

# A SUBSTANCE USE HEALTH LENS

## A stigma-reduction project in Thunder Bay

### Key Takeaways to Reduce Stigma

- Leadership buy-in/participation
- Use assessment & policy tools to identify/address stigma
- Involve people with lived and living experience in all stages
- Embed commitment across all levels of the organization
- Ensure dedicated capacity through staff time, training, tools, funding, etc.

Resources and tool links:  
[TBDHU.com/SUH\\_Lens](https://tbdhu.com/SUH_Lens)



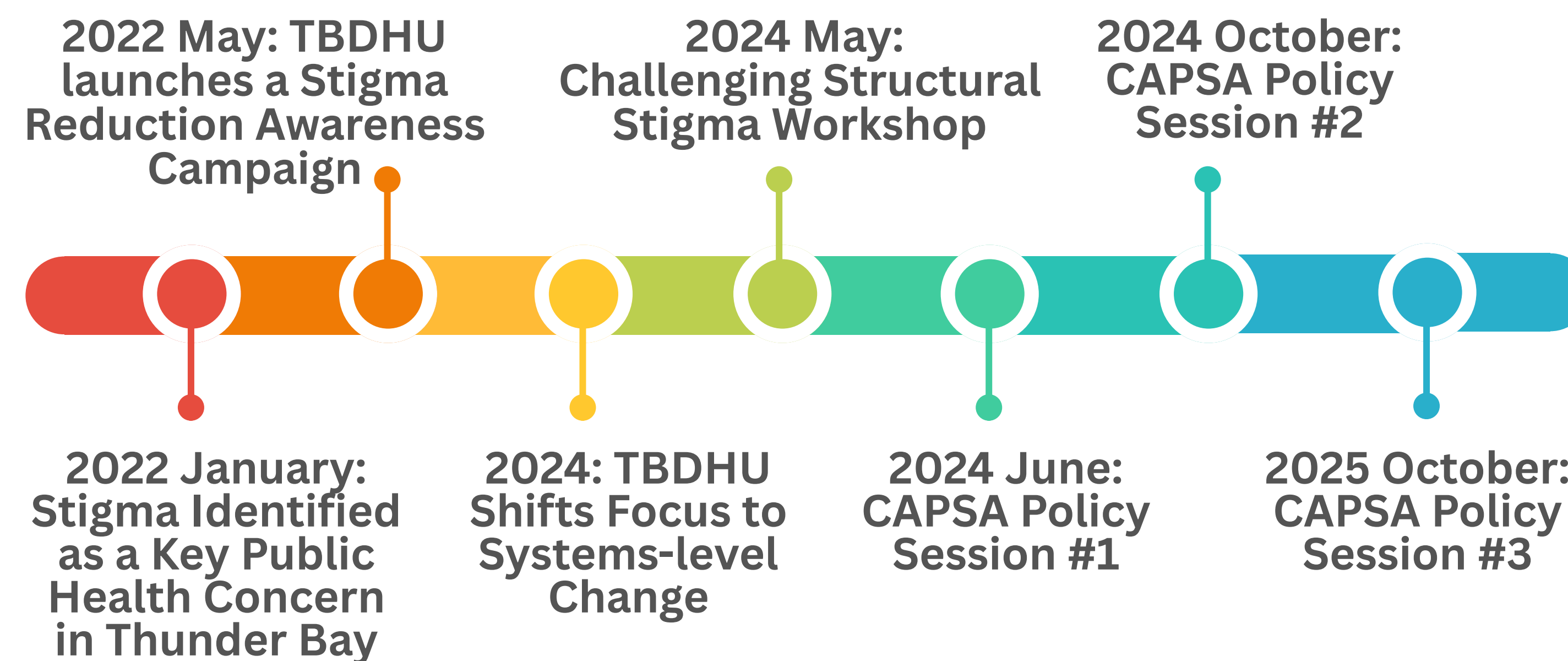
### AUTHORS

Stephanie Diebolt, TBDHU  
Sheena Albanese, TBDHU  
Ashleigh Hyland, CAPSA



### BACKGROUND

Efforts to address substance use stigma in Thunder Bay, Ontario have evolved, with the Thunder Bay District Health Unit (TBDHU) recently adopting a substance use health (SUH) approach. This project focused on engaging leadership to tackle structural stigma.



### OBJECTIVES



### PRINCIPLES

Centre lived experience  
Apply an equity lens

### ENABLING FACTORS

Leadership support  
CAPSA expertise

### APPROACH

#### Engagement: Structural Stigma Workshop

Leaders from health and social services were invited to a free *Challenging Structural Substance Use Stigma* workshop to build foundational knowledge. Two representatives per organization were asked to champion integration of the learning internally. Promotion was done via social media, TBDHU's newsletter, website, and the local Drug Strategy.

#### Capacity-Building: Policy Sessions

Organizations from the workshop were invited to follow-up sessions led by CAPSA, whose lived experience and national credibility boosted interest. As a community of practice, the group sessions focused on equity-based policy tools, reflective practice, and peer dialogue.

### FINDINGS

- 10 organizations attended the structural stigma workshop
  - 8 joined CAPSA-led policy sessions
  - 5 completed policy and practice tools
  - 2 organizations have initiated updates to their substance use policies (including TBDHU)
- 2 new organizations joined later and expressed continued interest

#### Qualitative Insights from Participant Feedback

- Substance Use Health aligns with wellness priorities
- Sustained change requires ongoing staff education and engagement
- High readiness for change despite challenges

### CONCLUSIONS

The stigma workshop enabled the formation of a community of practice to support policy development. While capacity to complete the tools varied, interest and commitment remained strong. After a year and a half, participating organizations and two new partners have committed to embedding substance use health principles within their organizational culture and practices. Together, these efforts reflect meaningful progress toward applying a substance use health lens in Thunder Bay.