



Medical Officer of Health Report to the Board

Tuesday, November 26th, 2024

Health Promotion

Renfrew County and District Drug Strategy

Progress Updates:

The Renfrew County and District Drug Strategy (RCDDS) steering committee did not meet in October; however, work continued in alignment with the preliminary recommendations of each of the pillars and in preparation for the meeting on November 14th, 2024.

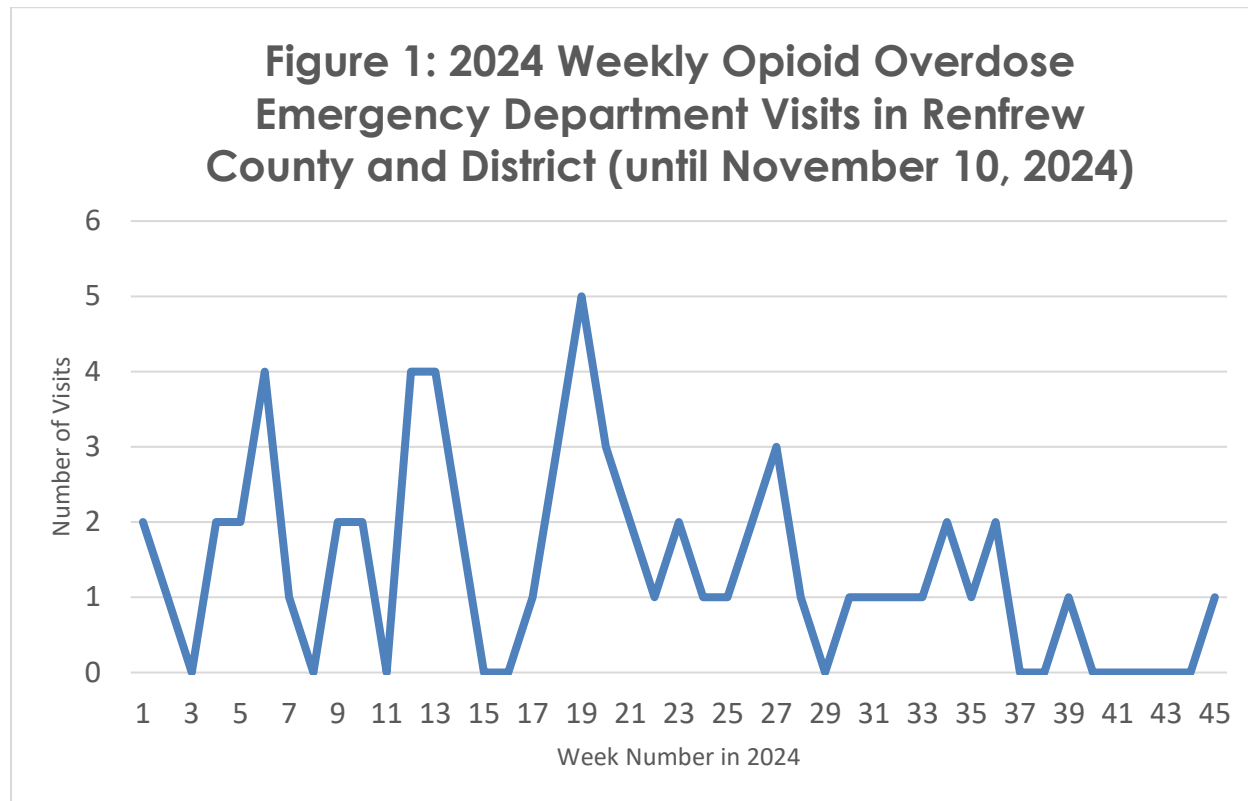
Several partners from the treatment pillar collaborated on the proposal to the Ontario Ministries of Health; Municipal Affairs and Housing; Children Community and Social Services; and Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development to support the creation of a Homelessness and Addiction Recovery Treatment (HART) Hub for Renfrew County and District. If successful, the HART Hub will offer critical services, co-located in same physical space, offering integrated referral pathways to other local and regional supports for individuals with complex service needs.

A comprehensive Harm Reduction report and accompanying priorities was provided in draft to the steering committee for their review and consideration of the structure's adaptability for other pillars. Additionally, a Community Engagement Plan and Evaluation Framework were developed for consideration by the steering committee at the November meeting.

In support of the anti-stigma recommendation that is interwoven throughout all pillars, the communication working group released a series of messages on social media to educate the community on the importance of compassion and the negative effect that stigma has on people who use drugs, including their ability to access care and treatment. The communication working group also developed a campaign in support of the Harm Reduction Pillar's recommendation of promoting the remote overdose detection service [Brave](#) to those who use drugs alone.

RCDDS Substance Use Harms Indicators:

There have been 25 drug-related deaths across RCD so far this year, which is fewer than the number at this point last year. Additionally, there have been 78 opioid-related emergency department (ED) visits so far in 2024, which is a little more than the same time last year. However, the rate of opioid-related ED visits has been decreasing notably as the year has progressed, with only 2 ED visits in the most recent 9 weeks (see Figure 1).



Source: National Ambulatory Care Reporting System (NACRS).

In all of 2023 there were 41 drug-related deaths and 69 opioid-related ED visits. While there have still been far too many deaths in 2024, there is some indication that the number is decreasing relative to last year.

It's not possible to attribute these trends to any one intervention, and there can be substantial month-to-month or year-to-year variation, particularly in a smaller health unit such as RCDHU. An essential aspect of the RCDDS is continuing to broaden our evaluation framework and monitor indicators to determine the impact of the strategy priorities. However, there has been substantial progress through the work of mesa, strong collaborative efforts from all partners addressing drug-related harms, working

together on the Renfrew County and District Drug Strategy, continuing to onboard new partners to increase naloxone distribution, and numerous other initiatives.

Harm Reduction Program Update

In alignment with the RCDDS, harm reduction staff have continued to promote and increase access to naloxone, a medication that can temporarily reverse the effects of an opioid overdose and prevent opioid-related deaths. RCDHU and our Ontario Naloxone Program partners have already distributed 3466 naloxone doses this year, more than the 2796 in all of 2023 and more than any other year. Furthermore, the team has doubled the number of naloxone distribution partners from 7 in 2023 to 14 currently.

In addition to naloxone distribution, the team continues its work to reduce bloodborne infections in the community both through the syphilis point-of-care rapid testing and immediate treatment evaluation (SPRITE) program and the provision of sterile substance use equipment and proper disposal methods. Harm reduction staff provide regular training to partners and individual clients on naloxone and safe sharps disposal. RCDHU has provided 172 training sessions so far this year.

Across RCD, harm reduction clients have accessed services through RCDHU and our partners 1901 times so far in 2024, compared to 1494 visits over the same time period last year. Additionally, RCDHU's harm reduction team has amplified its impact through a new outreach program that began in June. About 110 or 16% of the team's harm reduction visits have happened offsite so far this year. Furthermore, nearly all of the outreach visits supported a different individual (rather than returning clients), demonstrating the increased reach of the program.

You're the Chef

You're the Chef (YTC) is a school food literacy program geared for students in grades 5-8 that offers components of food safety and hands-on-cooking skills through experiential learning, while linking to the curriculum.

The Youth Wellness Hub has received their YTC certification and has been successfully offering the program in the Renfrew and Pembroke locations. This month, an additional three schools have also registered to obtain training to run the program. RCDHU is offering multiple additional training opportunities this fall related to the increased interest.

Health Protection

Immunization Program

COVID-19 and Influenza Vaccination:

As of November 6th, RCDHU had administered 1544 doses of COVID-19 vaccine and 1374 doses of influenza vaccine through community-based clinics, or through mobile vaccination services to retirement homes and congregate care settings. RCDHU has dispensed a total of 18 820 doses of influenza vaccine and 1096 doses of COVID-19 vaccine to health care partners across RCD. Pharmacies continue to be an active channel for the public to receive both COVID-19 and influenza vaccine. As of mid-November, pharmacies in RCD had administered approximately 5264 doses of COVID-19 vaccine and 7883 doses of influenza vaccine. So far this season, approximately 26% of COVID-19 doses administered in RCD have been through RCDHU, with about 67% administered by pharmacies and 7% by other partners.

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) Vaccination:

RCDHU has hosted 3 community-based immunization clinics to support the new infant and high-risk children RSV program. Healthcare providers' offices and Pembroke Regional Hospital have also received their first shipments of the new passive immunization agent for infants, nirsevimab (also known as Beyfortus®). RCDHU will continue to offer appointment-based community immunization clinics throughout the RSV season for eligible infants. So far, RCDHU and Pembroke Regional Hospital have administered 61 doses of nirsevimab to eligible infants and children, while an additional 314 doses have been dispensed to primary care physicians.

Grade 7 School Based Immunization Clinics:

The first round of Grade 7 school immunization clinics for Hepatitis B (HB), Meningococcal, and human papilloma virus (HPV) have been completed. In total, 40 school-based clinics were hosted across RCD with approximately 1100 students being eligible for immunizations. In total, 648 doses of HPV vaccine, 633 doses of HB vaccine, and 723 doses of Meningococcal vaccine were administered at these school-based clinics. Students may also choose to be vaccinated through their healthcare provider or by booking an appointment at an RCDHU routine immunization clinic. The second round of grade 7 school immunization clinics will start in the spring of 2024.

Healthy Environments

Vector Borne Disease Surveillance and Control:

The second phase of active surveillance for ticks (tick dragging) was completed in October. This resulted in two additional confirmed risk areas near Petawawa and Eganville, as well as one potential new risk area near Pembroke. Current risk areas are Arnprior, Cobden and Calabogie. The additional risk areas will be communicated more broadly in the spring of 2025 ahead of next year's tick season and after the species of the ticks collected have been confirmed by the National Microbiology Laboratory.

Through our passive tick surveillance program, a total of 50 ticks from a human host have been submitted for analysis as of November 5th. Out of 40 ticks analyzed so far, 38 are black-legged ticks and six are positive for the bacteria that causes Lyme Disease.

Health Hazard Response:

November is radon awareness month. Radon is a radioactive gas found naturally in the environment. It is colourless and odourless. When radon enters an indoor space, such as a home, it can build up to high levels and pose a health concern to the people living there, including increased risk of lung cancer. Radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer after smoking. RCDHU is working with our schools and municipalities to spread the word about how to check for and address high levels of radon gas in buildings. Social media messaging on this subject has also been shared to raise awareness. See <https://takeactiononradon.ca/learn/radon-action-month/> to learn more.

Emergency Response Program

Throughout 2024, RCDHU has led several internal and external tabletop exercises and simulations to prepare for emergencies. This work included a 2023-24 respiratory illness season debrief, a large opioid overdose incident response simulation, and a 2024-25 respiratory illness season preparedness tabletop exercise with partners. After each session a summary of learnings was compiled and distributed to the group to inform preparedness work.

A collaborative presentation with Ottawa Public Health was delivered at the Emergency Management Ontario Capital sector meeting, providing valuable education on public health roles during emergencies and potential community supports. Approximately 60 attendees, including Community Emergency Management Coordinators from regions served by the Eastern Ontario Health Unit, Ottawa Public Health, and Renfrew County and District Health Unit, participated. This event fostered collaboration and improved knowledge sharing among key emergency response partners.

In October, staff participating in RCDHU's public health grand rounds received an orientation on the RCDHU emergency management program, enhancing their understanding of the health unit's role during emergencies and maintaining our agency's overall emergency preparedness.

Infectious Diseases

Respiratory Illness Activity:

In October, respiratory outbreak activity was sustained, averaging two new outbreaks per week. COVID-19 was the primary pathogen, accounting for approximately 78% of cases. COVID-19 test positivity rates in RCD remain high, correlating with increased outbreaks, and higher than the province's overall moderate COVID-19 test positivity.

So far in the 2024-25 respiratory season, no influenza cases have been reported to RCDHU and influenza activity remains low provincially. The rate of RSV infection has started to increase across Ontario.

Hospital bed occupancy for respiratory illness has remained high and respiratory-related emergency department visits have increased, making up 11%-14% of total visits, which indicates high to very high activity levels.

Pertussis (Whooping Cough):

Pertussis cases have increased in RCD and the rest of the province over the past 6 months. So far this year, 11 whooping cough cases have been reported to RCDHU, marking a notable increase after no cases from 2019 to 2023. Approximately 82% of these cases involved children aged 0-19 years. RCD's whooping cough rates are similar to those of Ontario, which is experiencing its highest year-to-date counts and rates since 2007.

RCDHU staff diligently follow-up on each case to provide education, trace contacts, and recommend prophylactic antibiotics when required.

The best way to protect against whooping cough is immunization. Whooping cough is part of the routine immunization schedule, and one of those required for attending school under the *Immunization of School Pupils Act* (ISPA). RCDHU staff provide regular immunization clinics where this vaccine can be accessed, and it is also available through healthcare providers. For more information on getting vaccinated or to check if immunizations are up to date, residents are asked to call their healthcare provider, visit <https://www.rcdhu.com/healthy-living/immunization/>, or call RCDHU.

Thanking our Director of Health Protection

After many years of dedicated service, RCDHU's Director of Health Protection, Vicki Benoit, will be retiring as of the end of this month. We express our gratitude for Vicki's immense contributions to RCDHU over the years, including playing a pivotal role in leading our local response to COVID-19, directing the successful rollout of many new vaccination programs, and recently helping to increase our public health outreach efforts. All the while, Vicki's focus has always been on mentoring and supporting her teams to thrive, enabling them to provide public health programs and services of the highest quality. Thank you Vicki and we wish you a happy and fulfilling retirement!

Submitted by: Dr. Jason Morgenstern
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