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YOUTH SUMMIT ON CANNABIS

The Health and Emergency Medical Services Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report, August 14, 2003, from the Commissioner of Health Services:

1. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that:

1. The Health Services Department be authorized to receive and expend a grant of \$3,000 from the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police in order to host a Youth Summit on Cannabis in partnership with York Regional Police and other local community agencies.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the proposed Youth Summit on Cannabis to be hosted by the Health Services Department in the fall of 2003. The York Region Youth Summit on Cannabis is a first of its kind in the Province. The concept of a youth summit reflects the identified need for youth aged 13–19 to be given an opportunity to participate in an awareness event concerning the health, social, legal and political issues related to cannabis use.

3. BACKGROUND

In April 2003, Public Health staff applied for a grant from the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police. The grant was established to support “community groups to initiate programs that deal directly with drug prevention or/and information sharing involving the youth within that community.”

The grant proposals were required to have a specific program duration of not more than one year. Proposals also needed to be based on an assessment of community needs, provide a project plan with measurable goals and timelines, include a police endorsement letter and be limited to new initiatives. The grant was not intended to cover ongoing operational costs that would depend on ongoing funding.

Letters of support were included in the grant proposal from Chief La Barge of York Regional Police, Jody Hamilton from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and Brian Salmers, Executive Director, Addiction Services for York Region. The target population for the summit is youth aged 13–19 and, as such, the York Region District School Board and York Region Catholic District School Board were consulted and will partner in the planning and implementation of the summit. Other key organizations and community groups such as Youth Advisory groups will be invited to participate.

On June 6, 2003, the Health Services Department was informed that the proposal to host a Youth Summit on Cannabis in York Region had been accepted and a grant of \$3,000 was received. The grant money received covers the cost of materials and supplies for the summit, but does not include the staffing required to organize and host the event.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

4.1 Cannabis Use by Students in York Region

The extent of cannabis use by youth in York Region can be estimated through the examination of studies conducted by The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH). *The Ontario Student Drug Use Survey* (OSDUS) is the longest ongoing study of adolescent drug use in Canada. The study has spanned over two decades, based on 13 surveys conducted every two years since 1977. In the spring of 2001, 4,211 students from 41 school boards, 106 schools and 272 classes participated in the study.

From this provincial data, it is estimated that in York Region (2001), 29.8% or 26,169 students, grades 7 to OAC have used cannabis in the past year and of these cannabis users, 21% or nearly 5,500 students have used it 40 or more times. Almost 9% or 2,355 users used cannabis daily and 8.4% or 2,200 students who used cannabis within the past year reported that their attempts to stop were unsuccessful. Student use of cannabis in Ontario has been increasing gradually since 1991 and is currently the highest rate on record. In comparison, according to the *Centre for Addiction and Mental Health Monitor Report – 2002*, the percentage of Ontario adults who reported use in the past year increased from 6.2% in 1992 to 11.2% in 2001—also the highest rate on record for adults.

The suspension rates of students from York Region schools for substance use related offences, drug enforcement data from the York Regional Police, and requests for treatment services, also provide indicators of drug use in the Region. According to Addiction Services for York Region, cannabis is the number one drug for which youth in York Region are seeking treatment. This is consistent with the provincial indicators collected by the Directory of Alcohol and Drug Treatment Registry for Ontario.

4.2 Health Impact of Cannabis Use

Cannabis use impairs coordination and reaction time similar to the impairment caused by alcohol. Recent studies also show an increased risk of head and neck cancer (Hashibe et al., 2002) and negative effects on the respiratory and immune systems (Tashkin et al., 2002). Further studies show recurrent cannabis use impairs memory and learning capabilities, not only in adults, but infants born to mothers who use cannabis during pregnancy (Skosnik et al., 2001; Richardson et al., 2002). Frequent cannabis use has also been shown to mimic attentional deficits seen in acute schizophrenia and is associated with schizotypal personality (Skosnik et al., 2001).

The first national health conference on cannabis will be held in Alberta in September 2003. This conference will bring together health experts to discuss the key impacts of cannabis use. Findings from this conference will be presented at the Youth Summit.

4.3 Youth Summit

The proposal to host a peer led Youth Summit is based on research and best practice evidence that peer-led initiatives are most successful in working with youth. The summit will include students in the planning and implementation of the event and will provide an opportunity for student leaders from all 38 secondary schools in the York Region District School Board and York Region Catholic District School Board to increase their awareness of the health, social, legal and political issues related to cannabis use. The target attendance at the summit is 200 student leaders. The ultimate goal is to motivate and assist student leaders to develop and implement student led initiatives to prevent and reduce cannabis use within their schools and surrounding communities.

4.4 Relationship to Vision 2026

A Youth Summit on Cannabis supports many objectives contained in Vision 2026, including Supporting Safe and Secure Communities, Promotion of Wellness and Enhancing Partnerships.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The \$3,000 grant will support the costs of hosting the day-long summit including the development, printing and distribution of materials and supplies. The grant money will also cover the costs associated with producing the final evaluation of the initiative. Staff from the Substance Abuse Prevention Program of Health Services will be coordinating the event in partnership with staff from the York Region Police and other community agencies.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

Health Services Department staff continue to provide innovative and progressive strategies to educate the community about the complexities of substance use throughout all York Region municipalities. Youth are encouraged to engage in and take ownership of these initiatives as appropriate. In doing so, they create an opportunity to partner with their municipal leaders to create an informed community that can make educated choices on the issue of substance use.

7. CONCLUSION

Recent recommendations and proposed changes to cannabis laws in Canada have created confusion and misinformation within the community. Health Service staff provide comprehensive health strategies to address concerns around substance use within York Region. The Youth Summit on Cannabis will provide factual, current and credible information for youth about the health, social, legal and political issues related to cannabis use. The Youth Summit on Cannabis is only one component of a health promotion campaign specifically focused on cannabis use in York Region.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.