



McCauley Community Conversation Drug Poisoning & Overdose Crisis Summary

November 23, 2021



SAFER MCCAULEY:

Safer McCauley is a Neighbourhood Organizing Initiative (NOI) convened and coordinated by REACH Edmonton Council for Safe Communities. Its work takes place in the McCauley neighbourhood, on the lands of Treaty Six territory and home of the Métis, in ᐱᓂᓴᓄᓇᓕᓁᓈᓃᑦᓯᓅᓪᓵᓂᓴᑦ (Amiskwaciwâskahikan), Edmonton.

Safer McCauley is a community-driven safety council that seeks to understand, prioritize, and respond to the safety and well-being concerns of McCauley community members (i.e. all who live, learn, work, play and worship) in McCauley. Council members include REACH Edmonton, McCauley Community League, and City of Edmonton McCauley Revitalization. The council has grown to be an inclusive and welcoming mechanism for connection, sharing, learning, and empowerment. Partners include:

- Residents
- Community Organizations
- Social Agencies & Social Enterprises
- Business Community
- City of Edmonton Community Standards
- City of Edmonton Neighbourhood Resource Coordinator
- City of Edmonton Neighbourhood Empowerment Team
- Edmonton Police Service
- Ward O-day'min Councillor
- Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood MLA



INTRODUCTION:

Alberta Health Services (AHS) has identified McCauley as the neighbourhood in Edmonton, Alberta most affected by the drug poisoning and overdose crisis (followed by Downtown, Central McDougall, Boyle Street, and Alberta Avenue). According to AHS data from 2020 Emergency Medical Services (EMS) responded to 251 calls regarding drug poisonings and overdoses in McCauley; and drug poisonings or overdoses caused the deaths of 36 individuals within the neighbourhood's boundaries.

On November 23, 2021, folks living and/ or working in the McCauley neighbourhood were invited to discuss the issue at a virtual McCauley Community Conversation, co-hosted by Safer McCauley and the McCauley Community League (MCL).

The engagement was the first neighbourhood-based conversation about the crisis to take place in McCauley. It was designed to be an open and supportive neighbourhood-driven conversation, allowing community members to 1) share their lived experiences and observations, 2) discuss what resources the neighbourhood might want to be connected to; and 3) discuss how the neighbourhood might respond to the crisis.

The engagement was promoted via Safer McCauley and MCL social media, and shared via additional McCauley online channels, including Boyle McCauley News, McCauley Connect & Share, and McCauley Neighbours. Email invitations were also sent to approximately 500 Safer McCauley and MCL contacts, including residents, neighbourhood organizations, social agencies, businesses, City of Edmonton staff, EPS, and elected officials. Registration for the event took place at Eventbrite, with attendance capped at 50. All tickets were sold out in advance, with 40 people attending the conversation.



ATTENDANCE:

Those registered for the engagement included McCauley and Alberta Avenue neighbours, and representatives from:

- Bissell Centre
- Boots on Ground Harm Reduction Society
- Boyle Street Community Services (BSCS)
- E4C
- MCL
- Mustard Seed
- #YEGAmbassadors
- REACH Edmonton
- Safer McCauley
- Post-Secondary Learning (e.g. University of Alberta)
- City of Edmonton, Community Standards
- City of Edmonton, Neighbourhood Empowerment Team (NET)
- Alberta Health Services
- Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood MLA Janis Irwin

McCauley and Alberta Avenue residents made up approximately 50% of attendees. Many attending as independent residents also have professional ties to community development and community-supporting organizations.

This engagement summary is being distributed to:

- Everyone who registered for the event
- All Safer McCauley and MCL email contacts
- McCauley community members, via social media and Boyle McCauley News
- Partners in Drug Poisoning Prevention (PDPP)
- Relevant organizations and resources external to the neighbourhood (including those at the City of Edmonton and Province of Alberta)
- Ward O-day'min City Councillor, Ward Metis City Councillor, additional City Councillors, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood MLA, and Edmonton-City Centre MLA



COMMUNITY-LED AND TRAUMA INFORMED:

Safer McCauley sought input from several McCauley residents in designing the engagement. These individuals were strongly opposed to an engagement designed and delivered unilaterally by resources external to the neighbourhood. They felt strongly that it should be designed principally to connect community members to one another, rather than to resources. It is hoped that the conversation can serve as a launching point for ongoing, intentional conversations around neighbourhood-driven outcomes, including resources and actions to address the severe impact of the crisis in McCauley.

After a welcome, land acknowledgement and introduction, attendees joined smaller break-out rooms where they were greeted by a community facilitator (Kathryn Rambow from E4C, Alice Kos from MCL, and Mark Davis, Jaime Calayo, and Brandy Basisty from REACH Edmonton). Four of the five facilitators are residents of either McCauley or Alberta Avenue. Break-out room conversations focussed on 3 questions, with participants being invited to share whatever they felt was relevant to them regarding each question.

1. **“What have your experiences with drug poisonings and overdoses been in McCauley?”**
2. **“What would you like to learn about drug poisonings and overdoses?”**
3. **“What would you like to see happen in McCauley in response to drug poisonings and overdoses?”**

Anyone triggered by the conversation and/ or needing a break, was invited to leave their break-out room and enter a private room where support was available from a trauma-informed mental health professional.



RESULTS:

The following summary represents themes and areas of interest that emerged from discussing the three questions. It's important to note that responses are listed from most to less frequently mentioned—however, these less frequently responses were still mentioned by more than a few participants and worth noting.

Direct quotes from participants provide the bulk of the summary's narrative context. While personal names and/ or organizations are not attached to quotes, an effort was made to honour how participants self-identified (e.g. "Long-term McCauley Resident"; "Alberta Avenue Resident of 16 years"; "Community Health Worker of 40 years" etc.). Safer McCauley and MCL thank all participants for their honest contributions to illustrating the severity of the impact of the drug poisoning and overdose crisis in McCauley.

I. "What have your experiences with drug poisonings and overdoses been in McCauley?"

A large majority of participants reported witnessing an unprecedented and dramatic increase in evidence of drug-poisonings, addictions, and mental health issues, as well as houselessness and encampments in McCauley and neighbouring areas (e.g., Alberta Ave., Central McDougall, Chinatown).

"This has been by far the worst year our community has experienced, well over 150 overdoses in 5 and a half months since we re-opened"
- Community Support Worker, worked 7 years at inner city agency

"I used to hear maybe 2-3 sirens per week. Now I hear them at least 1-2 a day. It's crazy." - Alberta Avenue Resident of 16 years

"Never in my life and career have I seen this" - Community Health Worker of 40 years

"Worst summer ever." - McCauley Resident

A large number of residents and agency partners shared that they witness and/or interact with folks in drug-related distress on a daily basis, and it's taking a toll on many of them as individuals - and the neighbourhood as a system. The words, "trauma", "burnout", and "overwhelming" were repeatedly mentioned in the groups.

"It becomes very hard to do the same thing every day when there seems to be no end in sight. I receive regular notifications that someone else has passed away" - Inner City Agency Staff

"I made a promise decades ago that I'd never turn a blind eye, but this was the first summer that I've felt angry, hopeless." - McCauley Resident

"Over 160 people died in the last 20 months, 2 Edmontonians are dying per day. It's devastating to staff" - Community Agency Partner

"My neighbour had to use naloxone 3 times this summer." - McCauley Resident

"I called the ambulance every day." - McCauley Community Member

"Transit peace officers are administering naloxone 3 times per shift, and having a hard time when they reverse overdoses" - City of Edmonton Staff

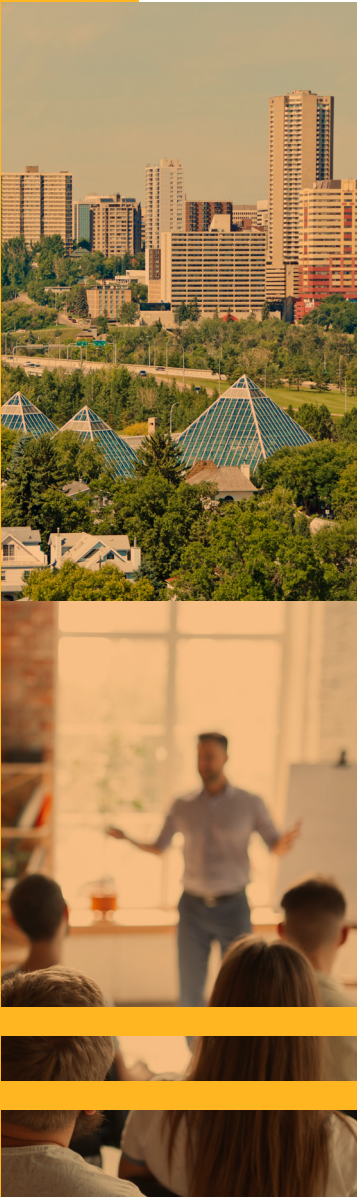
Several residents reported feeling a responsibility to get involved when they see someone in crisis, even at the risk of personal safety and well-being. A few folks shared that they feel guilty if they don't have the capacity to help in the moment. Participants in three break-out groups observed - and expressed concern - that children are also witnesses in such situations.

"The (emergency response) operator asked me to turn this guy over to check his breathing. He was a big guy—his friend didn't want to stick around to help because he was afraid of getting arrested."
- Long-term McCauley Resident

"Sometimes they (intoxicated folks who are incapacitated) can become violent when roused. This happened to my neighbour."
- Alberta Avenue Resident

"I'll be walking my kids to school, and we always see folks unconscious or intoxicated along the way. When they've asked me, 'what's wrong with that person?', it feels disturbing that I have to find a way to explain to them what's happening."
- Long-term McCauley Resident

"I've done outreach in my back alley with my 11 year-old."
- McCauley Resident



Participants reported concerns about service gaps, insufficient funding, and reduced capacity because of COVID-19 (e.g. capacity limits at agency venues). Several folks also communicated a lack of awareness of resources (e.g. being unaware of 211, and calling 911 instead). There is a concern that the role of first responder is being placed increasingly on neighbourhood residents.

"Sometimes I'm on the phone with an operator for an hour—I don't have time to do that every time I see someone who needs help." - McCauley Resident of 20 years

"There's no toilet facilities. You're finding poop, syringes, soiled clothing (in your yard). It's happened a few times where I've seen people dropped off in our neighbourhood, given drugs, and then abandoned here." - Long-term McCauley resident

*"The wait-time for 211 is obscene, and it discourages folks from calling."
- Chinatown Resident*

"We also want to acknowledge that a lot of these challenges have been downloaded to community members. The service gap is bigger than ever before." - Social Agency Staff

In addition to these principal concerns, several residents reported witnessing community resilience, feeling an increased connectivity among neighbours, and care and concern for folks in crisis. And some shared their appreciation for the work that emergency response teams are doing with the resources they have.

"I appreciate having a strong group of neighbours, and there's been resilience." - Chinatown Resident of 3 years

"We have a very close-knit block now. Lots of people came out to the naloxone training I hosted in my yard." - Alberta Avenue Resident

"Just because there are people on the street doesn't mean that I don't deeply care about them. I still consider them community members, and I don't want them to be harmed." - McCauley Resident

"I'm pretty impressed with the emergency response people" - McCauley resident



2. “What would you like to learn about drug poisonings and overdoses?”

Residents in three of the five groups reported that they’d like an increased understanding of what work is being done by community partners to respond to the drug poisoning and overdose crisis. Areas of interest include:

- Safer drug supply
- Drug testing
- EPS’s role in responding to the crisis
- Statistics comparing overdose rates from before and after the closure of supervised consumption at BSCS
- Harm reduction approaches to build relationship/trust (beyond clean needle provision)
- Factors/root causes contributing to the crisis

Residents in three out of five groups said that folks with lived experiences were the experts, and wanted to learn more about the drug poisoning/overdose crisis from them.

Residents in two out of five groups wanted to learn about the signs and symptoms of drug poisoning, how/when to respond safely (e.g., naloxone training), and the best support options if it doesn’t feel safe to intervene (e.g., 211 vs. 911).

Residents in two out of five groups did not respond to this answer—however, several folks from one group expressed that they already knew a lot about the topic and that they needed more support, not more education.



3. “What would you like to see happen in McCauley in response to drug poisonings and overdoses?”

Residents and service partners in all 5 groups communicated that increased collaboration and coordination between agency partners and levels of government was key to improving services and de-escalating the crisis.

“Is there a combination of cops and social workers to respond to issues? The HELP program is getting underway, but is not deployed in response to citizen calls.” - McCauley Resident

“Why won’t all three levels of government commit to partnering on this program?” - Community Outreach Worker

Participants in four out of five groups said there needs to be more outreach services that meet folks where they’re at. Some ideas offered were:

- Police officers that are trained in trauma-informed and harm reduction practices
- Mobile drug testing and mobile safe using sites
- Outreach “pop-ups” that respond to hot spots (service responders on bicycles was mentioned twice)
- More social workers teamed up with police to do the outreach piece (alongside EPS’s enforcement role)
- Increase capacity of 24/7 Crisis Diversion Team (quicker, more effective response) and Bear Clan Patrol

“Is there a combination of cops and social workers to respond to issues? The HELP program is getting underway, but is not deployed in response to citizen calls- it is coordinated within the service.” - McCauley resident

“In speaking with EPS beat teams, they would love to have social workers on their team. They want to be closing down the drug houses, instead of using enforcement time on folks who are being preyed on.” - Alberta Ave. resident

Participants in four out of five groups said that the conversation needs to continue, and include all McCauley community members—in particular, “expert” folks with lived experience of houselessness, mental health, and substance use issues.

“I’d rather know what community members can teach us. Educating people again and again is paternalistic, and it’s time to listen.” - Chinatown resident

“How can drug users join us (in the conversation)? I want to see the inclusion and acceptance of everyone in the neighbourhood.” - McCauley resident

“We need to continue the conversation” - long time McCauley resident



Participants in three out of five groups felt that more education (e.g., goals of harm reduction, destigmatizing substance use issues) and understanding needs to happen in other neighbourhoods that have capacity to help, so that services can be more evenly distributed to support folks in other parts of Edmonton.

"What's happening with harm reduction as a vehicle to actually build relationships—not just about providing a clean needle?" - long time McCauley resident and business owner

"I want to say to these people who are like, 'not in my backyard' - I literally have people using [drugs] in my backyard because there's so many shelters and homeless services in McCauley." - Long-term McCauley Resident

"With regards to chronic calls, about 10% of the folks are well-known, so the emergency responders have relationships with these folks. Why don't other neighbourhoods accept these folks?" - Community Health Worker

Several residents commented that McCauley does not have the capacity to absorb more services for folks considered vulnerable to drug overdose and homelessness - and still be a viable place for everyone to live.

"People with children and those aging in the community are starting to wonder if the neighbourhood is safe enough to remain here." McCauley resident

"We've lived in the neighbourhood for 20 years, and are actually thinking of moving away. But what would that do (if we all left)?" - McCauley Resident

Participants in three of out the five groups would like to see more safe housing alternatives for homeless folks with mental health and substance use issues.

"[There needs to be] transitional housing for people just coming out of the hospital - or lacking a home for various reasons - with support to handle the basics of life (life skills) until they are ready to move into a home." - McCauley Resident

"It's happened a few times where I've seen people dropped off in our neighbourhood in wheelchairs, from the hospital. They're given drugs, and then abandoned here." - McCauley Resident





Participants in two out of five groups said that permanently shutting down drug houses/problem properties would help.

"It would be great to close down these drug houses, they prey on people who are vulnerable. They seem to close down for three months and then if the owners make the changes required, then they open up again." - Alberta Avenue Resident

"The vulnerability of community members took a frog leap, there was an increase in income from CERB, and there was system error (not verifying income). This attracted drug dealers who cherry pick folks at Hope Mission, and offer them drugs and place them in a drug house. Some folks have landlords who take their cheques, and lots of folks get exploited." - Community Health Worker

Participants in two out of five groups said that more washroom facilities were needed for houseless folks.

"There's no toilet facilities. You're finding poop, syringes, soiled clothing (in your yard)." - Long-term McCauley Resident

"There are people there (park near Sacred Heart Church) every day - noticeably more than previous years, in my mind. People also break into the building to use and sleep and even go to the bathroom." - Community Service Partner

Other suggestions offered by residents:

- Community social workers should be permanently (not temporarily) placed in high-incident neighbourhoods
- More detox/rehabilitation placements available
- Safe consumption sites that are distributed throughout the city (de-centralized)



CONCLUSION:

- Conversation was a launching point that allowed folks to express themselves re. lived experiences. Everyone presented as honest and respectful
- Attendance was indicative of the interest and need; great to see so many residents engaged, as well as service partners
- Core neighbourhoods (residents and service partners) are being identified as having collective trauma because of ongoing drug overdose crisis/having been witness to traumatic things repeatedly.
- Long-time residents and service partners reported that the number of folks experiencing drug poisoning (and drug-related crimes) has reached unprecedented levels, and some residents are considering moving out of the area.
- Engagement around the issue needs to target all community members, not just vulnerable folks.
- Multiple points of view were represented. Given the diversity of perspectives and interests, the empathy and consideration demonstrated by all participants was impressive
- **Despite the differing points of view, everyone shares a common interest in reducing the impacts of addictions in our neighbourhood**
- Valuable for residents and social agencies to hear about each other's challenges.
- Some folks have already expressed interest in keeping the conversation going.
- It's important to ensure that any follow up is intentional around some actions/ responses to what has been shared.