

Virtual Learning Together Series Huddle Recap

Harm Reduction: Virtual Overdose Response Line

Thursday July 15, 2021

Takeaways

Co-creating safety plans works well. It gives people power and autonomy over their care, which is a key aim of the National Overdose Response Service as a peer-led, peer-run initiative.

It's essential to cultivate a work culture that promotes the mental health and well-being of employees. Employees have flexible shifts, emotional and mindfulness support, overdose debriefing and ongoing opportunities for professional development.

Recap

Panelists **Dr. Monty Ghosh from the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary** and **Kim Ritchie from Grenfell Ministries** provided an overview of their virtual overdose response line, which provides support for individuals who use substances alone. They shared their experience working in emergency shelters and improving access to harm reduction services. Monty and Kim encourage people to reach out to them, to build connectivity within community and be able to better serve clients.

National Overdose Response Service (NORS)

Almost 60 percent of opioid overdoses that occur throughout Canada are by people using alone in their own homes, with 80 to 90 percent of overdoses being people using alone.

Opioid overdoses can be reversed by Naloxone. Supervised consumption services (SCSs) reduce mortality, but have geographic limitations. There needs to be a way to reach the population who live beyond the boundaries of a SCS, don't want to be seen using substances or may be self-isolating. The [National Overdose Response Service \(NORS\)](#) replicated the US's [Never Use Alone](#) initiative and set up a peer-run, peer-led overdose prevention hotline (toll free from anywhere in Canada, 24/7) for those using drugs alone. The service operates with the intention is to build rapport and community through affirming, confidential, stigma-free, respectful support.

NORS is a collaborative initiative between people who use drugs, [Grenfell Ministries](#), [BRAVE Technologies Co-Op](#) and Dr. Monty Ghosh. The hotline launched in December 2020, with:

- 2,000+ calls and 18 incidents of overdoses reversed so far.
- 71 volunteers and 15 staff.
- Comprehensive case management, linking to additional care, services and resources as required.

How NORS works:

- The individual calls 1-888-688-NORS(6677).
- The caller is told to keep their porch light on and front door unlocked, to keep pets away and paraphernalia and drugs hidden.
- The caller is connected to a safe consumption supervisor who helps co-create the caller's safety plan and will stay on the line while the caller uses their substance.
- The supervisor offers additional support should the caller require it.
- If the caller is unresponsive, either their safety plan is enacted or Northern911 is called and emergency services are dispatched to the caller's home.

Safety plans are co-created each time someone calls, which take into account the unique geography of Canada and the unique needs of the individual. If a neighbour has Naloxone, their phone number is added to the safety plan. 911 may be called in certain agreed situations. NORS works with Northern911, a company that has mitigated this issue and can connect to even remote regions of Nunavut.

As NORS works with people who are banned from other lines across Canada (for example, because they have high acuity and complex needs), staff often co-create **caller protocols** with the caller, to navigate those needs while mitigating the challenges of running the helpline.

The service is **peer run and driven**. NORS phone line operators can access instant debriefing and mental health supports. Those who call the hotline also work and volunteer for NORS. Staff who are actively using substances are able to learn how to navigate their own trauma and create meaning out of it to help other people. NORS aims to eradicate the hierarchies that exist in social services in order to provide a comprehensive service that complements and endorses a working environment that can really help people.

In terms of **liability**, NORS is protected by each province's variation of the Good Samaritan Act as well as the Federal Good Samaritan Act. Grenfell's legal team conducted the legal review to ensure liability protection. Insurance protects the agency and volunteers.

Anyone working with people who use substances can use NORS to support their clients:

- Much like giving out a Naloxone kit, pass on the NORS hotline number 1-888-688-NORS(6677) and website www.nors.ca to all clients who may be using substances alone.
- Explain to them how the service works and how to use the service.
- Encourage them to not to use alone where at all possible.

People can also use the **Brave app**, which works just like NORS with two small differences:

- Connectivity – NORS uses cell service, which gives flexibility to call from anywhere within Canada so callers don't need a connection to wi-fi if they don't have a data plan, while Brave uses data/wi-fi, which allows people to call from anywhere in the world as long as they have wi-fi/data service.

- Anonymity – with NORS, the person who answers the call will request the caller's address and other details to know how and where to send help if something goes wrong. The caller's information is kept strictly confidential. In the Brave app, users enter critical information needed for rescue into a card that is only released to the Brave App volunteer in an emergency.

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