

## Advocacy in Outreach: A BHSc Outreach Case Competition 2023

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### Abstract

The "Advocacy in Outreach" case competition hosted by BHSc Outreach at McMaster University encouraged students to identify a salient healthcare issue in the Hamilton community and develop an evidence-backed initiative to address it. McMaster students were challenged to assume the role of health advocates by practicing their community-oriented thinking and ability to creatively problem-solve for the benefit of others. Fostering this thinking among our future health leaders is important since Canadians face a diverse range of healthcare issues from gaps in accessibility to staffing shortages to growing health inequity. To embark on the path toward solutions, participants created abstracts that outlined their plans for raising awareness of a pertinent health issue or a community-level program that supports vulnerable populations. The following abstracts are well-considered proposals that aim to proactively address challenges and improve health outcomes in Hamilton. Through this competition, BHSc Outreach hopes to inspire students to take further steps to contribute to their community in the future.

**Keywords:** advocacy; outreach; BHSc Outreach; healthcare

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### Conference Abstracts

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#### A palette for healing: Using art to help opioid recovery in Hamilton

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The opioid crisis is rampant throughout North America, with Hamilton being no exception. Opioid misuse and deaths are increasing in Hamilton, with over 800 opioid-related paramedic incidents in 2021 alone—a substantial increase to ~500 in 2020. This is a life-altering burden on individuals and their families, being a potent strain on their physical, mental, and social well-being. Addressing this crisis demands considering the complex interplay of factors, including socioeconomic factors, mental health, self-expression, and societal inclusion. Several studies emphasized the urgent need for comprehensive recovery programs that recognize the multi-faceted nature of addiction and promote holistic healing, accounting for the individual and those around them. This pitch proposes the implementation of "Painting a Path", a community-based arts initiative offering a safe creative outlet for people recovering from substance abuse disorders, together with family and friends. Through engaging in artistic expression together, we aspire individuals to overcome the fear and associations often accompanying addiction. Public art exhibitions can be organized, highlighting their unique talents and helping them develop a constructive sense of identity. It also demonstrates their resilience and strength, which helps humanize and destigmatize the

issue of addiction. To further engage the community, "Painting a Path" can invite local businesses and schools to participate and donate supplies. It's also critical everyone in recovery can participate, regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or gender, ensuring nobody feels excluded. Current literature strongly supports the importance of social cohesion and community belonging in substance-abuse recovery, where studies found its associations with better self-esteem, sleep, and lower depression and anxiety. Creative outlets are also proven techniques for recovery, like expressive writing and music therapy. By incorporating communal aspects towards artistic expression, this initiative would greatly benefit the holistic healing and well-being of those recovering from opioid addiction.

### **Empowering connections: Peer-support group for pregnant and postpartum women with opioid use disorder**

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In Hamilton, opioid-related deaths during pregnancy have increased by over 280% in the last six years. With an 11 to 12 times higher risk of mortality associated with prenatal opioid use, the majority of deaths in mothers with infants with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS), a condition which occurs as a result of opioid use during pregnancy, occurred as a result of avoidable causes. Unfortunately, the prevalence of OUD and mortality rates are likely to be under-estimated in pregnant women, who face additional fear and stigma-related barriers to disclosing their condition. These barriers have resulted from many underlying factors, including the fear of child protective services involvement, lack of healthcare provider cross-talk, and the stigmatization of OUD in pregnancy. Current educational campaigns are passive in nature and fail to actively engage the target population. Thus, we propose a peer support group for pregnant women with and at-risk of OUD to help mitigate fears and provide consolation during their pregnancy. The peer support program we propose would be designed to address any fear and uncertainty of self-disclosing OUD during pregnancy, including legal repercussions and child protective services involvement; what to expect during and after pregnancy; and how to self-advocate to their physician/health team about their concerns. In implementing this program, we hope to bring together and educate pregnant women on the impact of opioid use during pregnancy and to alleviate any concerns they may have in this regard, with the end goal of reducing complications related to opioid use.

### **Safer use spaces: Reducing drug overdose in the shelter system**

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Since January of 2023, the City of Hamilton has been exploring whether to declare a state of emergency over its opioid crisis. Fatal opioid overdoses have increased exponentially in the city over the past several years, with 166 opioid deaths being reported in 2021 as compared to 26 in 2005. Opioid related-harms rose over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it has been found that individuals who lack permanent housing in Hamilton have a high prevalence of substance use. The recent increase in street level homelessness and subsequent overcrowding of homeless shelters in Hamilton due to the pandemic and the rise in costs of living have led to these shelters becoming overwhelmed with instances of fatal and non-fatal drug overdoses. This problem is exacerbated by the lack of implementation of harm reduction policies and practices within most shelters. Safer use spaces, which are controlled indoor environments where individuals can use drugs with trained personnel on site, are present in some homeless shelters, such as in Hamilton's YMCA Safer Use Drug Space in Carole Anne's Place (CAP). A year after the implementation of the YMCA safer use space, staff made only one drug related call to EMS; before the existence of this space, calls were made to 911 at least once a day. Funding and attention must be directed towards scaling up these spaces consistently across the shelter system. Additional harm reduction measures that should be considered for implementation in shelters include the installation of sharps disposal containers in washroom stalls and increases in the availability of free anti-opioid drugs (Naloxone). Increased awareness of the current opioid crisis in Hamilton is necessary in order to pressure city councils and shelter providers to enact harm reduction measures that will reduce the risks associated with opioid use in homeless populations.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest. To ensure this in the process of judging and evaluating the case competition, all judges were blinded to the individuals submitting each abstract and were only informed of their identities after the fact.

### Authors' Contributions

Aashna Agarwal: Founded the first BHSc Outreach case competition held in 2021, developed promotional materials and scoring materials, as well as drafting the conference abstract booklet, and gave final approval of the version to be published.  
Neil Lin: Served as one of the judges for the competition, also involved in the drafting of the abstract and final manuscript.  
Anwar Abdi: Served as one of the judges for the competition, also involved in coordinating with individual teams in the drafting of the final manuscript.

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