

Shelter, Support & Housing Administration Division

Shelter Provider, 24-Hour Respite Site and 24-Hour Women's Drop-In COVID-19 Response Frequently Asked Questions and Resources

This FAQ sheet has been developed to answer questions that homeless service providers may have about COVID-19 and SSHA's response. In addition to this document, service providers are encouraged to review the [City's website for updates on SSHA services](#), and to review following resources which are also available on the website link above (<https://www.toronto.ca/home/covid-19/affected-city-services/>):

- [Interim Guidance for Homelessness Service Setting Providers](#)
- [COVID-19 client screening tool for homelessness service settings](#)
- [COVID-19 screening process for clients in homelessness service settings](#)
- [Checklist for clients referred for COVID-19 testing](#)
- [Instructions for arranging non-emergency transportation for clients](#)

Note that as the situation is changing rapidly, the answers we provide today may change tomorrow based on updated circumstances and information.

Please stay up to date with the most recent information to keep yourself informed of new developments by referring to credible sources of information, such as Toronto Public Health's [website](#) and the [City's website for updates on SSHA services](#).

SECTION 1: SSHA SERVICES AND RESPONSE TO COVID-19

1. What SSHA services will stay open/be closed during this time?

Housing Support

Most Housing Stability Services will continue, including payments to service providers and landlords, and processing of Housing Allowance applications. Some services may be subject to longer wait times.

Access to Housing (Housing Connections) offices at 176 Elm St. will be closed. Residents can continue to submit applications by fax, online, or by mail. Information on Rent-Geared-to-Income Housing is available at toronto.ca/accesstohousing or by contacting Housing Help Centres.

Responding to general inquiries regarding files and requests for program information is suspended. Emails sent to ask@housingconnections.com will be responded to once normal operations resume.

Financial services and contract administration activities will continue. This includes Social Housing Apartment Improvement Program (SHAIP) and Toronto Renovates payments.

Shelters and Supports for Individuals Experiencing Homelessness

129 Peter Street referral centre is closed to walk-in service, effective immediately. All referrals to shelter should be directed to Central Intake at 416-338-4766. Clients can access Central Intake by calling 311 or 1-877-338-3398, toll-free from any pay phone. The nearest payphone to 129 Peter Street is located at Queen St. W and Bathurst St.

All City-operated shelters, respites and 24-hour women's drop-ins will remain open and support activities will continue. Streets to Homes outreach will continue to operate 24/7.

Response to non-urgent community and client complaints and community meetings and site visits will be suspended. Shelter and overnight service daily occupancy reporting will also be suspended. No encampment clearings will take place.

Should Environment and Climate Change Canada forecast a temperature of -15° C or colder, or a wind chill of -20° C or colder, the Medical Officer of Health will issue an Extreme Cold Weather Alert and the City will carry out the Cold Weather Response Plan.

2. What is SSHA doing to respond to the emergence of COVID-19?

Based on the evidence and medical advice we have received, we know we need to quickly take actions to delay the spread of COVID-19 to significantly reduce risks. The City has developed a three tier approach to strengthening prevention against COVID-19 in our emergency shelter system.

We have rapidly implemented this plan over the past week, mobilizing our response on an urgent basis, to be as prepared as possible and stay one step ahead of a very rapidly evolving situation. We are taking these steps because we know that many people experiencing homelessness have underlying chronic medical conditions that increase their risk from COVID-19 and this is a particularly vulnerable population.

Added Space for Physical Distancing

Five new facilities opened between March 16 and March 19, 2020 to better allow for physical distancing between clients. Each site will be able to accommodate approximately 50 clients and service is currently ramping up:

- a. 354 George St.
- b. John Innes Community Recreation Centre, 150 Sherbourne St.
- c. Warden Hilltop Community Centre, 25 Mendelssohn St.
- d. Driftwood Community Recreation Centre, 4401 Jane St.
- e. Matty Eckler Community Recreation Centre, 953 Gerrard St. E (for women and trans clients only)

Information on each new facility is now available on [Homeless Help](#).

Out of the Cold programs typically wind-down for the season in late-March and early April. This year, Dixon Hall continues to operate an Out of the Cold location at 188 Carlton St. The location has 45 beds for the rest of the Out of the Cold season. If required, the City will activate Metro Hall during an Extreme Cold Weather Alert.

The focus is to create more than 200 spaces as quickly as possible within City facilities to create additional physical distancing within our current programs, particularly our 24-hour respite sites and 24-hour drop-ins.

We anticipate an additional two sites to be opened this week – one today (March 23) and another tomorrow. There are an additional 10 facilities identified and ready to be activated as they are needed.

We have also opened a dedicated site available for people who have entered the country within the past 14 days, providing them with the ability to self-isolate, as recommended by TPH. Central Intake asks screening questions of people calling for shelter access and refers them directly to this program.

Isolation for Clients Waiting for Test Results

We have created a dedicated program with isolation spaces and appropriate health supports for people identified through screening and assessment processes that are waiting for test results. This is the first program of its kind in Canada.

Currently we are implementing screening processes using the Toronto Public Health recommended screening questions at all points of entry by phone or in-person for all those seeking shelter. Anyone wanting to access the shelter system who should be assessed for COVID-19, is being referred to one of the province's assessment centres.

Isolation for Clients Who Test Positive for COVID-19

The City has secured a location to provide a service for people experiencing homelessness who have tested positive for COVID-19 and are working to prepare the site to be ready to open. We continue to work with our partners at the Inner City Health Associates to identify and secured the required health supports to activate this program.

Rapid Housing Initiative

To reduce risk of particularly vulnerable populations, we are developing a Rapid Housing Access Initiative to prioritize housing offers to existing shelter clients to available Toronto Community Housing units. Clients are being referred through our Coordinated Access system and will be provided with supports to be successful in achieving housing stability. Units will be prioritized for particularly vulnerable individuals, including seniors. Fifteen households have been matched with housing and will be moving in this week. The units will be fully furnished in partnership with the Furniture Bank. An additional 50 units have been identified for move in in the coming weeks.

3. How is Inner City Health Associates (ICHA) supporting the response within the homelessness sector?

ICHA is a key partner in our response, supporting program delivery and management at our current isolation site, as well as providing advice and guidance in assessing and referring clients to testing.

4. Should homelessness service providers expect a surge in demand for services as a result of the COVID-19 related economic crisis?

SSHA has taken steps to protect housing stability during these challenging economic times. Social housing providers have been instructed to discontinue eviction-related processes and issuance of Notices of Decision for Loss of Eligibility – RGI Assistance, and to suspend existing Notices of Decision for Loss of Eligibility – RGI Assistance. SSHA has suspended the processing of existing and incoming Requests for Review – Loss of Eligibility for RGI Assistance.

Housing providers have been directed to be flexible and exercise discretion on rent payments particularly as they apply to households whose primary source of income is employment. Housing providers have been instructed to work with impacted tenants to defer rent payments and/or enter into payment agreements.

In addition, the provincial government has suspended evictions and instructed the Sheriff's Offices to halt any scheduled enforcement.

SECTION 2: CLIENT ADMISSION AND SCREENING

1. Should/can shelters go into lockdown and shelter in place – should shelters stop accepting new referrals?

Shelters should continue to maintain their existing capacity and accept new admissions into your programs, while implementing the physical distancing approaches identified by Toronto Public Health. Given the ongoing pressures on the shelter system and needs of this very vulnerable population, we need to continue to provide safe indoor places for people to seek shelter. Shelter to shelter transfers should be suspended where possible to limit movement between programs.

2. How should sites be screening clients for COVID-19?

One of our key priorities has been to develop processes to screen clients and refer them for testing to one of the COVID-19 Assessment Centres. In partnership with Toronto Public Health, we have developed a [screening tool](#) and [instructions for accessing transportation](#) from shelters, 24-hour respites, 24-hour drop-ins and Streets to Homes to testing centres for clients who meet the screening criteria.

Clients should be screened on intake to the program, as well as active monitoring of existing clients for development of symptoms.

More information is available on the [TPH website about locations of testing centres](#).

3. What precautions should sites take for refugees who have recently arrived or clients who have recent travel history?

The federal government has restricted entry to Canada. Most foreign nationals are not currently being admitted across the border. The client [screening tool](#) provides direction for shelter sites regarding screening of clients who are recent arrivals.

4. Who can access non-emergency transportation for homeless clients who meet the screening criteria?

City-operated or funded shelters, 24-hour respite sites, 24-hour women's drop-ins, day time drop-ins and any other service that works with clients who are experiencing homelessness can [access non-emergency transportation](#) for homeless clients needing transportation to an assessment centre and/or to the isolation site following assessment.

Transportation is available between 8am and midnight every day.

5. Will the non-emergency transportation that will bring from shelter sites to the Assessment Centres be marked with signage noting it is transporting individuals potentially exposed to COVID-19? Is there a way to minimize stigmatization of the individual and maintain their privacy dignity?

The third party contracted transportation company has been instructed not to have such signage for the reasons outlined. The drivers will arrive wearing full personal protective equipment to transport clients with symptoms of COVID-19 to the assessment centres or hospital for testing.

Please understand this service is being provided in place of a regular ambulance that would arrive for this same purpose with staff in full PPE. Unfortunately, our EMS service is not currently able to provide this as they are overstretched.

It is helpful to educate neighbours and others in the community about the important work we are doing to quickly isolate very vulnerable members of our community who show symptoms and have them tested. After testing a special isolation shelter has been established for people to stay until their test results are returned.

6. Are you going to provide sites with infrared thermometers?

At this time there are no plans to provide sites with infrared thermometers. You are encouraged to purchase supplies required for your response, using the additional funding has been provided for IPAC and other supplies.

SECTION 3: CLIENT TESTING

1. Where will clients who meet COVID-19 screening criteria go for isolation after testing? What supports will they have?

SSHA has identified a dedicated location with individual rooms where clients can self-isolate while they wait for COVID-19 test results. Clients will be transported to this location from testing centres and will remain there until they have received their test results. Clients will have access to medical support and medication storage on site, and the site is operating from a harm reduction lens and is family friendly. Each room has a television and telephone. Once clients have received a negative test result, they will be transferred back to their referring shelter program.

No direct referrals to this isolation program will be accepted outside of this process. To protect the confidentiality of clients who are testing for COVID-19, and because the site is not available to clients outside of this process, the exact location of the site will remain confidential.

2. What harm reduction supports are available to clients at the isolation site?

The isolation site is operating from a harm reduction lens and has a wide range of support available for people who use substances. For example, clients are permitted to smoke inside their rooms, methadone and managed alcohol programming is available, and peer supports are on site. The site is staffed 24/7 with nurses.

Clients can also refer to Toronto Public Health's [COVID-19 Harm Reduction Tips](#).

3. Should shelters hold beds for clients who have been sent for COVID-19 testing?

Yes. Clients will remain at the isolation site for approximately 24-72 hours while test results are obtained. If the results are negative, they will return to their shelter bed at the referring program.

4. What should sites do if a client refuses to be tested for COVID-19?

Staff should use their relationship with clients to help them understand the importance of testing, and should offer additional supports to clients to encourage testing (e.g., accompanying them to the testing site). If a client continues to refuse testing, staff should alert the DOC at sshadoc@toronto.ca. The DOC staff will pass the information on to the EOC at the City, who will advise on next steps.

5. If a client is sent for COVID-19 testing and the test is negative, will they be given documentation to show the shelter their test was negative?

Clients who are referred for COVID-19 testing will be assessed by public health staff to determine whether testing is necessary. Upon confirmation of a negative test result, individuals may return to the shelter/respice/drop-in program they were previously admitted to. We are currently developing tracking processes on results of testing and will update as new information is available.

6. What happens next if a client is sent for COVID-19 testing and the test is positive?

If a client has been waiting for test results at the isolation site and receives a positive result, Toronto Public Health will implement their contact tracing and notification protocol.

SECTION 4: CLIENT ISOLATION AND QUARANTINE

1. How can clients self-isolate in a shelter/respice/24-hour drop-in environment?

SSHA has created [additional spaces](#) available for isolation and quarantine. Please consider the possible options for creating isolation spaces within your facility to the extent possible. For example, designate any separate rooms with closed doors, with separate bathrooms if possible or designate an accessible or all gender washroom for this purpose. If only shared rooms are available, consider designating a room with the fewest possible number of other residents.

Review the information available from Ontario Public Health about [how to self-isolate](#) and [guidance for caregivers and household members of people who are self-isolating](#).

2. Where do people go from the isolation site if they test positive for COVID-19?

The City has identified a location to provide a service for people experiencing homelessness who have tested positive for COVID-19, but critically need health care supports in place before we operationalize this site. We are working with Inner City Health Associates to identify those supports and when they could be in place.

SECTION 5: FRONTLINE STAFF TESTING AND ISOLATION

1. How and when should frontline staff be tested for COVID-19?

Staff should follow [Toronto Public Health's COVID-19 testing guidelines](#).

2. How should sites manage staffing issues while staff are self-isolating or feeling unwell?

Sites should develop contingency plans as soon as possible. Planning should include identifying mandated and critical services, ranking all services in order of priority, and planning to limit non-essential or lower priority services as needed. Staff serving non-essential functions should be trained to backfill essential positions wherever possible.

SECTION 6: REDUCING RISK OF INFECTION

1. Where can sites get access to personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff, and additional cleaning supplies?

We recognize that access to personal protective equipment (PPE) is critical to being able to provide services safely and that this is an area of concern for many providers. We recently circulated a survey to better understand your needs related to PPE and this information will help us continue to advocate for access to PPE supplies for the homelessness sector.

There is a limited supply of PPE and cleaning supplies available. The City is currently assessing what PPE and cleaning supplies are on hand and how to ensure first responders and health care providers have the equipment they need. SSHA is working to prioritize the homeless sector to receive PPE and cleaning supplies and is developing a distribution plan as supplies become available.

To provide some immediate relief, we have provided additional funding to all shelter, 24-hour respites, 24-hour drop-ins and daytime drop-ins to support increased infection control and prevention activities, and purchase specialized cleaning supplies, PPE and increase social distancing (e.g. using curtains).

Please note that masks are not currently recommended for frontline staff who are feeling well and interacting with clients who are feeling well. Physical distancing protocols recommended by TPH should be followed in these cases. Masks are recommended only for use by people who are not feeling well. In general, N95 masks are not recommended as appropriate protective equipment in response to COVID-19.

2. How can shelter operators encourage physical distancing in shelters?

We continue to work closely with our partners at Inner City Health Associates (ICHA) who are in the process of developing physical distancing guidelines for homeless services. As

these are being developed, we encourage you to consider the feasibility of implementing any of the following best practices at your sites:

- Increase spacing between beds where possible
- Arrange beds so that individuals lay head-to-toe (or toe-to-toe)
- Use neutral barriers (foot lockers, curtains) to create barriers between beds
- Stagger mealtimes to reduce crowding in shared eating facilities
- Stagger the schedule for use of common/shared kitchens
- Create a staggered bathing schedule to reduce the amount of people using the facilities at the same time
- Create a schedule for using common spaces

3. What can service operators do to reduce risk of infection at their sites?

To reduce the risk of infection and ensure ongoing service capacity, we ask that all providers implement the following measures:

- Implement physical distancing strategies at your sites where feasible
- Suspend shelter to shelter transfer practices
- Temporarily limit service restrictions, except in cases where a shelter provider determines that the service-restricted client poses an immediate threat or danger to another individual's health or safety, or the security of the shelter
- Divert resources as needed to ensure continued delivery of core support services
- Support clients with family reunification where possible to reduce their risk of exposure
- Eliminate non-essential visitors and service providers on-site, and screen all visitors on entry to the premises

In keeping with these recommendations, SSHA will be suspending non-essential initiatives at this time. Monthly 24-Respite Standards site visits and upcoming schedule Shelter Standards Assessment site visits will be postponed until further notice. The Street Needs Assessment, planned for later in April, will also be postponed until further notice.

We encourage each service provider to review your own operations and suspend non-essential services. These decisions should be made by your organization. Please email sshadoc@toronto.ca to report any changes to your services and copy your lead SSHA staff.

4. Should sites increase Infection Prevention and Control practices at this time?

A reminder to continue to increase routine practices of IPAC within your facility as one of the most effective ways to reduce the spread of infections. Refer to the [IPAC guide developed by Toronto Public Health](#) specifically for shelter and 24-hour respite site services.

5. What should shelters do if community members complain that they observe people outside a shelter, 24-hour respite or 24-hour drop-in who are not demonstrating physical distancing?

SSHA is committed to working closely with shelter, 24-hour respites and 24-hour drop-in providers to implement measures to increase physical distancing. Homelessness service providers are encouraged to take measures to implement and encourage physical distancing using approaches identified by Toronto Public Health.

It is challenging to enforce physical distancing in a public space and not all individual involved may be service users. Service providers should attempt to engage and educate clients on the importance of preventative and containment measures in relation to COVID-19.

- Use rapport to engage clients.
- Inquire if there are supports that can be put in place to assist clients with physical distancing and/or screening if required.

Please do not restrict service to shelter.

SECTION 7: SPECIFIC QUERIES

1. I have a specific query related to my site/program. Who should I contact?

If you have questions, we encourage you to contact your SSHA Lead Staff or send us your questions to the centralized email address sshadoc@toronto.ca and we will provide responses in our future email communications.