Let's make
public health in Timiskaming matter
during the 2022 municipal election

Municipalities influencing health

Members of municipal council play an important role in shaping the health and wellbeing of our communities. Municipalities can develop policies and provide facilities, programs, services and emergency management that influence the health and well-being of our population and make our communities great places to live where everyone can thrive.

When each person has the opportunity to achieve their full health potential, our communities become strong, healthy, and vibrant – a great return on investment.

Let's make public health in Timiskaming matter during the 2022 municipal election.

Why public health is important

Timiskaming Health Unit, one of 34 local public health agencies in ON, provides programs and services that promote well-being, prevent disease and injury, and protect population health. As highlighted with the COVID-19 pandemic, we also work to enable timely, integrated, safe, and effective response to, and recovery from emergencies with public health impacts. Our work, often done in collaboration with local partners and within the broader public health system, results in a healthier population and avoids drawing on costly and scarce health care resources.

We strive to provide residents and decision makers with information to make knowledgeable decisions related to the health and well-being of our population and communities.

This municipal election, _our ask_ is that municipal candidates and voters consider the following important local public health issues.

Services de santé du
TIMISKAMING
Health Unit

Mental health

The issue

Just like physical health, mental health and well-being are influenced by the social, economic, and physical environments in which people work, live, learn, and play. Populations with socio-economic disadvantages are disproportionately affected by mental health problems and challenges. **There is no health without mental health.**

36% of respondents to the Timiskaming Vital Signs survey (2021) said they did not have access to mental health care in a timely manner.[i]

Mental well-being is a concern with an increasing percentage of Ontarians who report their mental health as fair or poor, and who have experienced mental health challenges or illnesses, especially since the pandemic began. Almost half of Ontarians believe that COVID-19 played a major role in worsening of their mental health.[ii]

Return on investment

The economic burden of mental illness in Canada is estimated at $51 billion per year. This includes health care costs, lost productivity, and reductions in health-related quality of life.[iii] [iv]

Approximately 1 in 5 children and youth in Ontario has a mental health challenge[v]; and 70% of mental health issues have their onset during childhood or adolescence.[vi] This signifies the importance of early identification, intervention, and upstream prevention efforts which can lead to improved achievement in school and better health outcomes across the lifespan.[vii]

What THU is doing:

- Raising awareness around the importance of mental health through public campaigns.
- Supporting workplaces with mental health resources and other supports.
- Building capacity for prevention programming.
- Supporting the Timiskaming Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan (CSWB).

What municipalities can do:

- Support strategies that target the social determinants of mental health with a focus on reducing stigma, increasing inclusion, valuing diversity, and addressing discrimination, racism, housing instability, poverty and income inequalities.
- Help support early prevention programs targeting youth mental health.
- Commit to building mental health system integration and capacity.
- Support the coordination and implementation of the Timiskaming CSWB.

Healthy Built Environment

The issue

The built environment refers to our human-made surroundings; it includes housing, food systems, natural environments, transportation and neighbourhood design. The way our communities are designed can influence many outcomes related to chronic diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes, as well our mental health and social well-being.

Of the 11,540 commuting to work in Timiskaming, 9.8% use sustainable transportation (public transit or active transport). This is significantly lower than Ontario's rate of 22.3%.[viii]

Physical activity is a well-known benefit to mental and physical health. Many people do not drive because of their age, income, ability, or choice. Active transportation (replacing car trips with walking or cycling) is an ideal way for busy people to build healthy activity into their lives.   Neighbourhoods and streets that are more walkable and cycle-safe in their design encourage active transportation and benefit people of all ages and income levels.[x]

An efficient public transit system can increase health and social equity, as well as provide environmental benefits. Access to efficient public transit provides an independent way to access jobs and essential services and allows people living on lower incomes to direct more of their earnings to food, clothing, and rent. The effects of public transit are even more impactful when transit vehicles are electric powered and emit no pollutants.[xi]

Return on Investment

The average cost of owning a vehicle in Canada is between $8,600 and $13,000 annually.[xii] Making commutes safe and convenient through the availability of public transit, sidewalks, and cycling facilities can help make life more affordable and equitable for residents by reducing annual household transportation costs.

Municipalities offering connected active transportation routes, public transit options and physical activity facilities can encourage tourism and have potential for good return on investment.[xiii]

What THU is doing:

- Public awareness campaigns on pedestrian, cyclist, and motorist safety.

- Collaborating with schools and municipalities to encourage active transportation and enhance road safety for all road users.

- Provide research and data to inform local planning and transportation projects.

What municipalities can do:

- Incorporate principles of healthy community design and land use planning into official planning.

- Enhance community infrastructure for active travel and public transportation.

- Collaborate with community groups to create healthy, vibrant, and inclusive public spaces that meet community needs.

- Protect and enhance parks and green spaces with features that improve accessibility and interest for people of all ages and abilities.

Climate change

The issue

Climate change is the "greatest global health threat facing the world in the 21st century", with increasing wildfires, heatwaves and extreme weather exacerbating ongoing challenges related to social, economic and ecological systems[xiv]. Climate risks that have been identified for Ontario include vulnerable physical infrastructure (such as water and wastewater systems, transportation, buildings, energy and telecommunications), negative impacts on terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, and worsening human health inequities.[xv]

By 2050, climate change in Timiskaming is projected to result in an increase in the number of heat waves, and an increase in skin cancer from exposure to UV radiation.[xvi]

Ontarians generate nearly 3.6 million tonnes of food and organic waste annually. Over 60% of Ontario's food waste is sent to landfills, creating methane, a potent greenhouse gas that is 28x more damaging to the environment than carbon dioxide, and contributes to climate change.[xvii]

The transportation sector is the leading source of climate emissions, responsible for 35% of Ontario's greenhouse gas emissions.[xviii]

Municipalities play a key role in climate change mitigation and adaptation as well as in managing local impacts of climate change which in turn impacts physical and mental health. Investing in local climate action unlocks health, social and environmental rewards.

Return on Investment

The health benefits of climate action are well understood and offer important arguments for making transformative change. As government and health sectors recover from COVID-19, there is an opportunity to integrate health and climate initiatives into policy and planning decisions.[xix]

What THU is doing:

- Supporting local food initiatives to reduce food waste.

- Encourage local awareness about climate risks and opportunities to build community resilience.

- Offers support to municipal climate initiatives. THU brings perspective regarding the interaction between climate risks, mitigation and adaptation opportunities and community public health.

- Enhancing existing programming that has co-benefits for climate change and health.

What municipalities can do:

- Integrate climate considerations into governance, operations, community planning, services, and delivery.

- Invest in public transit and active transportation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase physical activity.

- Invest in the local food system and enact policies and programs that build a culture around sustainable food initiatives and food waste reduction and diversion.

- Develop and implement a climate action plan that considers mitigation and adaptation initiatives; strengthen commitments and set clear targets, timelines, goals, and accountability systems that can be measured and evaluated to track progress.[xx]

Food and income security

The issue

Food insecurity occurs as a result of not having enough money to buy food and other necessities.

Income is the strongest predictor of food insecurity among individuals and families in Canada.

In 2019, the cost of healthy food in Timiskaming for a family of 4 was $950/month ($219.27/week).[xxi] Food insecurity has been made worse by the pandemic with increasing food prices and higher costs of living.[xxii]

Nearly ¼ of Timiskaming Households with children ages 4-17 experience food insecurity (2017/2018). This is more than double Ontario's rate.[xxiii]

1 in 10 families in Timiskaming live with food insecurity, and 17.5% of the population in Timiskaming lives in low income.[xxiv]

Food insecurity is most prevalent among low-income households, female single-parent families, those who rent rather than own their housing, and those who identify as Indigenous, Black, or People of Colour.[xxv]

The root cause of food insecurity is poverty. Income-based solutions are needed to address food insecurity.

Return on Investment

Adults in food insecure households are more likely to suffer from chronic conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and anxiety. Children in these households are more likely to suffer from mental health issues, and teenagers are at greater risk of depression, social anxiety, and suicide. Severely food insecure households have higher health care costs compared to food secure households.[xxvi]

Food insecurity has the potential to limit those experiencing it from being full members of the local community by impacting health overall and mental health in particular.

What THU is doing:

- Advocating for the federal and provincial governments to enact proven income policy solutions to food insecurity, such as a basic income guarantee.[xxvii]

- Monitoring food affordability in the THU region.

What municipalities can do:

Address income security through the following actions:

- Invest in affordable housing and accessible public transportation.

- Support and work with anti-poverty coalitions and local community food action networks.

- Facilitate local initiatives that increase economic resilience for people living with very low incomes and for groups experiencing systemic racism such as:

  o Free income tax filing assistance;

  o Targeted support for access to and training for jobs with livable wages and benefits.

- Advocate for Federal and Provincial Government policies and programs to ensure an adequate income for all.

- Champion a living wage for Timiskaming.

Anti-racism

The issue

Racialization is the process for how society constructs races as real, different and unequal. Racial categories are not based on science or biology but on differences that society chooses to emphasize, such as skin colour, language, culture, religion, or place of birth.

The Temiskaming Foundation's Vital Signs survey revealed that 27% of respondents believe that Timiskaming is below average or poor at accepting people from different cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic groups; and 26% believe Timiskaming is below average or poor at fostering, learning about, and respecting Indigenous culture, values, and traditions.[xxvii]

Discrimination is commonly experienced by racialized groups in Canada. The trauma of discrimination and racism felt by racialized populations has been intensified by events like the COVID-19 pandemic and demonstrations involving acts and symbols of hate, bigotry, racism, antisemitism, and discrimination.

Systemic racism (when an institution or set of institutions together create or maintain racial inequity) and discrimination have resulted in the unequal distribution of resources, including income, education, employment, housing, and health care, impacting the mental and physical health of racialized populations. Systemic racism is often caused by hidden biases in policies, practices and processes that privilege, or disadvantage people based on race.

Concrete progress is needed to make Canadian communities more equitable for all.

Return on Investment

Reducing racial and ethnic inequalities through progressive policies will improve the economic prospects and increase income for racialized individuals, ultimately leading to a stronger economy that benefits all.[xxix]

What THU is doing:

- Supporting the coordination and implementation of the Timiskaming CSWB.

- Raising awareness that race is a social determinant of health.

- Supporting culturally safe public health services.

- Monitoring for opportunities to partner with communities and other sectors seeking to address racism including promoting social inclusion and belonging, and participating in policy development that seeks to address racism.

- Acknowledges and supports the rights of Indigenous Peoples including the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples to determine their own pathways and to make decisions about their communities, health and livelihoods.

What municipalities can do:

- Support the coordination and implementation of the Timiskaming CSWB.

- Encourage the creation of inclusive community spaces for all.

- Collaborate with community organizations and local law enforcement to establish and support ways to identify, monitor, and respond to acts of discrimination and racism, such as hate crimes.

- Uphold and implement responsibilities under the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action (e.g., honour the treaties with First Nations and uphold governmental responsibilities to each treaty).

- For more information on how municipalities can start or improve anti-racism and anti-discriminatory initiatives, visit the Ontario Human Rights Commission How-To Guide for Municipalities.

Substance use

The issue

The pandemic has heightened disparities across communities and has disproportionately affected people who use substances. Many social determinants of health can contribute to an increase in substance use such as poverty, lack of affordable housing, employment status, trauma and discrimination, as well as social and physical environments.

Northern Ontario has been particularly impacted by the opioid crisis. In statistics released by the Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario, the health units with the 5 highest rates of opioid-related deaths in 2020 were all in Northern Ontario. The toll of drug poisonings claimed the lives of over 4,000 Ontarians in 2021. From Jan to Aug 2022 there have been 9 suspected drug related deaths in the THU region compared to 4 deaths during the whole of last year.[xxxii]

The need for change and action is critical.

Return on Investment

In Ontario, substance use costs society almost $17.4 billion a year (2017) (includes healthcare, lost productivity, criminal justice, and other direct costs); with alcohol and tobacco costing the Ontario economy and public health more than all other substances combined.[xxxiii]

What THU is doing:

- Co-Leading the development of the Timiskaming Drug and Alcohol Strategy (TDAS) in partnership with several community agencies. This strategy is trauma-informed and founded on cultural safety and centered on people with lived experience.

- Supporting the coordination and implementation of the Timiskaming Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan (CSWB).

- Offering free harm reduction supplies and services to ensure that people who use drugs can have access to sterile equipment and naloxone to reduce the incidence and prevalence of bloodborne infections and other harms.

- Combatting stigma in the community with anti-stigma campaigns and promoting Overdose Awareness Day.

- Raising awareness of the low-risk drinking guidelines, and the low-risk cannabis guidelines.

- Advocacy for healthy public policy including the decriminalization of substance use.[xxxiv]

What municipalities can do:

- Support and implement recommendations from TDAS, as it relates to municipal jurisdiction.

- Supporting the coordination and implementation of the Timiskaming CSWB.

- Access or purchase outdoor mounted sharps disposal units to reduce publicly discarded needles and other drug equipment.

- Support local harm reduction efforts.

- Enhance municipal alcohol policies and review regularly, plan and implement alcohol-related interventions and other policy levers to reduce risk and harm from alcohol.

- Continue to exercise leadership on tobacco, vape, and cannabis control by using local law-making authority to restrict use and reduce exposure in areas not covered by provincial legislation. This can include licensing and regulating location of tobacco retail outlets and restricting tobacco use in places where children and youth spend time such as beaches and fairgrounds.

Oral health

The issue

Oral health is an important part of one's overall health and wellness, yet every year an estimated 3 million people in Ontario do not visit a dental office because they simply cannot afford it.

Poor oral health lowers quality of life at any age and if dental care is too expensive, overall health gets worse, often leaving emergency rooms in Ontario's hospitals as the only option. In 2020, there were 76,171 ED visits for oral health conditions in Ontario (both traumatic and non-traumatic), of which **754** were in Timiskaming (up from 590 in Timiskaming in 2015-2016).[xxxv]

Fluoridation of community water supplies is a low-cost and equitable means to provide increased protection from tooth decay on a population level.[xxxvi]

Dental care is excluded from the Ontario Health Insurance Program and many workers do not have employee health benefits. There are programs for children and seniors and a patchwork of inadequate programs for adults on social assistance, but no public oral health program for adults who cannot afford to pay out of pocket for preventative and acute dental care.

Return on Investment

Health Canada estimates that $4.15 million working days are lost due to dental visits or dental sick days in Canada every year.[xxxvii] An estimated $38 million is spent in the Ontario health care system for dental issues, where patients receive treatment for pain and other complications, but not for the underlying dental issue.[xxxviii]

It is estimated that every $1 invested in community water fluoridation yields an estimated $5 - $93 of savings per person in dental treatment costs.[xxxix] Municipalities in Timiskaming currently do not add fluoride to water.

What THU is doing:

- Implementing the Healthy Smiles Ontario program for eligible children aged 17 and under, and the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program for eligible seniors living with low-income aged 65 and over.

- Offers dental screenings in all publicly funded schools in our area, as well as screenings and fluoride varnish applications to children in licensed childcares and Early ON centers.

- Supporting oral health education and awareness.

What municipalities can do:

- Support fluoridation of municipal water supplies (when source-water levels are below the Health Canada-recommended level) to prevent dental caries).

- Encourage the Provincial Government to establish a funded oral health program for Ontarians **of all ages** who live on low income before the proposed 2025 timeline.[xvi]

Other key public health issues

Municipalities also play an important role in:

- **DIGITAL EQUITY >** Support strategies that fast-track the advancement of digital equity and keep everyone connected through quality, affordable Internet and digital technology and services.

- **PAID SICK DAYS >** Advocate for paid sick day policies at the Provincial and Federal level that is universally accessible to all workers, is paid at 100% of a worker's wages, and provides at least seven paid sick days.

- **AFFORDABLE ACCESS TO RECREATION >** Collaborate with community partners to offer a variety of free and affordable recreational opportunities for people of all ages and abilities.

- **BREASTFEEDING FRIENDLY SPACES >** Facilitate, welcome, and protect the act of breastfeeding in municipal public places by passing a resolution and making municipalities more breastfeeding friendly. Setting up rooms in public buildings for those who need a private and comfortable place. Encouraging employers, restaurants, and store operators to implement a pro-breastfeeding policy and promote breastfeeding in their establishments.

- **STRONG LOCAL PUBLIC HEALTH >** Advocate for provincial support of local public health units to ensure all Ontarians can get the public health services that they need at the right time and in the right place.[xi]

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