

March 16, 2020

**To:** All Shelter, 24-hour respite and 24-hour drop-in service providers

**Re:** **Updates on COVID-19 Response Planning for Homelessness Services**

As the COVID-19 situation rapidly evolves, we are committed to providing you with regular, updated communications to keep you informed of the latest developments in our response strategies.

To that end, we activated our Divisional Operations Centre (DOC), on Thursday March 12, with a dedicated team of staff to plan our response. To ensure we continue to meet your needs and in an effort to keep clients, employees and the community safe, SSHA is working in close partnership with Toronto Public Health, the City's Emergency Operations Centre, our health care partners at the Inner City Health Associates and other stakeholders to respond to COVID-19, and ensure we are prepared for what may come next.

Those experiencing homelessness and accessing our services are particularly vulnerable, and collectively we need to ensure we are doing everything we can to protect them, as well as the staff providing direct services to them.

We understand that you have many questions and we will do our best to provide information as frequently as we can. It is more important than ever that we stay in close communication. As the situation is changing rapidly, the responses and answers we provide today may change tomorrow based on updated circumstances and information.

We anticipate there will be further developments later today, following any new federal announcements and as plans for new services are confirmed.

At the present time, the following response strategies are underway or in development.

### **1. Screening and testing:**

- Screening tools specific to shelter locations, and referral options for isolation and quarantine of clients who may require it, are currently in development in partnership with Toronto Public Health and Inner City Health Associates. A screening tool is being developed and will be distributed shortly.
- People who meet the screening criteria for a probable case established by the Ministry of Health and who have current symptoms, should be referred for testing at

one of the Covid-19 testing centres. More information is available on the [TPH website about locations of testing centres](#).

- If you have questions about who should be referred for testing, please contact Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000 for further guidance.
- Prioritization of testing for people experiencing homelessness, as a particularly vulnerable group, has been requested at local, provincial and national levels.

## **2. Self-isolation spaces:**

- We are currently identifying options to create additional spaces available for isolation and quarantine and more information will be shared on these as soon as details are confirmed.
- Please also consider the possible options for creating isolation spaces within your facility to the extent possible e.g. 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](#)

## **3. Isolation spaces for People Under Investigation (PUI)**

- Over the weekend, SSHA opened a designated program to provide isolation and quarantine spaces for people experiencing homeless who are awaiting Covid-19 test results, in partnership with ICHA. Referrals into this program are through Healthcare Providers only, following a medical assessment.
- Individuals who have been tested and medically assessed will then be supported to access the new program for isolation pending the results of the test. Upon confirmation of a negative test result, individuals may return to the shelter/respite/drop-in program they were previously admitted to.

## **4. Recent arrivals to the country:**

- Given the recent advice of the Medical Officer of Health that anyone returning to Canada from another country self-isolate for 14 days, the City has requested the federal government to put the necessary provisions in place to screen and quarantine people at border locations themselves, in particular for people who have nowhere to go through their own means where they will be able to self-isolate.
- As an interim measure, clients requesting shelter beds through Central Intake and SHARC will be screened and referred to spaces suitable for self-isolation for a 14 day period if they have been out of the country in the past 14 days.

## **5. Social Distancing:**

- We continue to work closely with our partners at Inner City Health Associates (ICHA) who are in the process of developing social distancing guidelines. 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
- To further reduce the risk of infection and ensure ongoing service capacity, we ask that all providers implement the following measures:
    - 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
    - Limit walk-in referrals to 129 Peter Street and move to phone based service referrals through Central Intake, where possible
    - 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.
  - Staff will be in touch with all service providers to discuss current operational issues and log outstanding questions. If you have questions regarding services that may be non-essential, your lead SSHA staff can discuss this with you during the call.

#### **6. Activation of new services to increase social distancing:**

- We are also planning additional service locations to be able to reduce capacities and increase social distancing within existing programs, focusing on those programs where the risk is greatest including the SHARC, 24-hour respites and 24-hour drop-ins.
- We hope to open the first of these locations today and begin ramping up services throughout the week.
- In addition, the Out of the Cold program is currently winding down ahead of schedule. SSHA is working with Dixon Hall to identify possible locations that could be activated

to ensure sufficient capacity within the system. As these locations are confirmed, details will be shared with the sector and posted on our website.

## 7. Infection Prevention and Control:

- 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.
- 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.
- Last week we sent 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.
- The City is currently assessing what PPE 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. If SSHA is able to access additional supplies, we will work on distributing them broadly across the sector.
- To provide some immediate relief, over the next week we will be providing additional funding to all shelter, 24-hour respites, 24-hour drop-ins and daytime drop-ins to support increased infection control and prevention activities, purchase specialized cleaning supplies, PPE and increase social distancing (e.g. using curtains).

While we take these additional measures, we ask that you continue to maintain your existing capacity and accept new admissions into your programs, while implementing some of the social distancing approaches identified above. 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.

We truly thank all of you and your staff for your commitment to providing services to the most vulnerable members of our community during this challenging time.

People experiencing homelessness are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 and we know that any actions we can take now to delay the spread of COVID-19 will significantly reduce risks and provide additional time for planning and resource strategies to be developed to respond over the coming weeks.

Please keep yourself informed of new developments by referring to credible sources of information, such as Toronto Public Health's [website](#). As the situation continues to evolve rapidly, we will continue to provide you with regular updates and new information. This includes scheduling additional Webex and Teleconference meetings to share information with the sector.

In the meantime, if you have questions, we encourage you to contact your Agency Review Officer or continue to send us your questions to the centralized email address ([sshadoc@toronto.ca](mailto:sshadoc@toronto.ca)) and we will provide responses in our future email communications.