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WATERLOO REGION

Loss of Kitchener CTS means timely drug alerts will disappear, says drug strategy chair

Waterloo Region faces loss of vital Drug Checking Program in 2025

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The Scatr drug checking device – the black box behind Kitchener CTS drug checking peer Margo McConnell – is a big piece to keep drug users alive during community alerts as it test what is in drug supplies. It will be gone when the Kitchener CTS closes.

By Bill Doucet Reporter

“Information is power,” says Cameron Dearlove, especially when it comes to drug poisonings in Waterloo Region.

Timely community drug alerts to the public when a new illicit drug is causing overdoses and deaths, have mainly been from the Kitchener Consumption and Treatment Services (CTS) Drug Checking Program.

That program, said Dearlove, chair of Waterloo Region Integrated Drug Strategy, won't exist come January 2025.

With 10 CTS sites set to close by March 31, 2025, including the Kitchener location — under the province's new regulation that sites can't be within 200 metres of a school or childcare centre — funding wasn't sought past the December funding end date.

“I had hoped that we could, through some advocacy, continue that program with the closure of the CTS. I think it's unlikely, in that I don't know where we would do it,” Dearlove said.

“Where would be an appropriate location for people to bring in these substances? I'm not sure where that would be. It is a matter of funding the program, but also, that program won't have a home.”

Without the Drug Checking Program, the region wouldn't have been able to quickly release the recent drug alert on Tuesday, that from Sept. 17 to 23, there was an increase in reported overdoses/drug poisonings, with 41 reported overdoses, and three suspected drug-related deaths.

The culprit, detected by the Drug Checking Program, was a high-potency fentanyl circulating with oxazepam. As well, dexmedetomidine, fentanyl, arafurofentanyl, and romazolam were also found in samples over the last week.

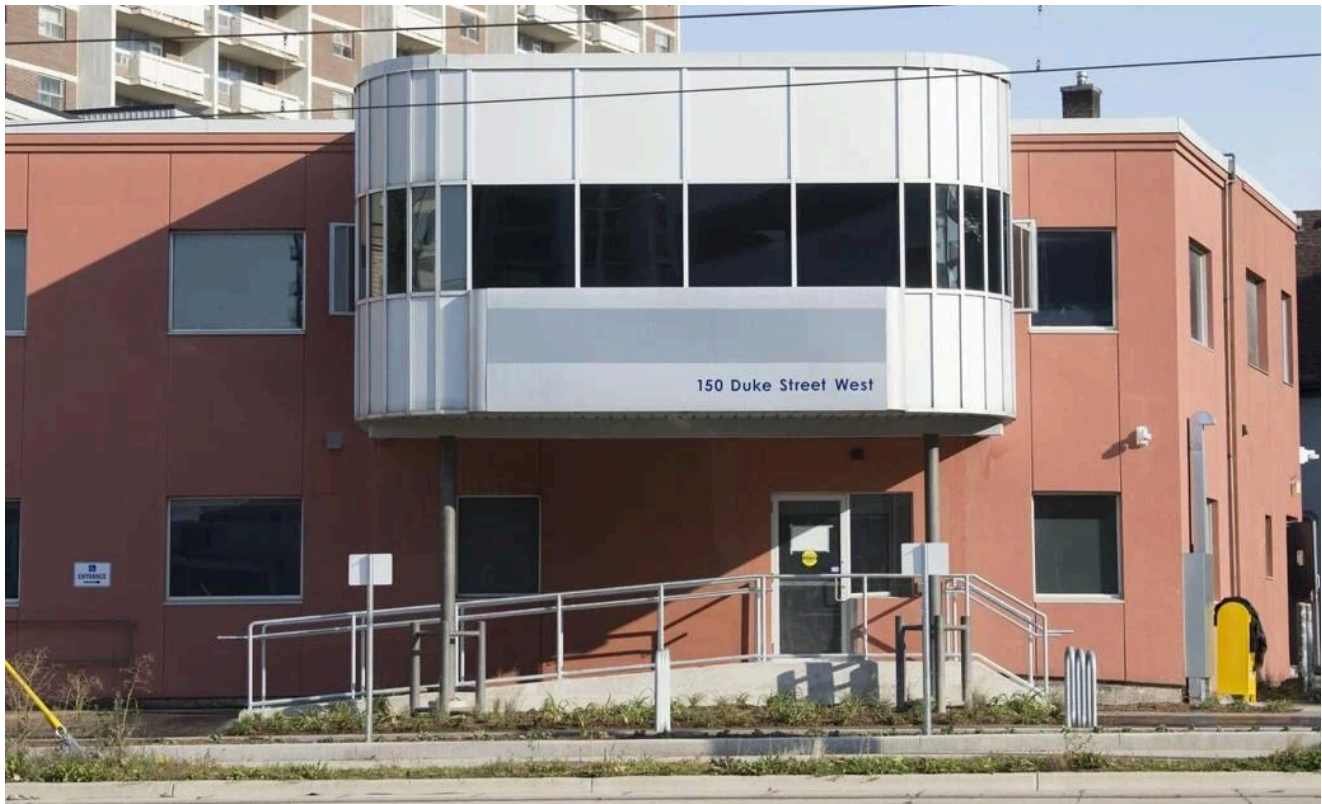
The colours of drugs causing the concern are cream, white/yellow, blue/green, and pink.

Oxazepam is a benzodiazepine-related drug with a slow onset that can slow or stop breathing, especially if an opioid or alcohol was recently used. Oxazepam is known as a slow “creeper” because the risk of overdose may not happen right away but could happen later.

Naloxone does not reverse the effects of non-opioid substance such as oxazepam, dexmedetomidine, and bromazolam, but should still be given in suspected overdoses, the Waterloo Region Integrated Drug Strategy said in a release.

A Drug Checking Program doesn't look to be part of the new Homelessness and Addiction Recovery Treatment (HART) hubs strategy, Dearlove said.

“They won't allow, like, a needle syringe program for example, so the likelihood is that this kind of program would not be a fit,” he said.



The consumption and treatment services site at 150 Duke St. W. in downtown Kitchener.

Mathew McCarthy / Waterloo Region Record

Once funding for the program runs out, the region will have to revert to how they previously tracked drugs for alerts, a much slower process, Dearlove said.

The former process involved a network of partners, including shelter locations, informing the other partners when they see a rise of overdoses. If overdoses are seen in other locations, the conclusion is there is something on the street causing it. Then, a drug alert is issued.

“Without the kind of information that we have now, it would be more so just identifying that multiple people have had experienced overdoses or drug poisonings due to some sort of substance on the street,” he said.

“But we wouldn’t have detailed information, other than really just watching for how many ambulances are being called.”

In contrast, the Drug Checking Program, from Aug. 8, 2023, to Sept. 3, 2024, has served 803 unique clients and conducted 2,070 tests. After learning what was in their substances, 29.7 per cent of clients reported they planned to lower their dose and 29.9 per cent of clients reported they did not consume the substance, said Sanguen Health Centre, which operates the program.

Reported samples tested were expected to be fentanyl (1,694), methamphetamines (358), cocaine (151), crack cocaine (79), MDMA (55), ketamine (16), and other (113).

What is concerning, Dearlove said, is drug users won’t get to know what they are consuming before they use and won’t get that choice.

The fight continues locally to keep the site at 150 Duke St. W. open. The Waterloo Region Drug Action Team is drumming up support for the CTS site and to plead their case at the Sept. 30 Kitchener city council meeting.

Last month, the Kitchener CTS saw 1,478 visits from 330 unique clients, including 67 new clients serviced. A visit is considered when a client uses the CTS for supervised drug consumption and/or to access or receive a referral to wrap-around services.

In 2024, from January to August, there were 68 overdoses at the site, which were reversed with no deaths. Since the CTS opened in October 2019, there has been 1,035 overdoses, which were reversed with no deaths.

While Dearlove said not having the Drug Checking Program will be bleak for users. There’s a chance reported overdoses and overdose deaths will rise.

“Talking to the people who ran the drug program, there absolutely were people that would take substances and test it and then say, nope, I can’t use that. Without that ability to do that everybody’s kind of operating in the dark and we really won’t know,” Dearlove said.



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