

Local health unit handed \$50,000 to develop program to tackle opioid crisis



By Mike Baker

Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDGPH) has been awarded \$50,000 to assist with the development of a program designed to improve the collection of opioid overdose data in the region.

The local organization, which is scheduled to disappear through reduction of the province's health units to 10 from the current 28, was last week named as one of two national finalists in MaRS Discovery District's Opioid Data Challenge. Alongside Brave Technology Coop, based in Vancouver, B.C.,

WDG Public Health was recognized for the work it had already done in developing its FAST platform. Broken down as Flexible, Accessible, Scalable and Timely, the FAST system was designed to help monitor, report on and quickly respond to opioid overdoses.

“WDGPH is thrilled to have been selected as a winner in the MaRS Opioid Data Challenge, especially amongst so many innovative organizations. The FAST platform was created in partnership with the Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy and leveraged the knowledge of an extensive network of community partners,” said WDGPH spokesperson Jill Davies.

“Winning this challenge will give us opportunities to continue to improve the FAST system so that future implementations can help other communities monitor, report on and quickly respond to opioid overdoses.”

She added, “We will be working with MaRS to continue to develop and scale the platform to improve the collection of opioid overdose data. Our hope is to see the proven success of this model reduce substance use harms and save more lives locally and across Canada.”

Over the past five years, opioid-related emergencies have been steadily increasing in Dufferin County. According to WDGPH data, there were 27 recorded opioid overdoses in Dufferin County in 2017, with two of those resulting in deaths. The issue was brought back into the public eye in March of this year when 19-year-old Mason Corrie and 20-year-old Bryan White died in the same week after ingesting counterfeit Xanax pills laced with fentanyl.

A report released by Health Canada late last year stated that, in the first half of 2018, 2,066 apparent opioid-related deaths occurred across the country, 638 of them here in Ontario. Between Jan. 2016 and June 2018, more than 9,000 lives were lost in incidents related to opioids. While statistics for the full year of 2018 were not available as of press time, another report commissioned by Health Canada notes that an average of 17 people were hospitalized for opioid poisonings in Canada each day in 2017.

MaRS Discovery District launched The Opioid Data Challenge back in 2018 in an attempt to offset the use and misuse of opioids, which is having devastating effects on hundreds of families and communities across the country.

?With our primary partner, the Public Health Agency of Canada, we identified that there is a real need for timely and accurate information around the opioid crisis,? said Shahab Shahnazari, Director of Innovation Challenges at MaRS Discovery District. ?Currently, each province tracks fatal opioid overdoses and non-fatal overdoses, where some kind of emergency service is involved. But data, particularly on non-fatal overdoses occurring in communities, remains limited. This challenge aimed to fill this data gap.?

WDGPH was identified as a first phase finalist back on March 19, receiving \$10,000 for that particular achievement. Following a second phase of applications, the organization stood out for the way it promoted its FAST platform.

?Based on feedback from the external judges, WDGPH proved that their methodology could be applicable and scalable to other communities,? Mr. Shahnazari said. ?Now, both Brave Technology Coop and WDGPH will continue developing their solutions, as well as working with MaRS to scale and integrate their concepts into existing public health surveillance systems, and share the insights generated from their data with trusted partners.?

Ms. Davies confirmed WDGPH was still in the very early stages of developing and scaling the FAST platform, but hoped to be in a position before long to provide more information to the public.