



# How Canadian libraries are handling the opioid crisis

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Like the rest of the country -- libraries are battling the opioid overdose epidemic. Although libraries are substance-free zones, that doesn't mean that all patrons adhere to their library's code of conduct.





For 10 years she was actively involved with securing funding for the new, energy efficient central branch of the Kitchener Public Library, which opened in 2014. Now, she's taken on new challenges as a director, overseeing forward-facing customer service in the library.

Fielding juggles the diverse needs of library patrons on a daily basis. She has to make sure the mother and toddler coming in for story time are getting as much out of their day at the library as someone who may be sleeping at homeless shelters at night.

And now, amid an opioid crisis that claimed **4,460 lives last year in Canada**

(<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/substance-use/problematic-prescription-drug-use/opioids/data-surveillance-research/harms-deaths.html>), some libraries -- like Kitchener -- are arming themselves with naloxone in an effort to save their patrons' lives.

Fielding got naloxone kits for her library and trained her staff to deal with possible traumatic interactions at the library -- like someone overdosing on opioids in the library -- while consulting with social service agencies and the local police.

"We realized really early on that it's not really a library issue, it's a community issue," she says. "We're that front door, that community living room so any issues that our community is experiencing, we're on the frontline of that in the public library."

As of April 1, **20 people have been confirmed to have died from opioids**

(<https://www.waterlooregiondrugstrategy.ca/en/data-and-research/overdose-data-for-waterloo-region-omars.aspx>) in the Waterloo region, according to Waterloo Regional Police Service.

Some libraries require that information pertaining to 911 calls, such as suspected drug overdoses, are filed through a freedom of information request, like the Ottawa Public Library, while others are more forthcoming with this data. Between 2015 and 2018, the Saskatoon Public Library had six calls to 911 for suspected drug overdoses, according to Kirk Sibbald who works in communications at the library. In 2018, the library began naloxone training for its managerial staff, with plans to roll out training to front-line employees this year.

At an Ontario Library Association panel on opioid overdose prevention in January 2019, Ottawa Public Library manager Catherine Seaman shared that her library had developed its own opioid overdose prevention strategy, which included giving naloxone kits and training to security staff at its Main branch, located in the city's downtown core. Between January and June 2018, 911 was called 16 times, said



held at the library, where naloxone -- a drug that reverses the effects of opioids, like heroin, morphine and fentanyl -- was handed out to 100 community members. Knowing nothing about the drug, Fielding attended the session -- wanting to demystify naloxone for herself. She felt more at ease knowing the drug could be administered as a nasal spray versus a syringe, which she felt was more daunting. Since the training, she realized that she wanted to share that knowledge with other library staff.

Fielding spearheaded a voluntary training program for Kitchener Public Library employees two years ago, with a second round of training planned this spring. She got an "overwhelming response" from social service agencies asking how they could help the library train its employees about naloxone and how to have thoughtful conversations while using the appropriate terminology for library patrons living with addictions.

To date, the Kitchener Public Library has said there have been overdoses in the library, but none have been fatal. The library has recently changed its staff policy so employees can administer naloxone if needed, but to date, but none have had to do so.

Although Fielding's role may be traditionally associated with helping students track down information for school projects, or offer book recommendations, Fielding is quick to point out that part of the library's role is to serve every member of the community.

"I think that libraries have a responsibility quite frankly to do this kind of work, but the responsibility is on both ends," she says. "Many of our staff signed up not to do this work and some are in training on compassion fatigue and self-care, we're giving them tools to be able to cope with that."

The public library remains the one true place for vulnerable and marginalized communities — but by no means is it perfect.

"We're a shifting profession, but one that has a lot of baggage," says University of Toronto librarian Desmond Wong of his chosen vocation.

While some libraries struggle to incorporate Indigenous perspectives in their spaces or hide behind policies that disproportionately target homeless patrons, others are redefining what the library space can be in crafting a modern, civic society where the political divide has never been deeper.

There's an emerging trend of giant, central branches that take up large swathes of downtown metropolises, a common ground for patrons from diverse backgrounds. Halifax recently opened its



More libraries are incorporating seed lending libraries, aquaponic gardens and other food literacy programs. The Halifax Public Library's unique food literacy program included cooking classes aimed for youth in areas that were affected by food deserts, often surrounded by public housing and shelters. Many children in attendance were Syrian refugees.

"It's one of the best things if I could recommend any kind of program for libraries who are working with refugee children," says Amanda de Oliveira Fogaça, who did her library co-op placement at the Halifax Public Library during the food program. She's now a public services librarian at the London Public Library.

"They love cooking. They love serving the food. Their joy was serving the food to the people in the library."

In a sense, libraries are becoming kitchens and living rooms -- common areas for all kinds of patrons.

Eric Klinenberg, author of *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization and the Decline of Civic Life*, writes that "everyday life in libraries is a democratic experiment and people cram into libraries to participate in it whenever the doors are open" -- but for librarians, they take their patrons' stories home with them. It's hard to forget the faces of those who have all but been written off as a lost cause everywhere else.

For Edmonton librarian Richard Thornley, it all comes back to serving the public -- the whole public -- no matter what baggage they bring into the library with them.

"We work with the people who nobody else will work with. We work with the people who have fallen through every single crack or every single safety net there is. They've drifted ashore at the library because this is the last place that they can come."

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It's 20 minutes from closing time at the central branch of the Calgary Public Library. Patrons collect their belongings and say goodbye to study-mates. A library staff member roams the third floor, collecting books left at study spaces that need reshelving. A group of teen boys pause at the top of the staircase, craning their necks to read the words ensnared by the buffalo sculpture.