

2025 Safety & Security Insights

COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE AND THE **ADDICTION CRISIS**

Acknowledgments

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When an unhoused man

was found struggling with drug addiction in the parking lot of a building in downtown Montreal, the on-site security team immediately called Janik Fortin. As the Director of Projects and Development for Montreal's Société de développement social (SDS), Fortin has the expertise needed to help those with opioid use disorder (OUD) work through symptoms related to opioid use or withdrawal. Just as importantly, she and her team exercise the compassion necessary to get to know people and treat them with dignity.

By the end of the interaction, Fortin's team, which is able to operate thanks to a combination of public sector funding and private funding from real estate companies like JLL Canada, was able to get the man into treatment. Now he's off the streets and living in supervised apartments.

"We know how to react and talk to people in distress," Fortin says. "We're not in a rush. If I need to spend two hours on an intervention, that's OK. Then our teams can help the person access the resources they need."

While this scenario is ideal, it's not exactly typical for commercial real estate (CRE) developments. Traditionally, third-party security guards would immediately escort someone under the influence of drugs – or any person who had overstayed their welcome – off the premises without looking into their well-being. In recent years, however, it's become

clear that simply removing people struggling with OUD from commercial property isn't solving long-term problems for anyone.

Smart real estate companies are beginning to explore different strategies, adopting a new approach and trying to help vulnerable people in a meaningful way.

"When I started in this industry it was all about deterrents and intimidation. You didn't have to use language to reason with people or de-escalate them. It has now evolved to the point where your best tool is your brain and your language,"

says Christopher Morgan, Director of Security and Operations Compliance – Property Management for JLL Canada. "Our company wants to make sure we treat people with dignity. Kicking them out of the property is just a temporary solution."

JLL Canada is not alone in its shift in both attitude and policy. While the current opioid crisis is both frustrating and heartbreaking to witness, building owners and security professionals are starting to adopt strategies to meet these challenges with compassion.

AN UNFOLDING CRISIS

Addiction and its effects on society

235,000

Canadians experience homelessness each year.



Source: Government of Canada



Social workers from the Société de développement social in Montréal partner with building security teams to help people with opioid use disorder access a range of resources.

187,500

opioid-related emergency department visits since 2016



Source: Government of Canada

aren't new in Canada, but anyone spending time in public spaces has likely seen first-hand how the problem is escalating. It's not all anecdotal: according to the Government of Canada's Snapshot of the Opioid Crisis, the country has seen more than 187,500 opioid-related emergency department visits and 49,100 opioid-related deaths since 2016.

While homelessness and opioid use are distinct issues, they can sometimes overlap. A 2024 report from the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) illustrates that approximately 235,000 Canadians experience homelessness each year. Another CIHI study revealed that among the more than 30,000 people experiencing homelessness admitted to Canadian hospitals between 2022 and 2023, 18% were there because of a substance use disorder or addiction.

Downtown malls and office buildings have always seen people living with visible addictions on their properties. However, the

problem is migrating to quieter suburban areas, where tenants and security professionals may not be used to interacting with people under the influence of opioids or in need of life-saving naloxone.

According to Fortin, even when shelter spaces are available in a community, many people with addiction avoid them, particularly if the facility has rules around drug use or coming in with a pet or romantic partner. Instead, individuals may situate themselves in retail stores, building stairwells or lobbies, parkades, outdoor common areas of office buildings or other publicly accessible spaces.

"You can't assume what is a stable and safe area anymore," says Paul Huston, Global Chief Security Officer at BGIS, who notes that opioid use has migrated to open public spaces from stairwells and parking garages. "In part because of COVID and so many buildings being vacated and shut down, drug-related activity has moved into areas where we haven't seen

it before. We're finding needles and signs of drug use in all areas of the buildings we manage."

IMPACTS ON COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE

The scope of the opioid crisis has been felt throughout the CRE industry in recent years, especially for those working in security. For instance, building security professionals find themselves responsible for managing the unpredictable behaviour of those with OUD while also worrying about the safety of tenants when needles or broken glass are left on the property.

While it's rare for individuals using drugs to physically endanger tenants or customers, the perception of potential harm is a real issue affecting property managers and building owners. Even if a distressed person experiencing addiction is harmless to those around them, incidents between security and a person under the influence can be loud and shocking. When captured on phone cameras, such scenes can create

the public perception that a retail building or workplace is unsafe, leaving property management to deal with the reaction from tenants and customers.

"We're seeing a gap between perceived safety and security, and actual safety and security," says Philip De Wolf, Senior Manager of Health and Safety and Emergency Management at RioCan Real Estate Investment Trust. "After any incident we've had to leverage our partnerships with our communication experts to help manage the message with our tenants, especially in our mixed-use centres."

This perception piece is why ignoring the issue isn't an option. But managing the issue comes with a cost – both in time and money. Not only do building managers and owners need to thoughtfully finesse safety messaging for tenants and the larger community of their building, they also need to update staff training and equipment to effectively address issues related to addiction.

Some building owners and managers are investing in technology such as tamper-proof alarms for stairwells and bathroom sensors. "Gender-neutral bathroom doors go from ceiling to floor to protect the privacy of the person who's inside the stall," explains Morgan. "This does not allow the security officers to check if someone's laying down, so we have no visual. The technology we're trying is a special detection device."

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Unsurprisingly, these systems are expensive – the one Morgan describes costs \$10,000 per stall – and they don't take the place of security staff who need to act quickly when those alarms or sensors detect a problem.

"What's required now is de-escalation training," De Wolf says. "We're speaking with our security partners and internal staff and giving them training on mental health and addiction awareness, so that when incidents do occur, they're able to de-escalate the situation and


manage until police arrive." Because most buildings rely on third-party security services with typically high staff turnover, training these guards in the nuances of de-escalation and expecting them to intervene in potentially dangerous situations with erratic individuals can be challenging. Increasingly, however, real estate companies are realizing that training and paying higher salaries to retain knowledgeable guards not only satisfies clients and tenants, but also offers better outcomes for people with OUD.

"One of the initiatives we took was training some of our security personnel with the use of naloxone," Huston says. "We've saved two people's lives because of that, which gives them another chance to get the help and support they need."

SEEKING SOLUTIONS

Some forward-thinking real estate companies are also adopting innovative measures to address the roots of the addiction crisis by establishing partnerships between their hired security personnel, local law enforcement and social services. In fact, some of the most interesting work is happening in Montreal, where Fortin and SDS offer their formal programming that connects social workers to real estate management teams.

JLL, for example, has shifted to a proactive response to the increase in visibly addicted individuals spending time in its retail properties in the city.



Through changes in security protocol and partnerships with law enforcement and local social agencies like SDS, JLL's security teams are developing protocols that are intentionally empathetic toward vulnerable people on their properties. In more than one instance, they've helped regular visitors who would have previously been dismissed as nuisances find their way into treatment and affordable housing programs and eventually reintegrate into mainstream society.

BOMA Canada has also convened a group of key stakeholders, which includes the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, the Canadian Bankers Association and the Business Council of Canada, to name a few, to address the challenge of revitalizing Canada's downtown cores. As part of this work, the group expects to develop creative advocacy objectives that will help address the addiction crisis.

A HUMAN-CENTRIC APPROACH

In addition to assisting individuals with addiction onsite when security calls in an incident, Fortin meets monthly with law enforcement, real estate management and security teams to discuss how properties are managing through the crisis. Since many people with OUD tend to become "regulars" in certain buildings, security personnel may keep notes on specific visitors,

using nicknames to protect each person's privacy. They may observe changes in mental and physical health, the need for emergency intervention, or if the individual seems ready to accept a social agency's help. No one can be forced into a shelter or treatment program, but security and social workers can earn their trust with regular interaction and offers of assistance.

"We're helping security learn how to react the proper way. When you're a security agent you represent authority, which most vulnerable people don't like," Fortin says, adding that she and her team serve as a bridge between security and the homeless person. "We try to make them learn that it's OK to work

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with security and that some are there to help them."

Real estate companies are in the business of community, which must include vulnerable members of society. These new person-centred approaches are not only ethically sound but also more effective in keeping both those with addiction and the general public feeling safe and secure. Until the root causes of the addiction crisis are solved, the future of building security needs to involve working with individuals with addiction instead of maintaining an "us versus them" mentality.

It's clear that for commercial real estate, the opioid crisis requires a collaborative approach involving property management, security, social services and law enforcement, all of which require significant financial support. Real estate companies like JLL are investing in keeping programs like Fortin's running. The hope is they'll eventually expand beyond Montreal to other cities around the country. From there, Morgan envisions the company investing in affordable housing to further help people trying to get back on their feet.

"You're part of the problem if you're not part of the solution," Morgan says. "The real estate industry has a major role in this. If people are on our property, we need to be part of the solution. We have a responsibility to participate." ■



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