

TORONTO DROP-IN NETWORK

GOOD PRACTICES TOOLKIT

Produced by: Paul Dowling Consulting, Good Practices Workgroup,
and Agora Foundation

2007

INTRODUCTION AND USER'S GUIDE

Welcome to the Toronto Drop-In Network's Good Practices Toolkit!

This Toolkit was developed through a process of intensive discussions with drop-in staff and participants, and it contains the collective wisdom of the Toronto Drop-In Network (TDIN). It is full of practical strategies, helpful tips, and rich discussions that are designed to help drop-in workers develop new policies or improve their existing practices.

The Good Practices Toolkit was written with the diversity of the TDIN in mind – each drop-in differs from others in terms of types of resources, staffing capacity, amount of available space, number of participants, ability to function autonomously, philosophy, mandate, and so forth. Many drop-ins face the same problems and have the same concerns, but few solutions are “one-size-fits-all.” The Toolkit covers a range of strategies that correspond to the different resources and constraints of each drop-in. Some of the guidelines apply to everyone – for example, food preparation safety standards – while others need to be adapted to meet the needs of different drop-ins.

Every drop-in is dedicated to continually improving their service, and this document is intended to give the TDIN the tools to help all drop-ins work together – as individuals and as part of the Network – to become the best that they can be. This Toolkit is intended to be a “living document” that grows and changes with the Network, benefiting from the discussion that it invokes. This process should be facilitated by material organization of the Toolkit – it is contained in a binder so policies or notes can be easily inserted in the appropriate place, and the pagination restarts with each subsection so that any new insertions can be easily incorporated into the numbering.

“Good Practices” Versus “Best Practices” or “Minimum Standards”

The Toronto Drop-In Network is remarkable in its diversity. Each drop-in exists within a particular environment, works within a particular set of constraints, and responds to a particular group of people. For these reasons, this Toolkit presents “good practices” rather than “best practices” or “minimum standards;” it does not try to prescribe one way to do something, but rather gives a range of suggestions for each topic that are responsive to the needs of different drop-ins.

Yet while practices may vary according to resources and populations, there is often an underlying “good approach” that provides a common foundation. For example, Section 3 says that drop-in participants should have input into the programs and services provided, and should be involved in decision-making processes at the drop-in. From this one premise, the section goes on to describe a variety of strategies – from surveys to town hall meetings to Board membership – that can be adopted, depending on the drop-in's particular resources and constraints.

For drop-in staff, this Toolkit does not provide you with a set of rules or minimum standards, but instead offers you a way to orient yourself toward your work. As you already know, working in a drop-in requires a tremendous amount of flexibility and creativity. Good practices are about thinking things through, acting with intentionality and care, being responsive to criticism, provoking discussion, and continuing to challenge yourself and others to find ways to improve the quality of your drop-in's service. It is helpful to think of all policies as drafts – never fully finalized, and always open for improvement based on new suggestions, local needs, and changing circumstances.

How to Use the Toolkit

Reproduction and adaptation of portions of this Toolkit by not-for-profit organizations is encouraged, providing that the Toronto Drop-In Network Good Practices Toolkit is acknowledged as the source. No part of the Toolkit may be used for commercial or consulting purposes without prior written consent from the Toronto Drop-In Network.

This Toolkit – like any box of tools – can be used in many different ways. If you want to build a shelf, you need a hammer and nails. If a pipe springs a leak, you need a wrench. Below are some suggestions on how to access and use the tools contained here.

Getting practical advice and material resources. You may be selective as you use this Toolkit, and pick it up only in specific situations where you need practical advice – for example, when you are revising a particular policy on barring practices, or revamping your hiring process, or deciding whether you should institute a loan-granting system, or wondering how to make your TTC token distribution more equitable, or looking for advice on how to improve your relationships with your neighbours.

Each section highlights effective strategies and discusses the advantages and drawbacks to each one, while the appendices provide material resources that you can print out and use. For example, there are participant code-of-conduct posters that you can put up in your drop-in; or volunteer application forms; or a confidentiality policy; or an emergency search and evacuation procedure, or a mail call form; or a barring contract between staff and participants; or a sample participant file closure form; and so forth. These offer a good template to build on, but may need to be adapted to reflect your drop-in's particular management structure, circumstances, and mandate.

Developing your own manual. Because the TDIN is so diverse, and factors like funding levels and spatial capacity significantly affect what types of programming and administration each drop-in has, this Toolkit is not a rule book providing simple, straightforward instructions that everyone will follow. The Toolkit can, however, be a valuable resource for managers to use as they develop their own manual for staff and volunteers in their particular drop-in.

Many drop-ins are under-resourced or understaffed and have little time to develop their own policies and procedures manuals; this Toolkit is intended to facilitate this process. In

addition to the practical strategies offered in each section, there are sample policies and sample protocols attached as appendices. These samples may be easily adapted to fit your drop-in (in some cases, the adaptation may be as simple as adding your drop-in's name at the top of the page; in other cases, you may need to alter the wording to better suit your particular context).

Further, the Toolkit has been printed in a binder to facilitate the addition and organization of your drop-in's own policies, procedures, and guides.

Explaining or justifying to others what you do. In addition to basic nuts and bolts of practical suggestions, this Toolkit also offers conceptual tools – “tools to think with.” It is important, not just to use a good practice, but to be able to give a rationale for *why* it is a good practice.

For example, if a participant challenges a particular rule – for example, why they are not permitted to take leftovers home with them – it is far better to give legitimate health and food safety reasons than to say “because it is a good practice.” This is a fairly simple example; more problematic ones require more detailed rationales. For example, explaining why a violent participant was only barred from entering the drop-in for a few days; or why it is any of the staff's business what a participant does down the street from the drop-in.

This Toolkit's philosophies and rationales for particular practices can be put to use in a variety of other situations – for example:

- When you are developing an orientation or training session;
- When you are advocating on behalf of participants or drop-ins in the political sphere; or
- When you are trying to justify or explain a particular practice to funders, or managers, or Board members, who do not understand what makes it effective.

Training staff or volunteers. This Toolkit may be used during training or orientation sessions for new staff, volunteers, Board members, or participants joining the staff or volunteer team at the drop-in. Each subheading in each section – for example, “TTC Tokens” or “Showers and Laundry” in 2B: Services and Supply Distribution – starts on a separate page. All relevant additional materials, like appendices, are located directly after that piece. The Toolkit has been organized in this way so that these may be easily removed as teaching aids or photocopied as hand-outs for training and orientation sessions.

Broadening and deepening your understanding. You may also read this Toolkit straight through, from start to finish, if you are interested to discover the kinds of things the Drop-In Network is talking about, and the sorts of practices being used across the GTA to work with socially marginalized folks. Reading the Toolkit from cover to cover may also be a good approach if you are planning to start a drop-in.

If you are interested in doing further research on any of the topics discussed in this Toolkit, there is also a List of Resources at the end that provides all the references used in each section as well as some additional sources that you might find helpful.

Networking. As well as being a useful resource for individual drop-ins, this book is also intended to serve as a common reference point for all the drop-ins in the TDIN and to be used to facilitate networking and dialogue. Building a safe community and a strong coalition relies on clear communication pathways and established guidelines that the community is aware of and can refer to. It should be emphasized, however, that this Toolkit is not intended to be the “last word” – it is intended to become a living document that grows and changes with the TDIN.

Methods

Site visits. This Toolkit was developed through an intensive consultative process. The manager of the TDIN chose a representative sample of eight drop-ins for the consultants to visit and interview their staff. The drop-ins were selected to express the range of the TDIN: one served youth, one served seniors; one served men exclusively, one served women exclusively; some were faith-based, some were secular; one focused on mental health consumer survivors; one focused on trans-gendered people; some were part of a larger organization, some operated on their own; some were based in the downtown core, some were suburban; and so forth.

Focus groups. In addition to the site visit consultations, focus groups were held to open up the discussion and to solicit as wide as possible a range of opinions on good practices within the TDIN. Three focus groups were held with open invitations to any interested drop-in staff, and one was held with interested participants from five drop-ins.

Workgroup. A Workgroup composed primarily of TDIN drop-in staff convened regularly to shape the direction and revise the content of the Toolkit. The Workgroup provided detailed feedback on each of the sections of the Toolkit as they were written.

TDIN. When the Toolkit was complete, a message was sent out to all members of the TDIN to let them know it was available and to give them a chance to request a copy and review the draft.

Sample Policies. The consultants collected policies and procedures during their site visits, and other drop-ins also sent in these types of documents. These documents have been adapted and reproduced throughout this Toolkit as generic samples in the appendices at the end of each section.

The names of the drop-ins that the sample policies were originally from are not included here. While the sample may have originated with one drop-in, the policies have been adapted based on feedback received during focus groups and site visits; they are no longer the policy of that one organization, but rather represent a good practice as defined by a number of voices within the TDIN.

References. The information in this Toolkit is drawn from the site visits, focus groups, and Workgroup consultations carried out between May and October 2006. These are not cited within the text; only external and published resources are referenced. External sources are indicated in footnotes within each section, and are also given in a List of Resources at the end of the Toolkit. The specific individuals, drop-ins, and organizations who contributed to this Toolkit are credited in the Acknowledgements.

Conclusion

Drop-ins provide a safe and welcoming refuge for some of the most vulnerable members of our society. This Toolkit is designed to help the people who operate drop-ins be the best that they can and provide the most effective service to the community. We sincerely hope that you will find it useful.

We would also very much appreciate your feedback on this toolkit. Could you take a moment to send an email to tdin@ststephenshouse.com to answer the following questions?

1. Will this Toolkit be useful to you and/or your agency?
2. Which section will be most useful, and why?
3. Which section will be least useful, and why?
4. Are there other policies and procedures you wished were in the Toolkit?
5. Your name and agency

Thank you!

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WORKGROUP

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- Anne Carruthers (Toronto Drop-In Network),
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- Mustard Seed,
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- All Saints Drop-In Centre,
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