



2024 WECOSS Annual Report

Message from the WECOSS Leadership Committee Co-Chairs

In it's seventh year of implementation this partnership has continued to enhance the scope and reach of services for those using drugs in our community and those at risk for uptake. In 2024, we saw direct outreach to those most at risk including youth, and justice-involved individuals, and refinements to existing tools and projects which make it easier for those looking for help to find it in a seamless way. The collaboration needed to bring these projects from ideation to implementation is immense, and I sincerely thank the partners involved in the WECOSS strategy for their continued commitment to this work.

Eric Nadalin
*Director of Public Health Programs,
Windsor-Essex County Health Unit*

I want to acknowledge the consistent and persistent WECHU leadership and support with the WECOSS, and more broadly the collective effort and energy that individuals and agencies contribute yearly to support a coordinated community approach to address substance use within our community. Without your investment and good will, we could not articulate, document and celebrate our collective success. Thank you for your continued investment in a healthier community and serving those who experience vulnerability, disenfranchisement and inequality.

Patrick Kolowicz
*Director of Bed-Based Mental Health
and Addictions,
Hôtel-Dieu Grace Healthcare*

Introduction

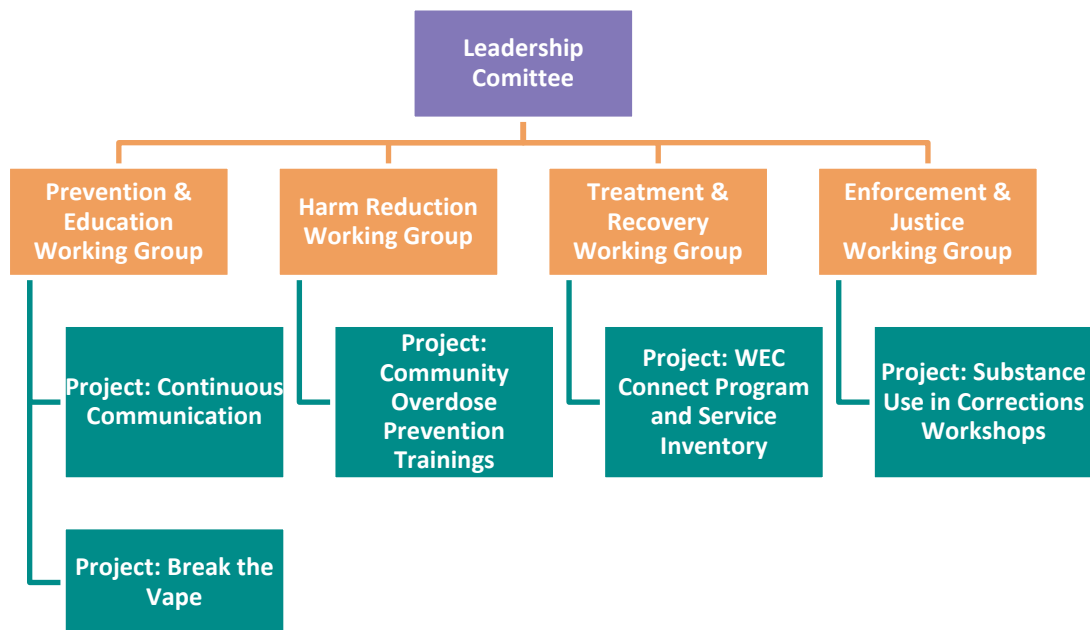
The Windsor-Essex Community Opioid and Substance Strategy (WECOSS) is a community-based opioid and polysubstance strategy that was formed in 2018 to address the local substance use crisis. The WECOSS is led by a diverse network of over 40+ community agencies who are committed to driving coordinated responses to substance use through a four pillar-based approach: Prevention and Education, Harm Reduction, Treatment and Recovery, and Enforcement Justice. Together, WECOSS partners work towards the vision of a healthier community by building effective partnerships, sustaining community-level interventions, and enhancing the quality and range of supports available to reduce substance use issues locally.

Since the establishment of the Strategy in 2018, an Annual Report has been released each year as part of the WECOSS' commitment to ongoing community engagement. Each report highlights the work completed annually to address substance use in the community through the collaborative efforts of WECOSS partners. The 2024 Annual Report provides an overview of the activities undertaken throughout the Strategy in its seventh year of implementation.

Strategy Implementation

In 2024, the WECOSS continued to operate through a Leadership Committee and four individual working groups representing each pillar of the strategy. With strategic direction and oversight from the Leadership Committee, each pillar working group implemented a community-based project(s) in 2024 that addressed its respective goals and objectives and supported the advancement of recommendations outlined in the [WECOSS Action Plan \(2018\)](#) and [WECOSS Modernization \(2021\)](#). Figure 1 depicts the strategy's implementation model and the unique projects undertaken by each working group in 2024.

Figure 1. WECOSS Strategy Implementation 2024



Foundational Activities

Opioid and Substance Use Notification System Operations

The Opioid and Substance Use Notification System (OSUNS) is an opioid and substance use surveillance system that monitors real-time data and local trends in substance use-related events across Windsor-Essex County. The Windsor-Essex County Health Unit (WECHU) maintains the OSUNS and issues public alerts to the community when spikes in overdose events or other harmful changes to the local drug supply are identified. Opioid-related emergency department (ED) data is monitored regularly through the system and alerts are triggered when opioid overdose ED cases reported over a weekly period surpass the threshold set for alerts. This threshold is determined by comparing historical averages to data reported for the week in question. Once an alert is issued, WECOSS partners are mobilized to respond by bringing critical supports and education to the community that can prevent future overdoses.

In 2024, the WECOSS issued a total of eight alerts to the community. Each of these alerts were issued over the first half of the year, starting in February and ending in July. Over the months of June and July, a rapid increase in the number of alerts issued was observed. The OSUNS' alert criteria was met in five of six weeks over these two months, resulting in five alerts being issued to the community within this short time span.

In response to these alarming increases, the WECOSS organized an emergency meeting with the Leadership Committee in early July to identify urgent strategies that could be implemented collectively by the committee to help slow the rise in overdose numbers locally. Multiple strategies were identified and subsequently implemented from July to September, which included the following:

- **Community Submission Form** - A [community submission form](#) was created on WECOSS.ca to allow community partners and the public to report changes observed in the drug market and increases in overdoses directly to the WECHU. These reports are used to inform future alerts and interventions.
- **Alert Modifications** – Alerts were modified in several capacities to better meet the evolving needs of the community:
 1. In the absence of a local supervised consumption service, messaging about the [National Overdose Response Service \(NORS\)](#) was added to alerts to increase awareness about virtual safer consumption options.
 2. A link to the [WECOSS' statistics page](#) was added to alerts to foster a greater understanding of the local substance use landscape, enabling key stakeholders to implement informed, data-driven responses.
 3. The OSUNS' alert criteria was modified to increase the significance and relevance of alerts issued.
- 2. **Naloxone Training Event** – An urgent naloxone training event was coordinated on July 25th at a community housing unit in Glengarry, which is a high priority neighbourhood in the City of Windsor that is substantially impacted by opioid overdose deaths. At the event, 31 naloxone kits were distributed and 26 individuals were trained to administer naloxone. Multiple community partners were also present at the event to distribute information and resources to residents on available supports and services for substance use.
- 3. **Partnerships and Outreach:** Meetings with local shelter agencies and street/outreach services were coordinated to identify needs and strategies to support their clients who use substances. These meetings supported streamlined communication and information-sharing between community partners serving the same populations, strengthening coordination amongst agencies to collaborate towards the mutual goal of preventing overdoses.
- 4. **Promotion of Existing Care Pathways:** To enhance awareness and use of existing services in the community, the WECOSS promoted the [National Overdose Response Service](#) on WECOSS.ca and via social media and outlined referral pathways to existing local services for members of the Leadership Committee.



Since July of 2024, the number and rate of local opioid overdose ED cases has reduced significantly. No other alerts have been issued by the OSUNS following the last alert in July. The WECOSS continues to monitor local trends on an ongoing basis to keep the community informed and well-equipped to maintain the reduction in cases.

Opioid and Substance Use Notification System Evaluation

In continuation from the 2023 evaluation of the OSUNS, a second phase of engagement was completed in 2024 to involve people with lived and/or living experience (“peers”) in the evaluation. A survey was launched and a focus group was hosted through community partner agencies to gain input from peers on the existing impacts of the OSUNS and potential areas to improve for the future. In total, 21 peers participated in the survey and 9 participated in the focus group. Based on the findings, the following recommendations were generated:

- Update alert materials to address knowledge gaps related to substance use by including information on the following:
 - Recognizing the signs and symptoms of an opioid overdose
 - Causes of opioid overdose
 - Community resources for harm reduction
 - Community resources for getting help/treatment for substance use
 - Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act
 - Drug checking information
- Expand alert poster distribution to include high traffic areas in Windsor’s Downtown Core to increase visibility and awareness of alerts.
- Explore additional communication channels for alerts, including advertising options and text message subscriptions.
- Explore opportunities for regular peer and/or community feedback, engagement, and outreach.

In late 2024, the OSUNS’ alert materials were updated using the input gathered from peers. Advertisements encouraging community members to subscribe to alerts were also issued on social media, the Google Display network, and in-transit buses in the downtown core. In 2025, WECOSS partners will continue to work together to action the other recommendations generated through both phases of the evaluation.

Project Summaries

Prevention and Education Working Group

Continuous Communication

WECOSS Modernization Alignment: Support consistent and structured public communication across different channels to promote the WECOSS as an information hub for substance use.

Project Summary: A continuous communication campaign was implemented to increase understanding about substance use and the WECOSS across the community. The campaign focused on the promotion of WECOSS.ca as a centralized hub for evidence-based information and resources on substance use. Messaging included information on the WECOSS as a partnership (i.e., who we are, what we do), the strategy's four-pillar based model, the alert system, harm reduction and overdose prevention strategies, and where to find supports and services for substance use.

To start the campaign, a continuous communication toolkit and social media calendar were developed and issued to WECOSS partners to support shared and consistent messaging across the membership. The Windsor-Essex County Health Unit used the campaign materials to issue key messages on various channels, including social media and other paid advertising platforms.

Outputs and Results:

- A **three-month** block of in-transit bus advertisements were posted on approximately **10** buses in the City of Windsor's downtown core, encouraging community members to subscribe to WECOSS alerts.
- **1** Google Display advertisement encouraged community members to subscribe to WECOSS alerts and accumulated **429,765** impressions and **4,445** link clicks.
- Social media messages on campaign topics were issued, with a cumulative reach of **36,933** on Facebook and/or Instagram.
- **19,046** web views were recorded on WECOSS.ca during the campaign (August 12th – December 4th, 2024).

Next Steps: In 2025, the pillar working groups will sustain the WECOSS' continuous communication strategy. Each working group has a public education/social media campaign planned for 2025 that will share information and resources developed through their respective projects. Messaging will focus on stigma reduction, youth substance use prevention, community safety related to substance use, and the [WEC Connect Program and Service inventory](#).

Break the Vape

WECOSS Modernization Alignment: Address the social determinants of health that impact substance use and community well-being.



Project Summary: During the 2022-2023 school year, WECOSS funding streams supported over 100 interactions with schools around support for vaping education and enforcement. Developed and implemented by the Windsor-Essex County Health Unit, the “Break the Vape” challenge launched in 2024 as part of a wider strategy aimed at decreasing youth vaping.

ONGOING WORK

Medicine Cabinet Clean Out (MCCO): In collaboration with local policing services, two MCCO events were hosted to collect unused/expired medication for proper disposal at the pharmacy:

- **Earth Day Event at Malden Park (April 2024):** Medication was collected and brought to the pharmacy for disposal, the WECOSS partnership was promoted, and substance use resources were distributed to community members.
- **Crime Prevention Week Event at Devonshire Mall (November 2024):** Approximately 35 individuals visited the MCCO booth and around two large zip-loc bags worth of medications were collected for disposal. A variety of community resources were also distributed, including community safety handbooks, naloxone resources, stigma factsheets, smoking/vaping information, MCCO materials, and resources on where to find help.

Harm Reduction Working Group

Community Overdose Prevention Training Events

WECOSS Modernization Alignment: Augment harm reduction services and supplies through coordinated agency involvement and policy supports.

Project Summary: In 2024, the Harm Reduction Working Group coordinated community overdose prevention training events to improve community members’ knowledge and capacity to respond to and prevent overdose situations. At events, community members were provided with naloxone kits and/or drug test strips, along with training on their use and education on other harm reduction best practices. Given the historically high rates of opioid overdose death in the downtown core, this neighbourhood was a primary target area for the events. Events were held with various stakeholders, including staff at community agencies, community housing residents, businesses, and the public. According to [provincial data](#), construction workers are also disproportionately impacted by opioid-related deaths and therefore, one of the events was targeted to local health and safety representatives in the construction industry.

Outputs and Results:

- **10** community overdose prevention training events were coordinated over the course of 2024.
- **138** naloxone kits were distributed and **138** community members were trained on naloxone administration through the events.



- **595** drug test strips were distributed at events.
- **94.6%** of evaluation respondents across five of the events indicated that they would use the training provided from the date of the training and/or in the future if needed.

Next Steps: In 2025, the WECOSS will continue to partner with the Windsor-Essex Community Housing Corporation, the Canadian Mental Health Association – Windsor-Essex County Branch, and the Windsor Police Service to attend regularly scheduled health fairs at community housing units to distribute naloxone kits, drug test strips, and overdose response/prevention education to residents.

ONGOING WORK

Needle Syringe Program: Pozitive Pathways Community Services (PPCS) and its satellite sites continued to operate the local [Needle Syringe Program](#) to distribute harm reduction supplies and education to people who use substances.

- **27,511** client contacts were recorded through the NSP.
- **582,501** needles were distributed.
- Approximately **20,595** needles were returned.
- **57** referrals were made to other services.

Ontario Naloxone Program (ONP): The Windsor-Essex County Health Unit’s Ontario Naloxone Program continued to operate to provide eligible community agencies with naloxone kits and training to distribute to their clients who use substances, as well as their friends and family.

- **30** community partners were actively involved with the ONP, **4** of which were newly onboarded in 2024.
- **1,838** naloxone kits and single spray doses of naloxone were distributed.
- **1,251** individuals were trained on naloxone administration by ONP partners.

Treatment and Recovery Working Group

WEC Connect Program and Service Inventory

WECOSS Modernization Alignment: “No Wrong Door” – Enhancing access to services and supports.

Project Summary: In 2024, the WECOSS partnered with the Windsor-Essex Ontario Health Team’s (WEOHT) Mental Health and Addictions Sector (MHAST) Table to create an online inventory of substance use, mental health, and behavioural addictions services available at the local, provincial, and national levels, both publicly and privately funded. The inventory, entitled “[WEC Connect](#)”, was developed to assist residents in locating, identifying, and accessing supports for mental health and addictions. The tool can be used in a self-directed capacity or with the assistance of community service providers and is intended to support system navigation needs while formal coordinated access programs are being developed.



A pilot study on the inventory was completed over the Summer of 2024 with the WEOHT's Patient, Family, and Caregiver Partnership Council. The Council was consulted on the efficacy, impact, and usefulness of the inventory and opportunities for enhancement. Feedback was used to make adaptations and improvements to the inventory prior to its public release.

The inventory was launched publicly at a 2-1-1 training event hosted in partnership with the WEOHT on October 23rd, 2024. The media were invited to attend and provided coverage on the launch. Following the launch, promotion also continued through paid advertising on social media and other media platforms and print resource materials.

To sustain the inventory over time, the Treatment and Recovery Working Group plans to collaborate with 2-1-1 to leverage the data on their inventory to keep the program and service information on WEC Connect current and up-to-date. Mass updates to WEC Connect will be completed every six months using the data on 2-1-1 and/or through direct outreach to participating community organizations to request updates.

Output:

- **120+** programs and services were included in the launch of WEC Connect.
- From the launch date on October 23rd to January 17th, 2025, there were a total of **4,579** web visits to the WEC Connect web page.
- Social media advertisements issued as part of the launch accumulated over **22,000** reaches, **3,100** engagements, and **220** link clicks.

Next Steps: In 2025, the WECOSS will continue to promote and encourage the use of WEC Connect through media marketing and direct outreach to community agencies and through local events. To inform future updates and ensure the tool is user-friendly, a survey feature will also be added to the inventory to collect direct feedback from users, allowing for continuous quality improvement over time. These efforts, in addition to regular bi-annual updates, will ensure that the information on WEC Connect remains timely, useful, and relevant to the needs of its users.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

WECOSS Wallet Card: A wallet card with tips for safer substance use and information on local harm reduction supports was developed for Essex-Windsor EMS. The wallet card was intended to support EMS patients using substances who are not ready or interested in receiving treatment through their suboxone distribution program. The card can be used by patients to identify strategies and supports to help keep them safe while using substances and to reduce their risk of overdose. Once finalized, the card was also distributed to the entire WECOSS membership to use in their work with clients using substances and to share amongst their staff and networks.



Enforcement and Justice Working Group

Substance Use in Corrections Workshops

WECOSS Modernization Alignment: Build a shared understanding of community safety and well-being by strengthening public safety and public health partnerships that support vulnerable and marginalized populations.

Project Summary: Substance use in corrections workshops were delivered to community partners to provide education on effectively supporting individuals who are justice involved and use/d substances. The purpose of the workshops was to support successful reintegration of justice-involved individuals back into their communities following release from custody, with a focus on substance use supports. The workshops were targeted to corrections officers, post-secondary students, and other relevant service providers and included messaging on various topics, including substance use, harm reduction, stigma reduction, and community reintegration supports.

Four workshops were offered over the course of the year – the first with staff at the South-Essex Community Council, the second with corrections officers and other service providers at the Southwest Detention Centre, the third with Police Foundations students at St. Clair College, and the fourth with School of Social Work students at the University of Windsor. Each workshop included a personalized presentation for the respective target setting to address the unique education needs and knowledge gaps of those in attendance. Participants were also provided with resource packages through the workshops to support continuous learning.

Outputs and Results:

- **197** individuals participated in one of four workshops.
- **82.6%** of evaluation respondents across all workshops indicated that they had increased capacity/confidence to support people who use substances following their session.

Next Steps: In 2025, the Enforcement and Justice Working Group will continue to explore opportunities to offer additional workshops upon request from community partners.

