

Shelter Support & Housing Administration Division

Shelter Provider, 24-Hour Respite Site and 24-hour Women's Drop-In Questions and Answers COVID-19 Response

This FAQ sheet has been developed to answer questions that homeless service providers may have about Covid19 and SSHA's response.

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](#).

SECTION 1: SSHA SERVICES AND RESPONSE TO COVID-19

1.1 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.

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 from Monday to Friday between 7 a.m. and 11 p.m.

18 March 2020

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 would take place during a Local 79 labour disruption.

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.

1.2 What is SSHA doing to respond to the emergence 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. We need to provide additional time for planning so we are prepared for what will happen in the coming days and weeks.

We are implementing a 3 tier response:

First, we are creating the ability for additional social distancing spacing within the existing shelter system through creation of new programs.

The first opened on Monday 16th March and service will ramp up over the next week.

The focus is to create more than 200 spaces as quickly as possible within City facilities that are currently empty. Those services are planned to open as early as tomorrow and will ramp up services over the week. As services open, that information will be available on our website and shared with our community partners.

This is NOT to create additional capacity in our shelters, but will allow us to move people within existing programs, particularly our 24-hour respite sites and 24-hour drop-ins.

This is to create more social distance space for those who use the system.

Second, we are creating additional isolation spaces for people identified through screening and assessment processes that are waiting for test results. This process has been initiated and we'll continue to move people who need it over this week into isolation.

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.

People who are experiencing homelessness who are being tested for COVID-19 will not be admitted into regular our shelter system. Instead they will be isolated in separate spaces at a designated program location.

This is the first program of its kind in Canada, as a medically supported isolation service for people who are homeless while they wait to receive their test results.

On the third tier, we are still working with our provincial partners to identify an appropriate service for people who have tested positive for COVID-19.

So far, we have not had anyone who has tested positive, and we want to make sure we have a program available when that occurs, that has the appropriate medical supports in place to protect staff, community partners and those we serve.

1.3 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.

SECTION 2: CLIENT ADMISSION

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

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.

SECTION 3: SCREENING AND TESTING CLIENTS

3.1 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. We have released a screening tool and instructions for accessing transportation from shelters, 24-hour respites, 24-hour drop-ins and Streets to Homes to testing centres. A dispatch function is being established at our Divisional Operations Centre (DOC) to coordinate available non-emergency transportation from sites to the testing centres, and provided instructions on arranging transportation. This transportation service has been available since this afternoon.

While clients are awaiting testing results, they will be transferred to the dedicated isolation program we have established. **No direct referrals to this isolation program will be accepted outside of this process.** Once clients have received a negative test result, they will be transferred back to the bed at their referring program.

This process will continue to evolve over the coming days, and updated information will be shared as it becomes available. As screening criteria and processes are updated by Ontario Public Health and our partners at Inner City Health Associates we will update our tools and processes.

3.2 Can/Are you going to provide sites with infrared thermometers?

18 March 2020

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.

3.3 What should sites do if a client meets screening criteria for Covid-19?

People who meet the screening criteria outlined in SSHA's screening tool 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.](#)

SSHA has transportation support in place for sites that need clients transferred to testing sites. Information about requesting transportation support has been shared with service providers.

3.4 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. Clients who receive a positive test will be immediately transferred to a designated program to provide isolation and quarantine spaces for people experiencing homelessness who are awaiting Covid-19 test results, in partnership with ICHA.

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.

3.5 Will recent arrivals to the country who are seeking emergency shelter in Toronto be screened for Covid-19?

The federal government has restricted entry to Canada. Anyone returning to Canada from another country is to self-isolate for 14 days. Most foreign nationals are not currently being admitted across the border.

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.

The client screening tool provides direction for shelter sites regarding screening of clients who are recent arrivals.

SECTION 4: CLIENT ISOLATION AND QUARANTINE

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

SSHA is 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](#)

4.2 Where should clients go who have been tested for Covid-19 and are waiting for results?

Over the weekend, SSHA opened a designated program to provide isolation and quarantine spaces for people experiencing homelessness 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 are awaiting testing results, they will be transferred to the dedicated isolation program we have established. **No direct referrals to this isolation program will be accepted outside of this process.** Once clients have received a negative test result, they will be transferred back to the bed at their referring program. This process is outlined in the flow chart attached for reference.

4.3 When will quarantine/self-isolation sites be open?

Over the weekend, SSHA opened a designated program to provide isolation and quarantine spaces for people experiencing homelessness who are awaiting Covid-19 test results, in partnership with ICHA. Referrals into this program are through Healthcare Providers only, following a medical assessment.

4.4 Where do people go from the quarantine site if they test positive for Covid ID?

We have requested that the provincial government to identify a location with appropriate medical supports for people who test positive for Covid-ID.

5. REDUCING RISK OF INFECTION

5.1 Will new services be activated to increase social distancing?

We are 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.

One site opened on Monday this week. Four more sites will be opening 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.

5.2 How can shelter operators encourage social distancing in shelters?

18 March 2020

We continue to work closely with our partners at Inner City Health Associates (ICHA) who are in the process of developing social 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

5.3 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 social 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
- 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.

5.4 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.

5.5 Where can sites get access to personal protective equipment (PPE) to protect staff?

18 March 2020

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).

6. SPECIFIC QUERIES

6.1 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.