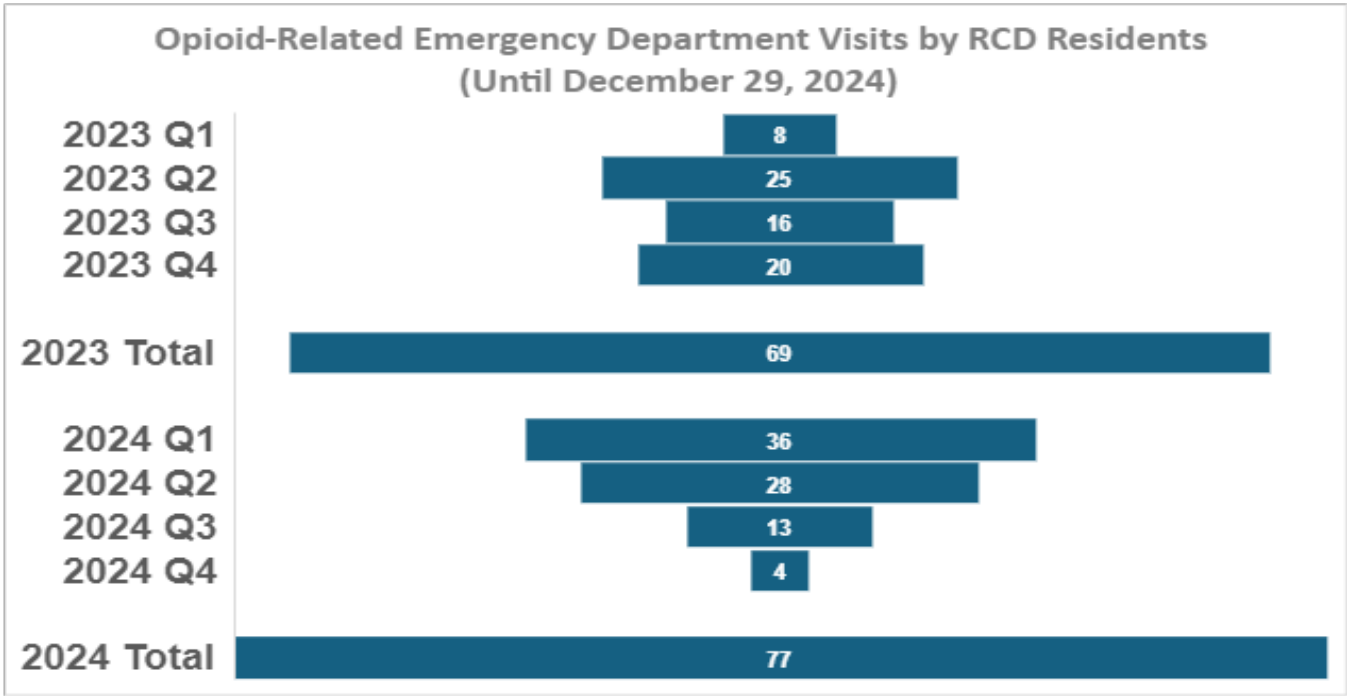
During December, a 2024 status update [media release](#) and [community engagement survey](#) were developed, and both were released earlier this month. The media release highlights some of the collaborative efforts and successes of the organizations participating in the strategy over the past year.

RCDDS Substance Use Harms Indicators:

As of December 29th, 2024, there were 27 suspect drug-related deaths across RCD for the year, which is fewer than the number at the same point in 2023.



As noted during the previous update, the rate of opioid-related ED visits has been decreasing as 2024 progressed, with only 4 ED visits in the 4th quarter of the year.



Drug Testing Kit Distribution

A pilot program through the Ontario Harm Reduction Distribution Program was launched in July of 2024 to distribute free drug testing kits, allowing individuals to test their substances for fentanyl, benzodiazepines, and xylazine. To date, 464 drug testing kits have been distributed across Renfrew County & District. These testing kits are helpful tools for harm reduction, as they help users quickly detect the presence of these dangerous substances in their drugs, allowing them to take actions to reduce the risk of overdose.

Alcohol

To coincide with holiday gatherings, RCDHU released a social media campaign in December to raise awareness of [Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health](#), which provides evidence-based guidance to support people in making informed decisions related to alcohol consumption. The guidance is based on the principle of autonomy in harm reduction and the fundamental idea that people living in Canada have the right to know that all alcohol consumption comes with risk. The campaign featured recipes for non-alcoholic “mocktails” such as winter sangria to provide festive alternatives to cocktails containing alcohol.

Winter Sangria

- Preheat your oven to 400F. Grab a baking sheet and place sliced oranges, sliced grapefruit and cranberries on it. Bake for 30-40 minutes, or until the cranberries burst and caramelize a bit (may need to increase baking time if using frozen cranberries).
- While that is baking, grab a pot to bring the pomegranate and orange juice to a boil. Once boiling, turn off the heat, add the chai tea bags and let steep for 5 minutes. Remove tea bags.
- Add the caramelized fruit to the sangria mixture in the pot and refrigerate until cooled (at least 2 hours or overnight).
- Grab a tall glass and fill it with ice.
- Ladle in sangria until the glass is half full, and top with grapefruit-flavoured sparkling water.
- Garnish with anise stars, a cinnamon stick, fresh cranberries and enjoy!

- 2 cups pomegranate juice
- 1 cup orange juice
- 2 cans of grapefruit-flavoured sparkling water
- 2 chai tea bags
- 2 oranges, sliced
- 2 grapefruits, sliced
- 1 cup fresh or frozen cranberries
- 4 cups ice
- Optional garnish: anise stars, cinnamon sticks, cranberries

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RENFREW COUNTY AND DISTRICT HEALTH UNIT

Tobacco and Vaping

RCDHU is partnering with the Renfrew County and District School Board and the University of Ontario Institute of Technology to deliver and evaluate a research project to investigate the effectiveness of the Catch My Breath vaping prevention curriculum. RCDHU health promotion staff will be delivering the program to grade 9 students in health education classes to ensure standardized program delivery. School recruitment and planning is underway, and program delivery will take place this spring and fall. Students will complete an online survey before exposure to the curriculum and one year later to assess changes in knowledge and intentions to vape.

Eating Disorders Ontario – Prevention Training

RCDHU joined several health units across Ontario in offering foundational training through Eating Disorders Ontario – Prevention. This Ontario Ministry of Health-funded program aims to build capacity for the local adoption of evidence-based prevention strategies for eating disorders across the province through training which focuses on food, weight, and body image.

Our region was the first in the province to collaborate on this training with Renfrew County Catholic District School Board and Renfrew County District School Board mental health staff. A total of 26 RCDHU staff members from the Healthy Communities, Healthy Families, and Infectious Diseases teams participated in this training.

Healthy Babies Healthy Children (HBHC) Program Training

The HBHC Home Visiting Program is an early intervention program for families confirmed through screening and assessment as being with risk of compromised child development. This voluntary program, funded by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) and delivered by staff from RCDHU, provides families in the prenatal period and families with children from birth until their transition to school with opportunities to achieve their full potential.

To support the implementation of the HBHC program, MCCSS also funds the Public Health Nursing Practice, Research, and Education Program (PHN-PREP). PHN-PREP develops, evaluates, and mobilizes evidence-informed resources to support public health nurses (PHNs), supervisors, and home visiting program teams to provide care and support individuals and families enrolled in home visitation programs.

To support the inclusion of psychotherapeutic strategies derived from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), PHN-PREP has secured funding in this fiscal year (2024-25) for 120 PHNs from across the province to take part in a virtual 2-day CBT skills-based training. The training workshop, entitled, "A skills-based approach to your clients' perinatal mental health training," will be led by Dr. Ryan Van Lieshout, Canada Research Chair in Perinatal Mental Health and a Perinatal Psychiatrist.

RCDHU was successful in securing 5 training spots for our HBHC PHNs. These 5 PHNs will be attending the training on January 27 and 28, 2025, which includes additional materials after the training to support independent practice.

Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program (OSDCP)

The OSDCP provides services to seniors (65+) who have a net family income below \$25,000 for a single senior and \$41,500 for a couple. Seniors who are enrolled in the OSDCP access services through RCDHU's dental clinic locations in Pembroke and Barry's Bay, or through our service level agreement providers throughout Renfrew County and District. RCDHU dental clinics include regular hygiene visits, as well as dental services for routine checkups, emergencies, restorative care, or extractions.

In 2024, RCDHU was able to implement the use of two dental operatories in the Pembroke clinic, increasing clinic efficiency and allowing more clients to access services. RCDHU administered 567 dental services appointments and 493 hygiene services appointments between the Barry's Bay and Pembroke clinic locations. RCDHU also coordinated denturist services for 44 seniors to receive either complete or partial dentures, depending on their individual needs.

HEALTH PROTECTION

Infectious Diseases

Respiratory Activity:

Since the beginning of December, respiratory activity has been increasing. There has been an average of two new outbreaks per week. COVID-19 accounted for ~44 % of outbreaks and Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) accounted for ~33 % of outbreaks. The first flu outbreak for the 2024/25 respiratory season was declared in week 1 (Dec. 29, 2024 – Jan. 4, 2025).

Hospital bed occupancy for respiratory illnesses continues to increase and is very high. Most hospital bed occupancy is related to COVID-19, but hospital bed occupancy due to RSV has been increasing in recent weeks. Emergency department visits related to respiratory illness have been increasing since the beginning of the 2024/2025 respiratory season. In December, the percentage of emergency department visits related to respiratory illness started at 19% and climbed to 22%.

RCDHU has added test percent positivity for RSV as another indicator in the [Respiratory Illness Data Summary](#) weekly reporting. This data provides more information to support informed decisions about the risk of respiratory illness transmission in the community.

Pertussis:

There have been 29 cases (14 confirmed + 15 probable) of Pertussis reported in RCD in 2024, all identified between June and December. The majority of cases (79%) were under the age of 20. The number of pertussis cases reported in 2024 is the highest on record in RCD, with the previous reported high in 2017 when there were 16 cases.

The 2024 rate of pertussis cases for RCD was 26 cases per 100,000 people, compared to Ontario's rate of 11 cases per 100,000. Last year was also the highest number of pertussis cases reported in Ontario since at least 2007.

Increases in vaccine preventable diseases like pertussis continue to reinforce the importance of getting immunized. Immunization rates in school-aged children have decreased since the COVID-19 pandemic, so families are strongly encouraged to review immunization records and stay up to date. Residents can inquire about their immunization record or book an immunization appointment through their primary care provider or by calling RCDHU. More information is available at <https://www.rcdhu.com/healthy-living/immunization/>.

COVID-19 and Influenza Vaccine

RCDHU's large-scale community COVID-19 and flu vaccine clinics ended in late December. RCDHU continues to offer appointments for people at higher risk of severe respiratory illness and for children 5 years of age and younger (whom pharmacies cannot always vaccinate). As of January 7th, RCDHU had administered 3749 doses of COVID-19 vaccine and 2461 doses of influenza vaccine through community-based clinics, in-home vaccination services, and mobile vaccination services to retirement homes and congregate care settings. RCDHU has also dispensed a total of 15,560 doses of Influenza vaccine to health care partners across RCD. Pharmacies continue to play a very active role in the administration of COVID-19 and Influenza vaccines for the public.

As of January 14th, approximately 12.2% of RCD residents had received a 2024 fall COVID-19 vaccine dose, compared to 10.8% across the province as a whole. RCD immunization rates are higher among adults aged 65 or older (37.1%), retirement home residents (63.7%), and long-term care home residents (65.4%). Among each of these groups, our local immunization rates are higher than provincial figures (which are 35.5%, 48.3%, and 50.3% respectively).

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) Vaccination

Older Adult High-Risk Program:

As of January 13th, 515 doses of RSV vaccine were administered to eligible individuals through community clinics and 11 retirement homes throughout RCD. RSV vaccine continues to be available for eligible individuals by appointment in our clinic settings.

Infant and High-Risk Children Program:

RCDHU has hosted a total of 6 community-based immunization clinics to support the new infant and high-risk children RSV program this fall and will continue to offer it at all routine immunization clinics in RCD throughout the RSV season. As of January 13th, 51 doses of nirsevimab (Beyfortus) have been administered by RCDHU. Healthcare providers and Pembroke Regional Hospital have been key partners in the program's success. As of January 13th, 2025, 110 doses have been dispensed to Pembroke Regional Hospital and 376 doses to health care providers.

Immunization of School Pupils Act (ISPA)

In December and early January 2025, 3580 notices were sent to students who were not up to date with ISPA vaccines. In December, RCDHU hosted 4 out of 11 planned ISPA high school clinics, which will continue through January and February. RCDHU will also host additional community clinics to increase access. Finally, ISPA vaccines are available through health care providers. It is important that immunizations administered in the community are reported through

the online [Immunization Connect Ontario tool \(ICON\)](#) or via fax, mail, or email.

As a result of ISPA immunization efforts, as of January 13th, the number of students missing the required vaccines or whose updated Immunizations have not been reported to RCDHU decreased by 676 students (about 19%).

Healthy Environments

Emergency Response Program:

RCDHU undertook a self-initiated COVID-19 after-action review (AAR). The AAR included a qualitative survey of RCDHU staff (across diverse positions within the organization) and community partners. The survey data was analyzed, and a document review was completed to support identifying trends for debrief sessions. A third-party consulting firm was hired to conduct three debrief sessions and one focus group and to provide a preliminary report with recommendations. The draft report was received from the consulting company in December and will be finalized early this year.

Each year RCDHU is required to complete a Hazard identification and Risk Assessment (HIRA) to maintain emergency readiness for the most likely and serious health hazards that may give rise to a public health emergency. The HIRA is informed by local historical health hazard data. The top ten hazards identified in 2024 are now posted on RCDHU's website at www.rcdhu.com/healthy-living/emergency-preparedness.

Food Safety Program:

It is the time of year when community organizations and municipal partners celebrate winter through special winter festivals and events. Public health inspectors are actively working with community partners to ensure that the special winter events taking place are carried out with safe food handling in mind. For example, inspectors offer guidance to vendors on proper food storage, cooking and hot holding temperatures, proper food handler personal hygiene, and use of potable water in food preparation.

Safe Water Program:

On January 1st, RCDHU was notified of a watermain break in Beachburg that caused a complete loss of water pressure and resulted in a boil water order (BWO) for all water users. Public health inspection staff worked quickly with the Township of Whitewater Region to notify the water users and businesses, isolate and repair the break, and then test the water supply to ensure its potability. The BWO was lifted on January 4th.

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