



**National Safer Supply Community of Practice**  
La communauté de pratique nationale sur  
l'approvisionnement plus sécuritaire

# Thunder Bay Safer Supply Program (TBSSP): Evaluation Results

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Health  
Canada

Santé  
Canada



NorWest Community  
Health Centres  
Centres de santé  
communautaire NorWest



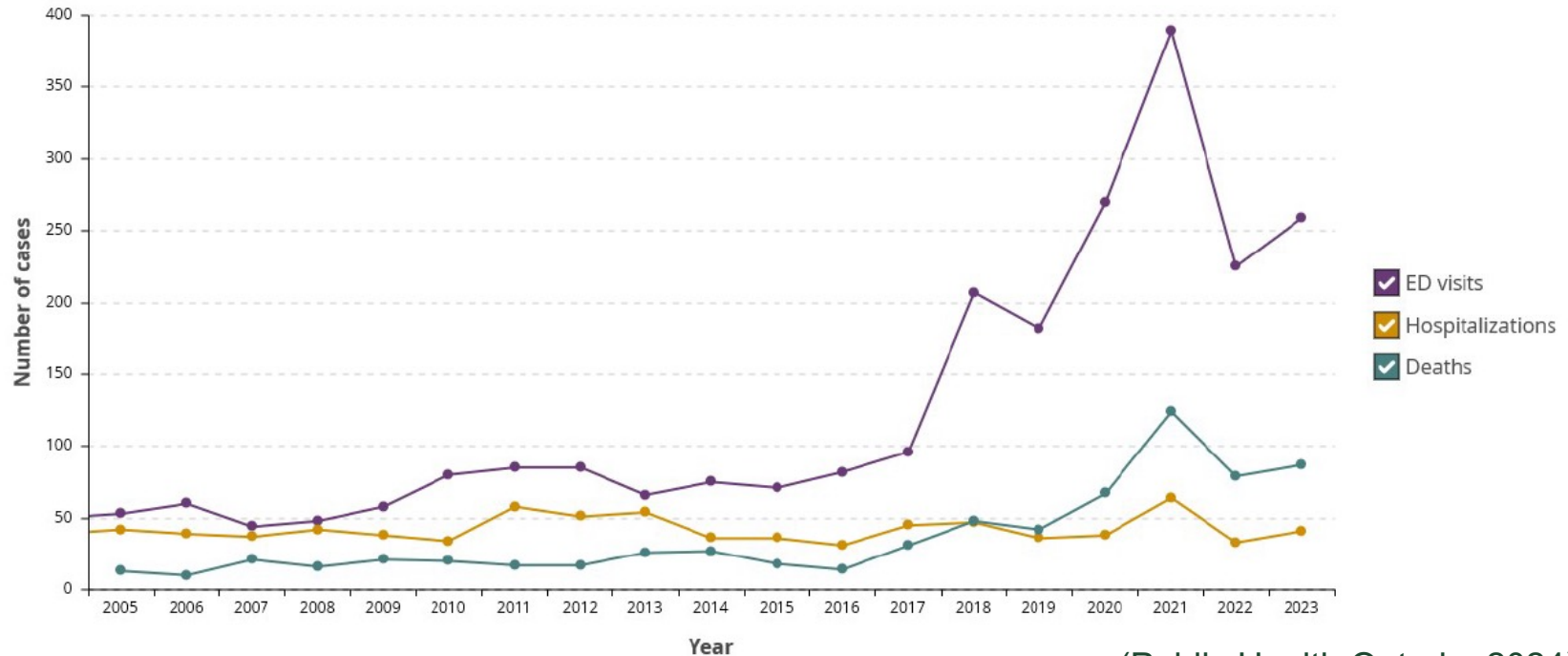
Lakehead  
UNIVERSITY

# Land Acknowledgement



# Why Thunder Bay?

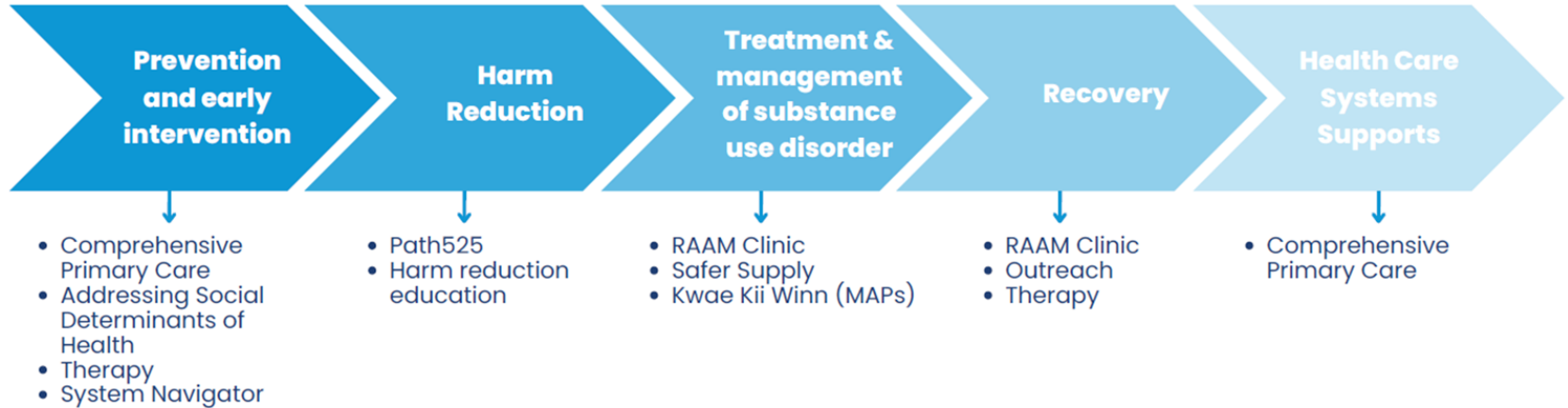
Cases of opioid-related morbidity and mortality, Thunder Bay District Health Unit, 2003 – 2023



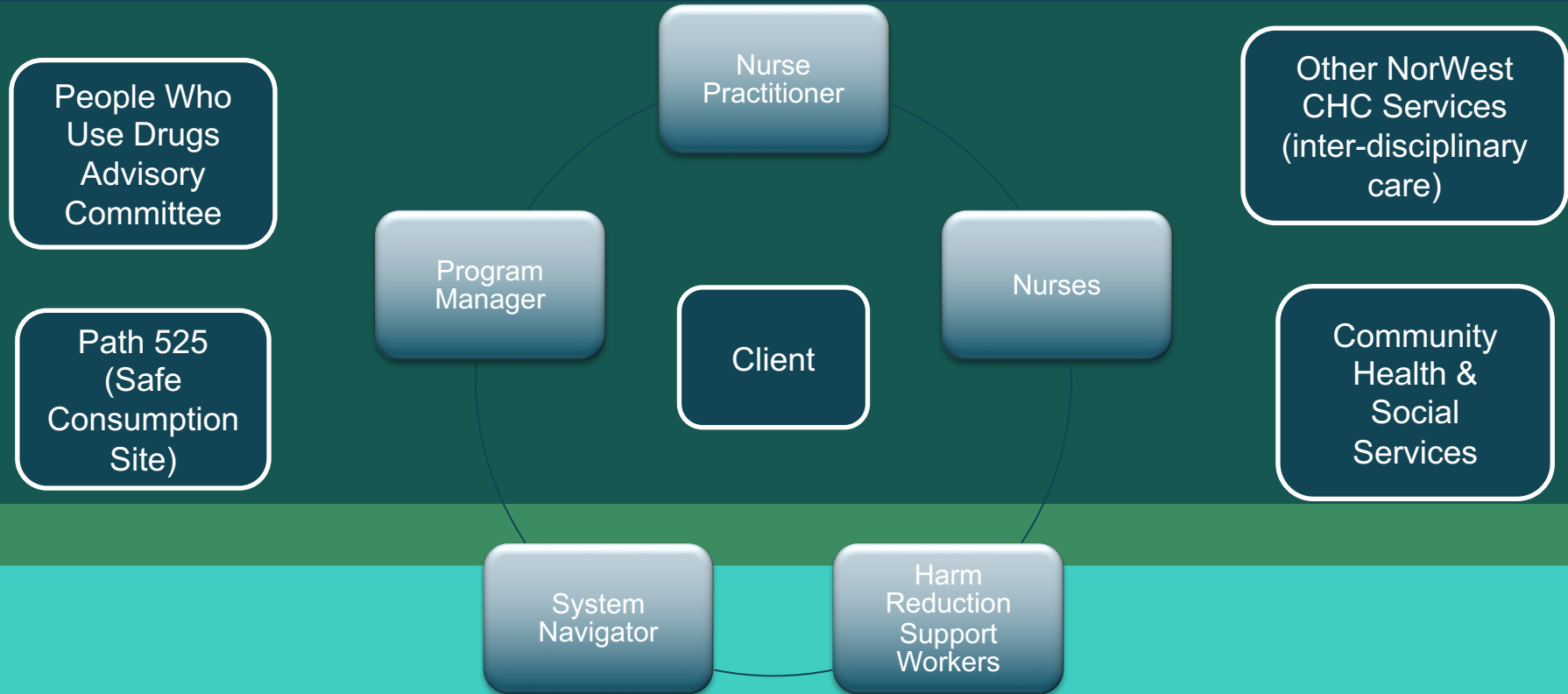
(Public Health Ontario, 2024)

# NorWest Community Health Centres

## NorWest CHC



# Program Model





# TBSSP Steering Committee

## *Steering Committee Membership*

Juanita Lawson, Committee Chair, NorWest Community Health Centres

Brittany D'Angelo, Co-chair, NorWest Community Health Centres

Meagan Drebit, Dilico Anishinabek Family Care

Holly Gauvin, Elevate NWO

Meghan Young, Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy

Bonaventure Egbujie, Ontario HIV Treatment Network

Kandace Belanger, Thunder Bay District Health Unit

Rilee Willianen, Thunder Bay Drug Strategy



## Research & Evaluation Team

Dr. Abigale Sprakes

Mike Baker

Ashley Rodericks-Schulwach

Maris Murray

Sophie Kuhn

Sydney Ambury



## Knowledge Sharers

TBSSP Clients

TBSSP Staff

PWUD Advisory Committee

TBSSP Steering Committee

# Safer Supply Program Evaluation

A response to drug poisonings in Thunder Bay, Ontario



## ‘ Turtle ’

The turtle represents a safe place where you are treated with dignity and respect.

*“the program saved my life, and it stopped me from reverting back to my older ways. Safer Supply makes my daily life easier to deal with”*

~ Artist, William Perrault ~

# The Context\* of Northern Ontario

**Population:** 855, 138 (5.4% of Ontario's population)

- Northwestern Ontario: 232, 299
- Thunder Bay & District: 146,862

**Land Mass:** 806,000 km<sup>2</sup> (88% of Ontario's land mass)

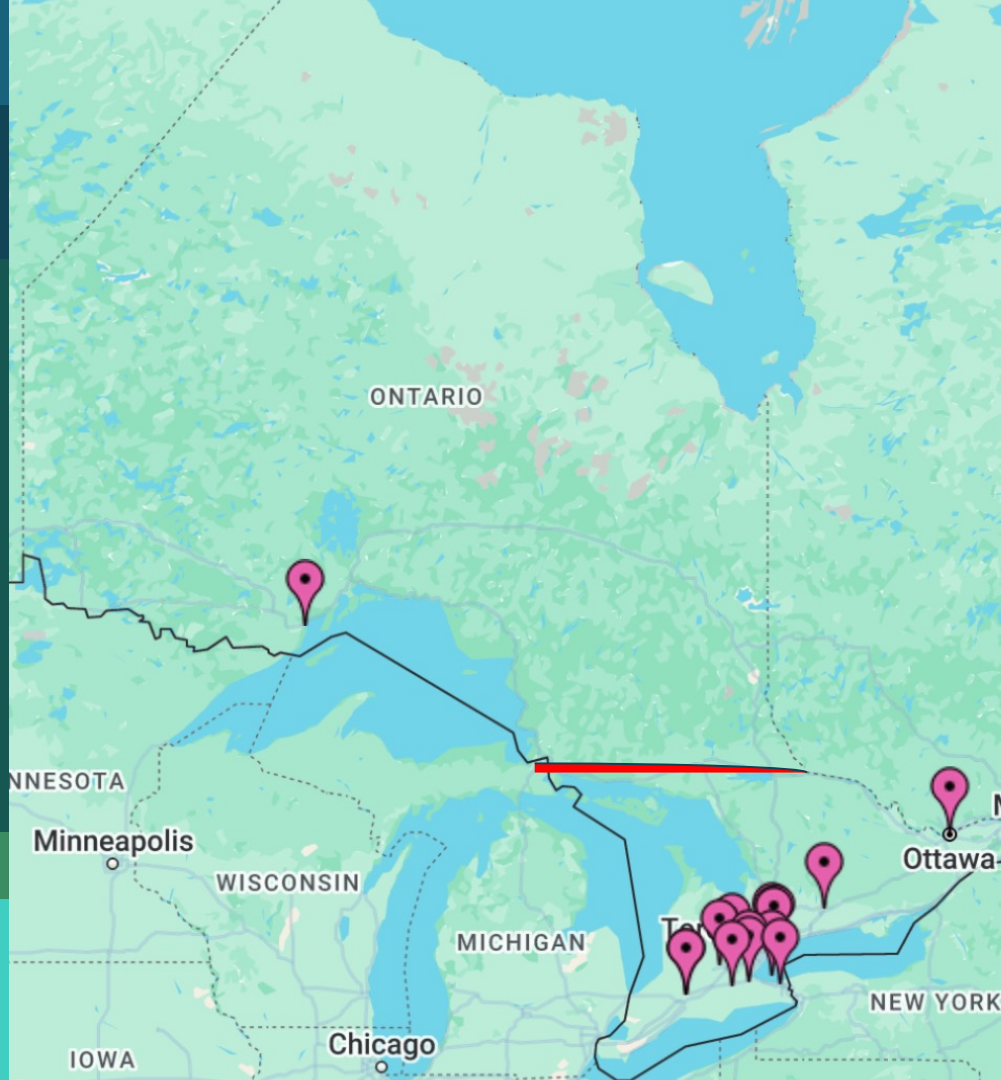
## Opioid-related Death Rate:

- Thunder Bay, Timmins, Sudbury, North Bay & Sault Ste. Marie have the five highest death rates in Ontario (Public Health Ontario, 2024)

## Disproportionate Impact:

- 13% of Ontario deaths occurred in Northern Ontario; however, the North is only 5.4% of the population (Public Health Ontario, 2024)

\*2023



120

69.5

35



## Goal & Vision

To reduce the deaths and harms related to the toxic drug supply by providing individuals with opioid use disorder (OUD) prescribed opioids in a supportive care environment, leading to greater stability and wellness by addressing the social determinants of health to enhance overall quality of life.



# Evaluation Framework

## Framework

- Research Team Design\*
- October 1, 2022 – March 31, 2024 (18 months)
- Logic Model Creation with Steering Committee and Evaluation Team
- Mixed Methods Design
- REB approval

## Data Collection & Analysis

- Chart Review: De-identified Data (n=35)
- Evaluation Survey\* (n = 40)
  - SSP Clients (n=23)
  - Wraparound Clients (n=17)
- Evaluation Semi-structured Interviews\* (SSI's) (n = 30)
  - SSP Clients (n = 20)
  - SSP Staff (n = 10)



## De-identified Client Data (n=35)

### Client Demographics

**35**

Safer Supply  
Clients

**66%**

Self-Identify as  
Indigenous



Substance  
Use: Average  
Age of Onset

**13.8**

Opioid Use:  
Average Age  
of Onset

**17.5**

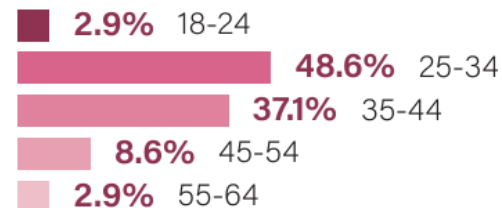
Men's  
Average Age

**39**

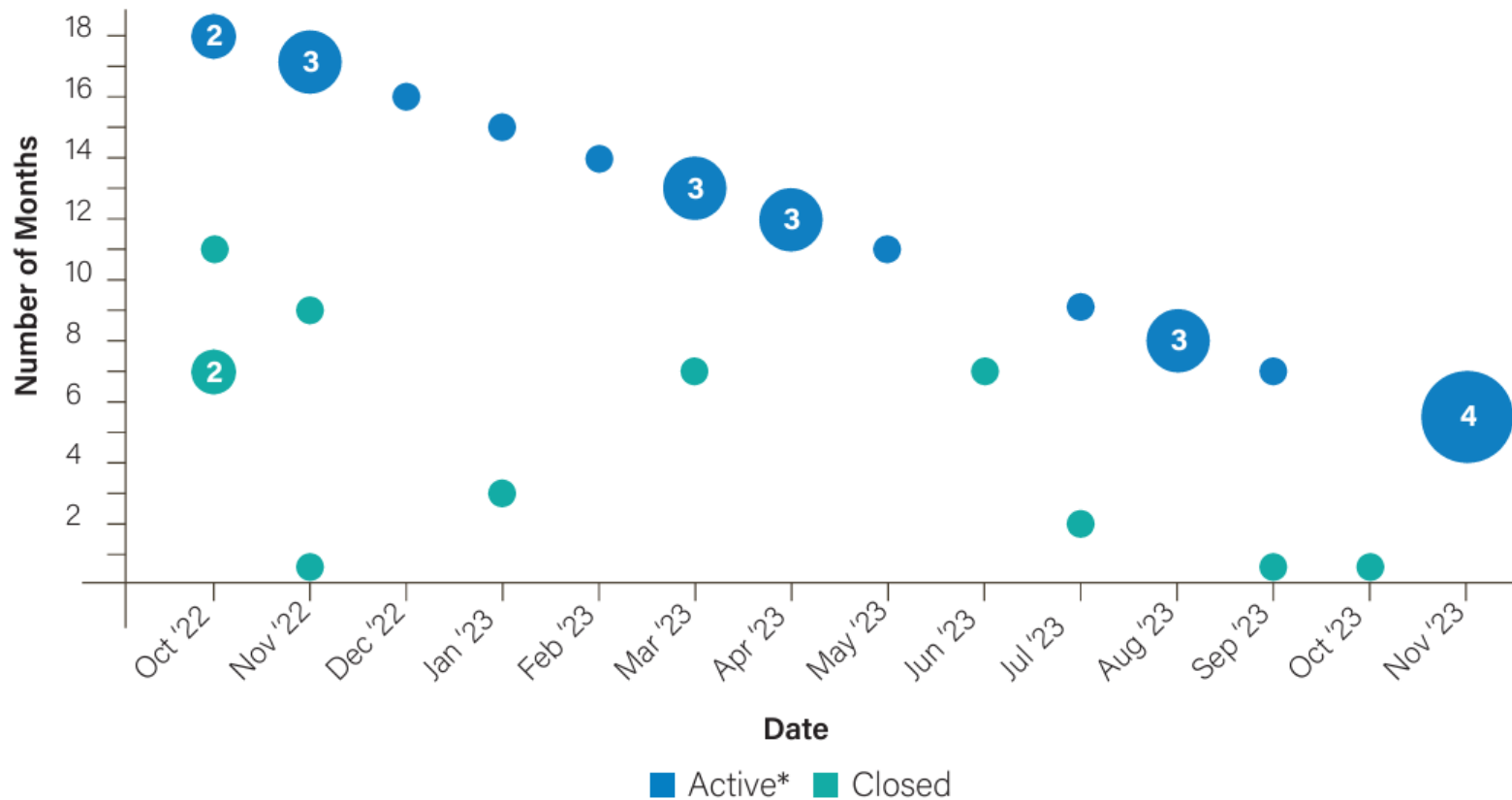
Women's  
Average Age

**32**

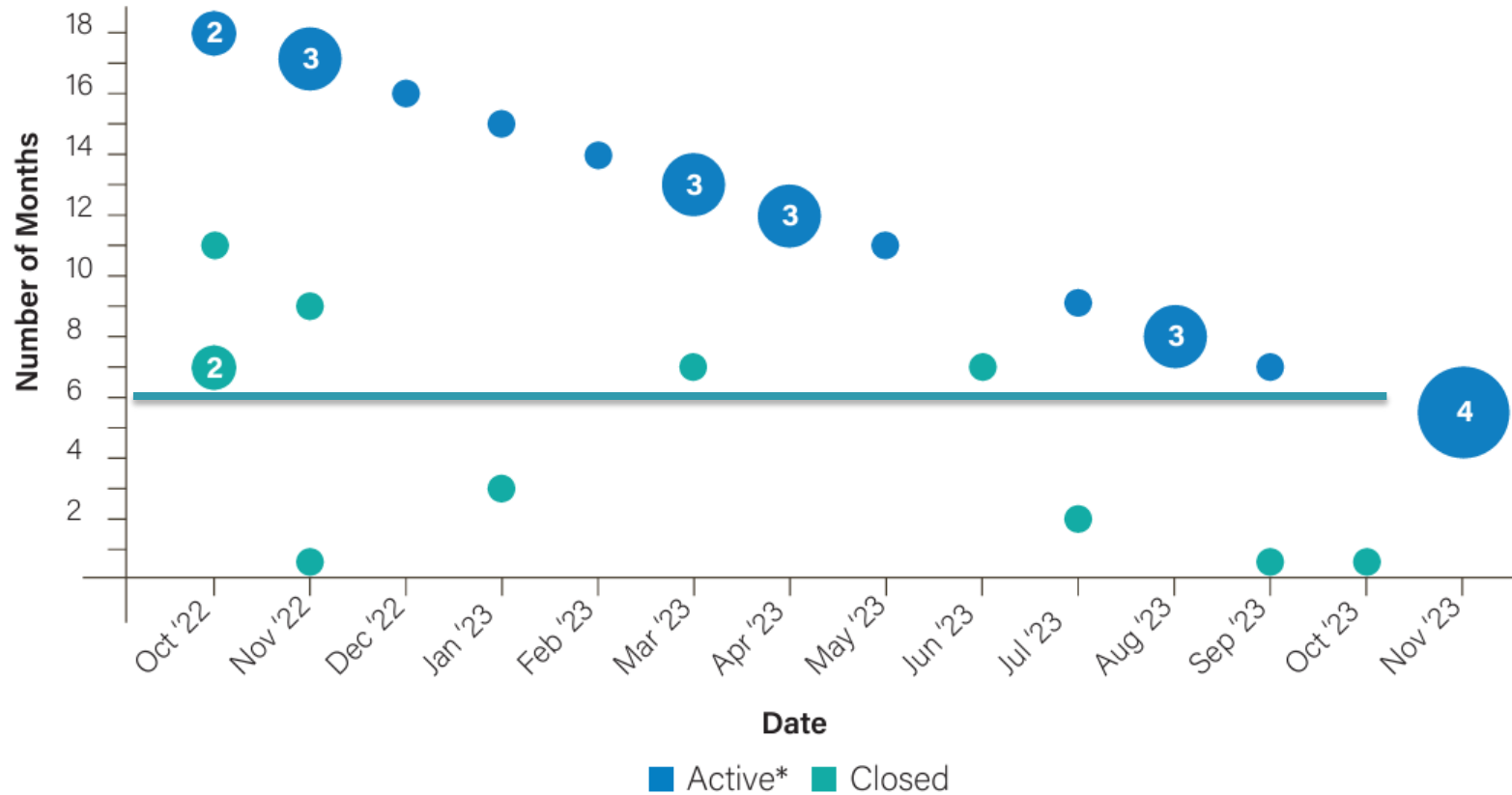
#### Age



## Length of Service

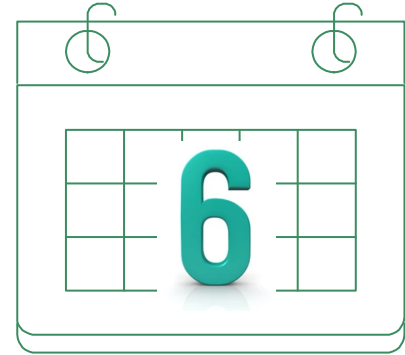


## Length of Service



# Change over time

Clients who remained in  
the program for 6 months  
experienced the following  
4 key findings



# 4

## Key Findings

1. Decreased Risk
2. Increased Basic Needs
3. Increased Health
4. Increased Connection

This program is the best thing that's happened  
in my life ... it saved my life ... I would probably be  
dead already if it wasn't for this.

~ CRN ~

1

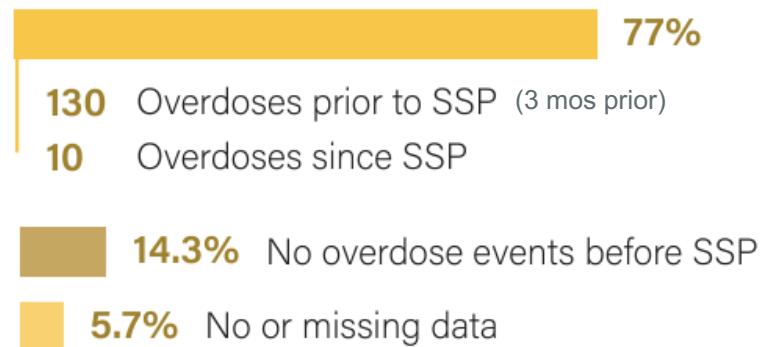
**Decreased  
Risk**

# Decreased Overdose Events



## Drug Poisoning/Overdose Events

Reduction in drug poisoning/overdoses since SSP:

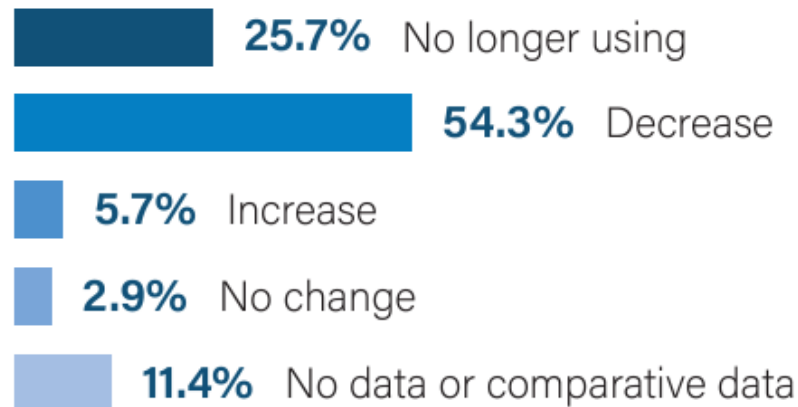


**92% reduction in drug poisoning events**

# Decreased Fentanyl Use



## Decreased Fentanyl Use



80% positive change in Fentanyl Use

# Decreased Risk

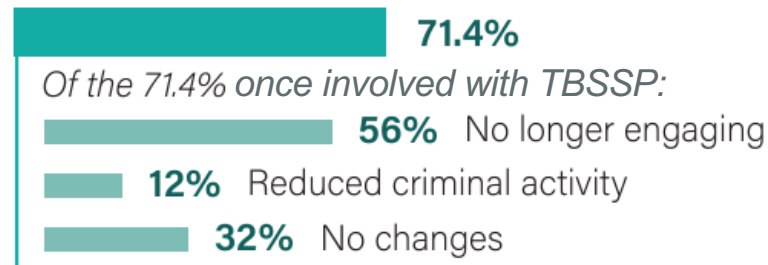


- 100% Reduction in Withdrawal Symptoms
- 100% Cessation in Methamphetamine Use
- 51.4% Reduction in Crack Cocaine Use
- 8.6% Cessation in Crack Cocaine Use

# Decreased Criminal Activity



Engaged in criminal activity to support their substance use:



No criminal activity to support their substance use:



After engaging with SSP an additional 40% reported no longer engaging in CA, 8% reduced CA, with 23% still engaged in crime

And the amount of money that I was having to come up with every day was unrealistic, even probably was a job kind of thing. So I was out daily boosting, stealing, not just once, but two, three times a day ... to get freaking fentanyl or crack ... to be able to be normal functioning towards the end of the day. And the next morning the whole thing would start over again, where I'd wake up sick.

~ Jason ~

2

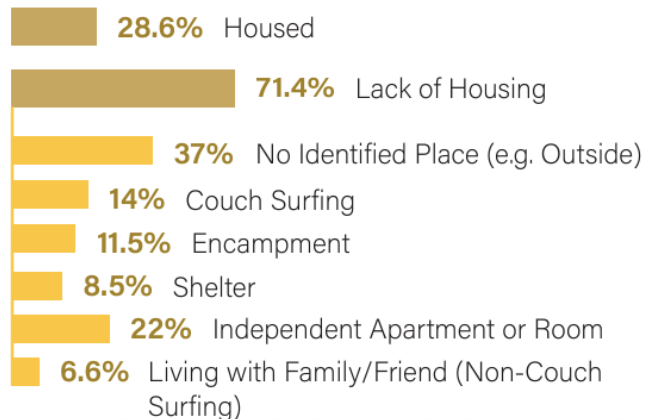
## **Increased Basic Needs**

# Increased Housing

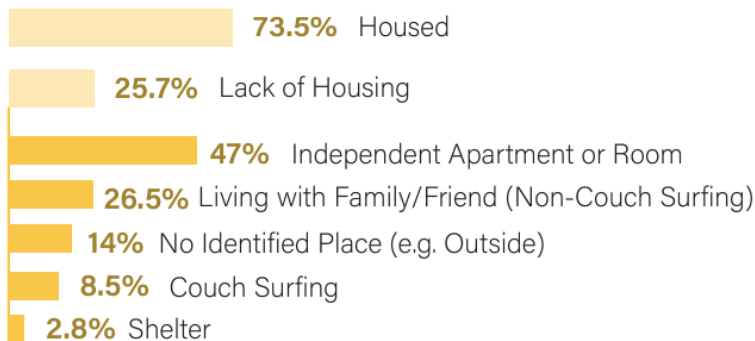


## Housing

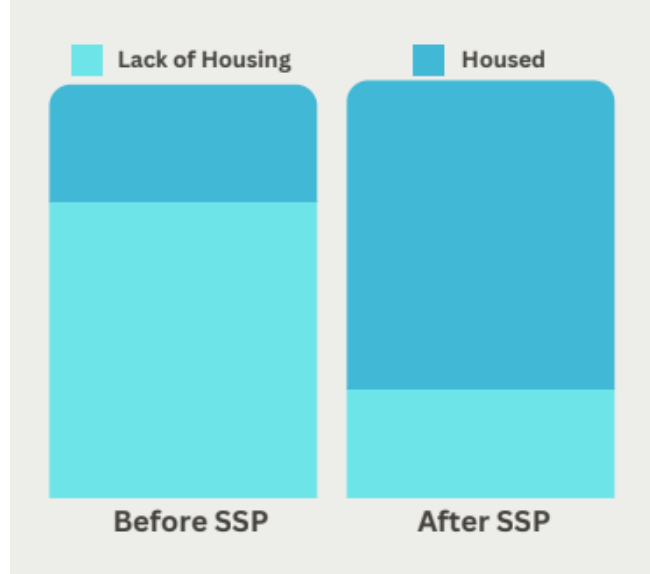
*Before SSP*



*After SSP*



**This is an 86% increase in housing for SSP clients**



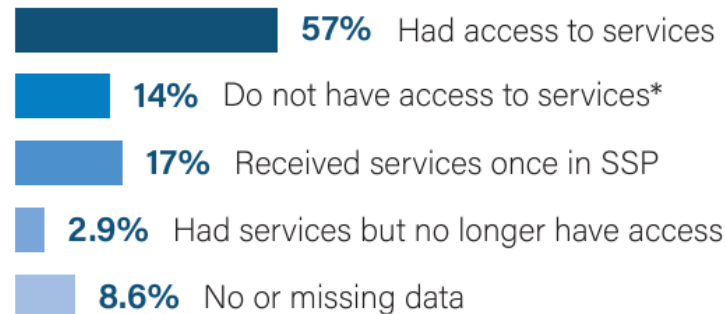
# Increased Access to Food and Services



## Access to Food



## Access to Services



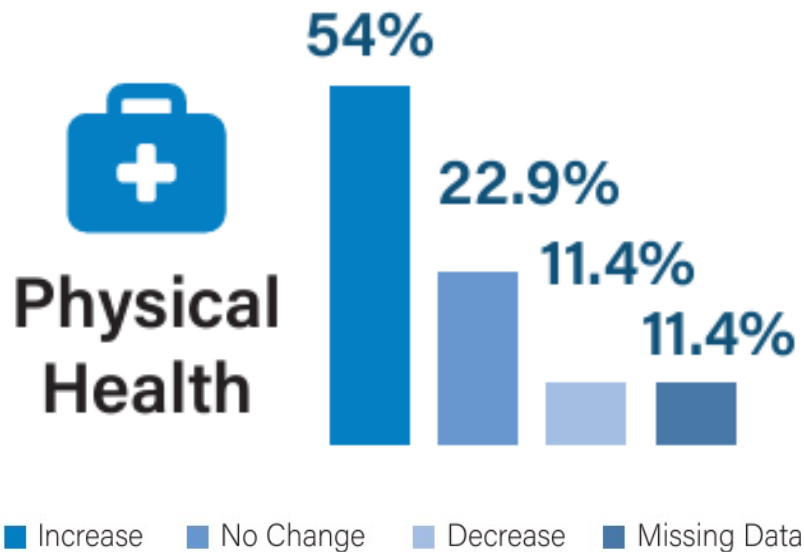
I was homeless up till about a month ago... we had a tent and even though it wasn't heated, we had a propane heater, but it was one that converts into a home. So I wasn't worried about poison, but yeah it was hard getting here. You know what I mean? Yeah, because we have to be there twice a day for the first bit. But now I have an apartment and a job lined up.

~ GD ~

3

## **Increased Health**

# Increased Physical Health



# Increased Physical Health

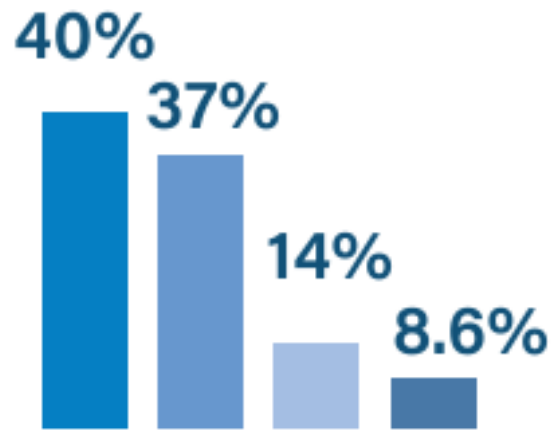


- 62.8% of clients received immunizations at TBSSP
- Of those with a chronic condition:
  - 68.5% engaged in disease management
  - 100% engaged in HIV/HCV care
- 50% decrease in ER attendance (of those who utilized pre-SSP)

Just recently one type of down [fentanyl] started to cause my feet to swell out, like how they were before with my legs having a really bad abscess on my leg ... Like I probably even almost lost one leg so probably within the next couple of months ... if I wasn't on this program, I would have health problems like that again.

~ Jason ~

# Increased Mental Health



■ Increase ■ No Change ■ Decrease ■ Missing Data

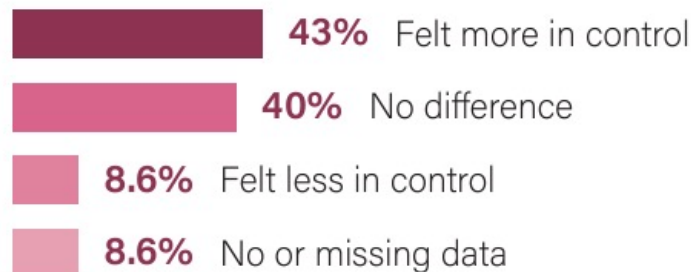
# Increased Mental Health



## Change in Daily Stress



## Change in Feeling in Control of Life



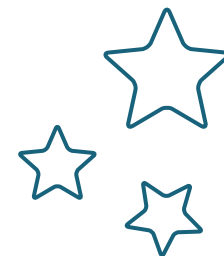
I would say that I'm more energetic, and more happy. Sometimes everybody has their days, but I feel like I'm just more happy ... I wouldn't be able to do this without the program, like getting off of everything, I wouldn't have been able to do it. Or even in treatment, or detox, you know. 'Cuz I do not feel safe in any of those places.

~ Viola ~

Chart 1.0

# Increased Health

Physical Health* (n=33)	Mental Health* (n=21)	Vaccinations (n=22) (78 provided)	Sexual Health (n=12)
Hepatitis C (HCV)	Depression	Hepatitis A (HAV) & Hepatitis B (HVB)	Reproductive Health (e.g., birth control)
Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)	Anxiety	Influenza/Flu	Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) Testing
Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)	Tetanus & Diphtheria	STI Treatment
Asthma, Flu, Colds, Pneumonia	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	Pneumococcal Disease	Supplements*:
Group A Streptococcal Infections	Psychosis	Meningococcal	Vitamins (e.g., D, Calcium)
Chronic Pain	Personality Disorders	Measles, Mumps, Chickenpox	Ensure Shakes
Foot care	FASD	HIV Prevention & Treatment*:	Other*:
Other medical conditions**	Stress	(PrEP) and (PeP)	Drug side effects (e.g., constipation)



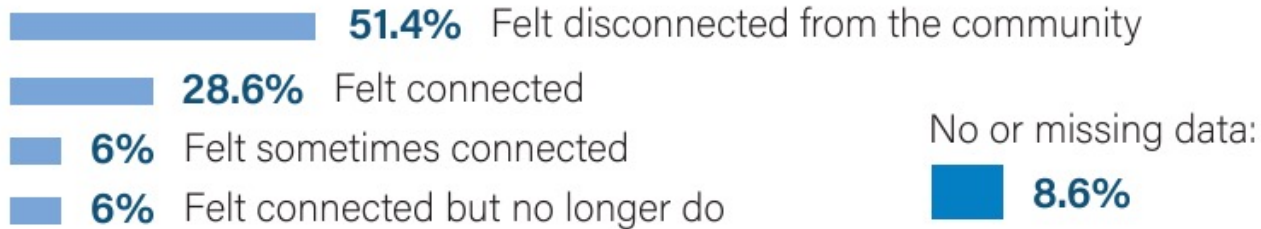
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## **Increased Connection**

# Increased Connection



## Feel Part of the Community (before TBSSP)



Once involved in SSP, 71.4% reported feeling connected to the larger community.

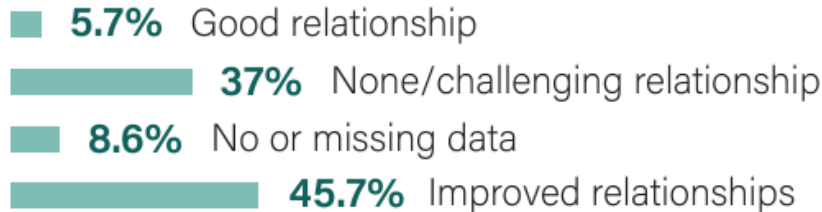
# Increased Connection



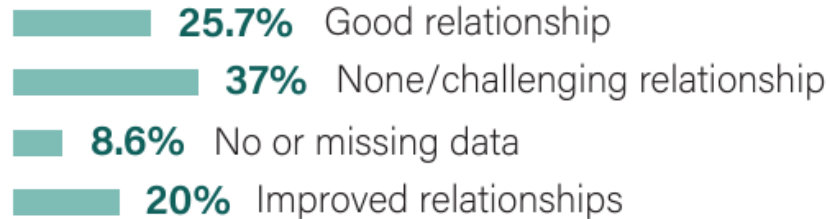
Once involved with TBSSP:



## Family:



## Friends:



It's saved my life. Got me back in touch with my family and friends and in good graces and I'm helping doing good things for my family and not doing any crime... things are going smoother.

~ Pete ~



# Goals

# Change over time

Goals/hopes/dreams  
shifted for individuals  
who remained in the  
program for more than 6  
months



# Goals



1. To stay alive
2. To prevent or reduce overdose/drug poisoning events
3. To reduce risky situations (e.g., engaging in crime, sex survival work)
4. To reduce withdrawals/dope sickness
5. To get their life back/move forward
6. To gain structure/stability in their life
7. To gain access to support and resources (e.g., healthcare)

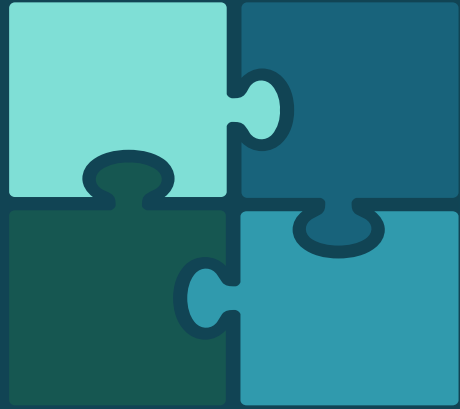
16

- 
8. To reunite with family/have access to children
  9. To be employable/secure employment and save money
  10. To attend school, upgrade or post-secondary
  11. Seek volunteering opportunities or find work
  12. To engage in substance use treatment programs (community based, live-in treatment)
  13. To have access to take-home doses
  14. To secure/have stable housing
  15. To reconnect with their culture
  16. To stop substance use, with an emphasis on fentanyl



# **Strengths & Challenges**

Program Strengths		Program Challenges	
1	<b>No fatal opioid poisoning events:</b> TBSP clients - "I'm alive." <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduction in overdose frequency</li> </ul>	<b>Care Pathways:</b> Limited or no access to various healthcare and correctional facilities re SS prescription. Leading to no continuity of care and places clients at risk of significant withdrawals and reduce tolerance level once discharged from the facility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Treatment Centres</li> <li>Hospitals</li> <li>Jail/Correctional Facilities</li> </ul>	5 <b>Increased Access to Services:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to Primary Care</li> <li>Access to Mental Health Care</li> </ul>
2	<b>Staff:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supportive/Caring</li> <li>Feel cared for, feel like a person, "you are seen", no judgement               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create safety</li> <li>Role Models - Staff with lived experience</li> </ol> </li> </ul>	<b>Restricted Movement:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Travel Restrictions, unable to travel with family or to see family</li> </ul>	6 <b>Wraparound Service:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to basic needs (food, clothing, bus tickets, housing support)</li> <li>System navigation (external)</li> </ul>
3	<b>Welcoming Environment</b> (Program Atmosphere) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Safe</li> <li>"Feels like home"</li> <li>Supportive, positive space</li> </ul>	<b>Location:</b> attending twice a day challenging for those who do not live close to the SSP site (transportation, time)	7 <b>Accessibility/Removing Barriers:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intake to program start date; average 7 days.</li> <li>Couples accepted together, to allow stabilization to occur</li> </ul>
4	<b>Sense of Community:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Don't feel alone/support available</li> <li>See others with same struggles</li> </ul>	<b>Pharmacy Model:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For individuals working on stabilization the pharmacy impacts their routine and increases risk when not in the safety of the SSP site to receive doses.</li> <li>Pharmacy hours – limited availability on weekend (if client unable to attend during these hours they will not have their required doses for the weekend)</li> </ul>	8 <b>Routine/Structure:</b> Attending program daily provides and requires routine and structure - allows for stability and positive changes in life
			9 <b>Harm Reduction Approach:</b> client autonomy supported, nonjudgemental, reduces stigma
			10 <b>Reduction in injection drug use:</b> there is a reduction in injection drug use and lowering of risk, however, there is an increase in inhalation, which has resulted in the lack of access to a safe consumption site, thereby increasing risk
			<b>Hours of Operation:</b> Impacts ability to work due to program hours or to work outside of Thunder Bay
			<b>Lack of fentanyl-based products:</b> Current medication not potent enough to address level of use or potential withdrawals
			<b>Lack of Non-Opioid Safer Supply:</b> No access to regulated stimulants. The majority of clients use both fentanyl and crack cocaine. So while they may be experiencing stabilization in some areas there is still fundraising and seeking the crack cocaine that is reducing some clients' quality of life
			<b>Not all benefits cover needed prescriptions:</b> This creates barriers to care, including if a coverage ends and the client no longer has access. Universal coverage is not present
			<b>Prescriber recruitment:</b> Primary care recruitment can be challenging in the North, there is an added challenge of recruiting for Safer Supply as there is a lack of prescriber education on this topic
			<b>Pilot Status and Inability to Scale-Up:</b> Uncertainty of program continuity and a staffing model that cannot meet the demand in Northern Ontario



# Overall Themes



# Themes

## Connection

Staff Approach

Staff with Lived Experience

Seen as human, worthy

## Addiction as Trauma

Not only what leads to substance use

Experiences due to addiction – overdose, death of friends/family, interaction with systems

## Housing

Wraparound service

Lack of safe affordable housing

Housing with Staff

## Diversion

Self-administration

Withdrawal Management

Compassionate Sharing

Survival – basic needs

## Integration with Primary Care

Substance use part of health care

Chronic health condition

Reduce Stigma

## Future

Pre-SSP, present-SPP and *future* of the program and the status of clients' lives



# Future

Chart 2.0

<i>Themes</i>	<b>Pre-SSP (past)</b>	<b>SSP (present)</b>	<b>SSP Sustainability (future)</b>
<b>Emotional State</b>	Hopeless	Hope	Fear
<b>Connection with Others</b>	Alone	Supported	Uncertain
<b>Overdose Frequency</b>	High	Low	Uncertain
<b>Probability of Life or Death</b>	Death	Life	Uncertain



# Future

Chart 2.0

<i>Themes</i>	Pre-SSP (past)	SSP (present)	SSP Sustainability (future)
<b>Emotional State</b>	Hopeless	Hope	Fear
<b>Connection with Others</b>	Alone	Supported	Uncertain
<b>Overdose Frequency</b>	High	Low	Uncertain
<b>Probability of Life or Death</b>	Death	Life	Uncertain

It honestly makes me want to cry thinking  
about them [politicians] taking it away,  
I just, honestly, that just looks like  
my whole world collapsing.

~ Shiz ~



# Advocacy & Amplification of Voices

I say it's a safer alternative ... like less likely to overdose ... some people want to get off the down [fentanyl]... like the pills are helping to stop using down. They are helping.

~ James ~

Um, I feel like I matter now, yeah, I feel like I  
matter [getting emotional] I'm not just  
another statistic.

~ Nathan ~

We're people too, and we need this program;  
it's saving our lives. It saved my life, I'm still  
here, because of this program.

~ WP ~

It does more good than harm... taking it away, it's gonna cause a lot more fallout ... if you think there's a problem with it [opiates], now, take it away. ... Do you see what that does? Like it's gonna cause like a big domino effect ... all those people that got better, they're gonna be back on the street, and just, you know, what I mean? ... it's helped me and just changed my life. So, just that would be devastating.

~ Shiz ~

My city [Thunder Bay] is struggling, and we need the support ... I would like everyone to know that they're [TBSSP] not only helping us clients, they're also helping the city as one. Like my family, like I would say my family because they're getting me back. Yeah, they're getting back the person I was before. So they're [family] definitely grateful too. I hope that this program just doesn't stop because I think that will just cause more problems, and for me ... I won't have my support system. Yeah, it would be tough, it would be tough. And I really hope that it doesn't happen because I need them.

~ Viola ~

## What TBSSP has Brought to my Life

Trying my best    More human  
Growing    Hope    Happier  
Productive    I Matter  
Increased self-esteem    Alive  
No longer want to give up  
Transformation  
Positive  
Resilience    Future    Healthier    Life changing



## Next Steps...

### Knowledge Mobilization

Webinars  
Conferences  
Report Release

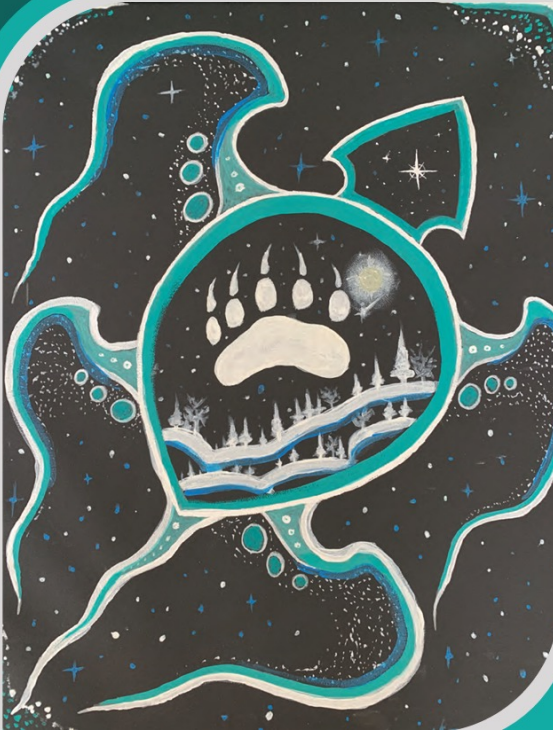
The Lived  
Experience of  
SSP Participants  
~CRISM~

Digital Story  
Telling (DST)  
~CERG~

Advocacy Efforts

# Safer Supply Program Evaluation

A response to drug poisonings in Thunder Bay, Ontario



Any questions not answered today?

Program Questions:

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Research & Evaluation Questions:

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