

SUMMARY REPORT

# Meeting Crisis with Opportunity

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## Reimagining Toronto's Shelter System

The Impact of COVID-19 on Toronto's 24 Hour Emergency  
Homelessness System

June 2021

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# Introduction

Vulnerable populations, including people experiencing homelessness, have been hard hit during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup>. In Toronto, a rapid emergency response to protect homeless populations was undertaken, resulting in a significant restructuring of the 24-hour emergency homelessness system (shelter system). In order to document the impact of this transformation, the Toronto Shelter Network (TSN), in partnership with Dixon Hall Neighbourhood Services (Dixon Hall) embarked on a six-month exploratory study called “**Meeting Crisis with Opportunity: Reimagining Toronto’s Shelter System**”.

TSN is an umbrella organization that is composed of approximately 35 member organizations that together operate more than 100 emergency shelter, respite, 24-hour drop-in and COVID-19 response programs<sup>2</sup>. TSN believes that housing is a human right and envisions a City where everyone has a home that enables them to live with dignity.

**Meeting Crisis with Opportunity** was funded by the Social Development, Finance and Administration (SDFSA) department at the City of Toronto. The study aimed to achieve the following objectives:

- To better understand the impact of COVID-19 on the shelter system.
- To describe the experiences of shelter users (clients)<sup>3</sup> since the onset of COVID-19, and to better understand the impact the pandemic has had on diverse populations using Toronto’s shelter system, including those who moved into hotels and those who remained in legacy<sup>4</sup> shelters and respites.
- To develop recommendations that will help guide homelessness service providers and decision makers to develop sound and actionable short- and long-term strategies for improving emergency homelessness services.

This report identifies findings and highlights considerations that can improve the delivery of housing and homelessness services and supports for people in Toronto, build capacity and infrastructure for future waves of COVID-19 and other emergencies and inform the permanent transition of the shelter system into one that is people-centered and housing-focused.

1 The terms “COVID-19 pandemic”, “COVID-19”, the “pandemic” are used interchangeably throughout the report.

2 As part of the COVID-19 response, The City of Toronto has leased approximately 25 hotels providing more than 3,000 spaces for physical distancing and for people to move indoors from encampments.

3 The terms “shelter user”, “client” and “resident” are used interchangeably throughout the report.

4 The term “legacy” is used to refer to shelter programs that are not located in hotels, but does not refer to respites or 24-hour drop-ins.

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# Methodology

**Meeting Crisis with Opportunity** was conducted using mixed research methodologies as follows:

- A review of grey literature.
- A survey of 239 current service users at shelters, respites, 24-hour drop-ins, and COVID-19 hotels across the City. People from diverse populations including Black and Indigenous, families, LGBTQ2S+, men, refugees, women and youth were included in the sample.
- Three focus group sessions with 56 managers, front-line staff and shelter housing help workers/counsellors, as well as an online survey of four managers.

- Interviews with seven stakeholders bringing expertise in homelessness and housing policy and operations, public health and community engagement.

Challenged at the outset with a very short project timeframe, the research team's efforts were further complicated by constant outbreaks of the COVID-19 virus at various shelters and resulting lockdown measures, service delivery priorities and research fatigue. Thanks to the cooperation and willing participation of shelter users and service providers, the project was completed on time and as planned.

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# Findings

## Review of the Literature

Existing literature describes how the lack of sustained investment in housing and social policy by federal and provincial levels of government has contributed to the current homelessness crisis in Toronto. Systemic inequities, propelled in large part by anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism, have made particular populations vulnerable to homelessness. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified inequities for diverse socio-demographic groups that experience intersecting barriers, and which comprise shelter using populations in Toronto, including Indigenous peoples, women, LGBTQ2S+ people, families, Black people, refugees, youth and men, as well as some of the pathways into homelessness for these populations.

The literature shows that there is a unique policy moment to leverage. The City has committed to a vision of ending chronic homelessness with the HousingTO Action Plan, the Province of Ontario is working towards a vision of ending chronic homelessness by 2025 and the Government of Canada has committed to ending all chronic homelessness in Canada by 2028.

## Service User Survey Results

Survey participants reported having both positive and negative experiences with the shelter system during COVID-19. In general, shelter users felt well supported by shelter staff during the pandemic and reported satisfaction with infection control measures undertaken by shelters. Without doubt, hotel clients appreciated the increased privacy and safety available to them.

## Findings (continued)

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At the same time, restrictive rules, mask wearing and program reductions were difficult for many of those surveyed. The survey findings indicate that COVID-19 and the related changes implemented in the shelter system have had a differential impact on different populations. They highlight strengths and deficits of the shelter system and the lack of supports available outside of shelters for many communities. Notably, hotel program users and Black survey participants reported a lack of access to housing supports. For Black shelter users, this may be attributed to both systemic racism and bias within the shelter system and on the part of landlords. In addition, childcare has been eliminated for many families, youth have been challenged to secure employment supports and women need gender-informed harm reduction services.

Shelter users made many suggestions for improving homelessness services and for ending homelessness in Toronto, with most respondents advocating for robust housing supports to be embedded across the shelter system and improved access and pathways to affordable and supportive housing.

### **Service Provider Focus Group Results**

Management and front-line staff described the challenges and the successes that they experienced during the pandemic. They spoke of facing significant human resources and financial pressures and raised questions about organizational and system-wide sustainability. They expressed significant concern about the health, mental health and safety of staff and shelter users, and about increased rates of overdose. They also highlighted the loss

of programming supports for clients, their increased social isolation and disruptions to their social networks and sense of community.

On the other hand, they discussed positive experiences, such as the ease of transitioning shelter users into private accommodations at the hotel programs and into permanent housing as a result of rapid housing initiatives introduced during the pandemic. They also described many strengthened partnerships, most notably with the health sector. Service provider accounts help to paint a picture of the direct and indirect ways in which the pandemic has both tested and helped shelter users, service providers and the shelter system as a whole. Their testimonies highlight the resilience of service providers, their commitment to ensuring the well-being of shelter users and their continued efforts to find permanent housing solutions for shelter users during these trying times.

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# Considerations for the Shelter System

## Human Resources and Sustainability

This study has shown that a number of changes need to be made to ensure that shelters are equipped to mitigate and/or handle emergency situations.

- It is essential that individual shelters, and the shelter system as a whole, have a) the capacity to adequately recruit, retain and compensate their staff, b) resources to create workplaces that prevent burnout and compassion fatigue and foster wellness, and c) a strategy to quickly skill up the workforce to respond continuously to changing demographics in the system or shifts in need.
- It is important to have staff – permanent and relief – who have the knowledge, skills, experience and resources to address challenges that may be amplified during emergencies and to work effectively with populations who are particularly vulnerable during times of crisis.
- To help stabilize shelter service providers, the Shelter Support and Housing Administration (SSHA) and other City divisions can deepen their work with shelter providers to transition the shelter system to embody a more robust housing delivery focus. Immediate opportunities for enhanced collaboration include the roll out of the coordinated access system and the conversion of emergency homelessness programs into supportive housing.

## Program and Service Delivery

The pandemic disrupted program and service delivery across the shelter system. Enforced masking and social distancing coupled with service/program reduction and closures, and the lack of access to friends, family, other shelter users, shelter staff and community service providers contributed to the rise in mental health and substance use related crises across the sector. At the same time, a most incredible outcome during this pandemic has been the range of partnerships forged or strengthened across various sectors. Further, feedback from shelter users and staff indicates that there is an opportunity for housing to be a stronger and more fundamental feature of shelter programming.

- There is a need to embed programming that promotes wellbeing and fosters both belonging and community into the shelter model, so that during emergencies and times of crisis there is capacity to prevent social isolation and promote mental health.
- Tables that are working on the development of referral and service pathways between health services (primary care, harm reduction and mental health) and the shelters should hasten their efforts and should be resourced adequately so that all shelter users, regardless of where they are in the shelter system, can receive equitable access to the services that they require. It is time to double efforts at assuring ongoing access to and sustainability of health care, harm reduction and mental health/case management resources within the shelter system coupled with follow up supports that lead to successful housing outcomes.

# Considerations for the Shelter System (continued)

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- Shelter service providers should build staff knowledge and skills, and/or invest in additional housing workers, in order to strengthen, reshape or introduce services and programs explicitly focused on preparing clients to achieve optimal housing outcomes.
- Funding agreements with SSHA should appropriately resource and hold accountable shelter service providers for housing outcomes.

## Human Rights Focused, Inclusive and Equitable Shelter Models

The pandemic triggered a system-wide shift from congregate to individual rooms, a change that enables people to live with more privacy and provides a sustainable solution for protecting people in the face of future health emergencies. At the same time, there are valid concerns to address regarding health, wellbeing and safety, particularly for shelters users who are most at risk.

Despite the complexity of the emerging shelter hotel program, there is a need for these dignified settings and an opportunity, as communities and services begin to stabilize, to perpetuate and elaborate on these programs for unique communities (i.e., LGBTQ2S+, Black , Indigenous, etc.).

The study findings also indicate that shelter service models and built forms/physical structure can be improved to better address the unique needs of distinct shelter using populations and to foster inclusive and welcoming communities.

- SSHA, the Housing Secretariat and shelter service providers can work together more intentionally to ensure that human rights principles are consistently and equitably applied across all facilities that comprise the shelter system.
- Shelter service providers should continue to engage with funders, policy makers and health system partners to strengthen the foundation established during the pandemic to ensure that a robust and comprehensive range of services (e.g., housing, primary care, mental health, harm reduction, addiction, employment, etc.) are consistently embedded across the shelter system so ensure equitable access for all shelter users.
- The shelter system must continue to evolve to ensure that a range of options are available for diverse and emerging populations.
  - » First and foremost, SSHA and Indigenous partners can continue to advance accountability statements and action items identified in the Meeting in the Middle Strategy to meaningfully address Indigenous homelessness in Toronto.
  - » SSHA and the shelter system should also continue to work with Black leadership, within the shelter system and other Black serving organizations, to implement the recommendations of the COVID-19 Interim Shelter Recovery Strategy, which call for a distinct approach to serve Black people experiencing homelessness wherein the reality of anti-Black racism is recognized and addressed.
- There should be an intersectional approach to all shelter system planning whereby the unique experiences and backgrounds of diverse shelter users (families, LGBTQ2S+, refugees, youth, women, etc.) are prioritized and accounted for.

## Considerations for the Shelter System (continued)

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- Shelter users should inform policy and program development as an important step towards greater inclusiveness. Shelter service providers can play an important role in helping to put forward effective models for doing so.

### From Shelter to Housing

Overwhelmingly, feedback from shelter users and service providers emphasized the utmost importance of increasing the supply of affordable and deeply affordable housing stock across the City. They stressed the need for a range of housing options that meet people’s diverse mental and physical health and harm reduction needs, and which support their education and employment goals. Inevitably, they also identified the need for robust social and housing policies that entail sustainable long-term financial investment from municipal, provincial and federal levels of government, as well as the private sector. These findings suggest that shelter providers can leverage the unique moment afforded by the COVID-19 pandemic and work collectively towards the common goal of ending homelessness by:

- Engaging with SSHA and the Housing Secretariat to help inform decisions about the future of the shelter system and the acquisition/repurposing of shelters for housing.
- Ensuring that learnings from other jurisdictions are leveraged, particularly in future decisions regarding hotel programs.
- Participating in collaborative and cross-sectoral initiatives for increasing the availability of supportive housing stock, such as the Supportive Housing Growth Plan.
- Advocating for rent subsidies, such as the new Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB), more portable rent subsidies and rent controls.
- Developing a strategy for engaging with the City, housing developers and landlords to create more (deeply) affordable and supportive housing.
- Advocating for improvements to the minimum wage, Ontario Disability Support Program and Ontario Works Program, and for alternative models for guaranteeing people a living wage.



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# Future Areas of Research and Research to Action

**Meeting Crisis with Opportunity** provides a snapshot of the shelter system at an important point in time. The findings and considerations presented should offer guidance on policies, procedures and future areas of research. With more time and resources, the following areas deserve further exploration:

- Further comparative analysis of **Meeting Crisis with Opportunity** data to better describe the unique experiences for diverse socio-demographic populations of shelter users and for people using different shelter programs (i.e., hotels, legacy shelters).
- A study to better understand the impact of the pandemic on Black shelter users, who comprise more than 40% of all shelter users, and the intersection of the pandemic experience with anti-Black racism and the unique experiences of diverse Black populations, including women, youth and LGBTQ2S+.
- A study to evaluate the long term impact of the pandemic for people using different shelter programs and on the health and mental health outcomes for diverse shelter users and service providers.
- Engagement with Indigenous shelter service providers and Indigenous researchers to support their efforts to document the differential impact of the pandemic on Indigenous shelter users and service providers.
- A study of the feasibility of converting shelter programs (i.e., legacy shelters and hotel programs) into permanent supportive or transitional housing for clients and defining the requirements for ensuring inclusive and welcoming environments for diverse people.
- A study to explore opportunities for integrating peer-based programming (i.e., with the expansion of harm reduction) and creating good work opportunities for people with lived experience across the shelter system.





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# Conclusion

People experiencing homelessness have been hard hit during these past three waves of the pandemic – communities have been disrupted, people have become increasingly isolated, mental health challenges have been exacerbated and more lives than ever have been lost to overdose.

The impact on service providers, who throughout the pandemic have shown remarkable commitment and resilience, has been significant. Despite daunting workplace circumstances and the risks posed to their health and their families' health, service providers rose to the challenge and enabled the shelter system to remain operational throughout the pandemic. The majority of shelter users and service providers see a silver lining, namely the increase in the number of people that have been housed this past year, the introduction of the hotel program and the overall success of measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in shelters.

Sixteen months into the pandemic, it is time to turn our attention to the future of the shelter system. The TSN and Dixon Hall share this report to foster reflection, ongoing inquiry and

change. Data from other jurisdictions shows that homeless individuals with even short stays in shelter hotel programs have greater successes once they transition to other forms of permanent housing. This is just one of many findings and considerations highlighted in **Meeting Crisis with Opportunity** which inspire hope and can help move us toward the eradication of chronic homelessness in our city.

Finally, shelter users best understand what is required to improve their housing outcomes and can best articulate the needs of diverse populations using the shelter system. As a next step, shelter users, as well as shelter providers and decision makers, will be re-engaged to identify priority recommendations and actions so that this study can more explicitly inform decision making processes and have lasting impact.





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