

Virtual Overdose Response – PRIHS 4

March 10, 2020

What's this project about?

Over 2,400 opioid related overdoses were treated in emergency departments last year and the government reports an average of 2 deaths a day from opioid overdose in 2018, demonstrating the severity of the overdose crisis.

One intervention, established in some places in Alberta, is Supervised Consumption Services (SCS). These wraparound services provide support to people who use substances and help prevent overdose deaths. However, they are limited by geography as their greatest effect is within a 500-metre radius of the site. In Alberta, 83% of the overdose deaths occur in suburban and rural populations, which generally are not served by the current physical SCS. Virtual Overdose Response is a scalable intervention that can provide evidence-based harm reduction service to Albertans who do not access current SCS. We hope the Virtual Overdose Response Service will improve Albertans' experiences and health outcomes by removing barriers such as stigma, geographic distance and community resistance to SCS. When a client calls the Virtual Overdose Response Service, a peer operator will monitor the client after substance use, dispatch emergency medical services if the client becomes unresponsive, and provide information on resources for safer use or treatment. The feasibility study will be run in Calgary.

How will we do this?

This project is funded through a three-year Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Health System (PRIHS) grant. The project will have two phases, a clinical trial to demonstrate feasibility, and will answer some implementation questions followed by the roll out of an anonymous service in Calgary.

Where are we now?

Phase One, the clinical trial, has received ethics approval. We have hired and trained staff, including Virtual Overdose Response operators and two research assistants. We anticipate recruiting participants for the trial in late April 2020.

Who is involved?

We are collaborating with: clinicians; the City of Calgary; TELUS; Emergency SCN; Population Public Indigenous Health SCN; lawyers; CRISM; Provincial EMS; CAMH; CMHA – Calgary; HIV Community Link; Calgary Police Service; Alberta Community Council on HIV (ACCH); Streetworks; Researchers from the Universities of Alberta and Calgary; the BC Centre for Disease Control; and people with lived experience.

