

Downtown Community Outreach Response and Engagement (CORE) Program

Date: June 26, 2025

To: Board of Health

From: Acting Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

SUMMARY

In 2024, Toronto Public Health and the Toronto Police Service launched the Downtown Community Outreach Response and Engagement (CORE) program as a one-year pilot to address complex health and social service needs among individuals experiencing homelessness, and challenges with mental health and substance use in the Yonge-Dundas (Sankofa Square) area. The program pairs public health nurses with police constables to deliver integrated, low-barrier, mobile outreach and case management services.

The program aims to connect individuals with health, social, and wraparound services, including harm reduction interventions, through voluntary, trauma-informed, client-centered engagement. The model aligns with the City's Our Health, Our City Strategy, advances the City's SafeTO Community Safety and Well-Being Plan, and applies a public health lens to community safety and well-being.

This report provides an overview of the program and seeks City Council authority to continue its implementation. Toronto Public Health will provide an update on the program, including the results of an evaluation, to the Board of Health upon completion of the pilot period in the first quarter of 2026 and seek the Board of Health's direction on the future of the program beyond the pilot year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Acting Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. The Board of Health recommend that City Council authorize the continued implementation and operation of the Downtown Community Outreach Response and Engagement program, as outlined in the June 26, 2025 report from the Acting Medical Officer of Health.

2. The Board of Health recommend that City Council authorize the Medical Officer of Health to enter into or continue agreements or other arrangements with the Toronto Police Service and/or other service organizations and agencies for the operation of the Downtown Community Outreach Response and Engagement program on terms satisfactory to the Medical Officer of Health and in a form satisfactory to the City Solicitor.
3. The Board of Health request the Medical Officer of Health to report back to the Board of Health with evaluation results and recommendations for the next steps of the Downtown Community Outreach Response and Engagement program in the first quarter of 2026.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no financial impacts associated with the adoption of the recommendations in this report.

\$1.0 million in gross expenditures and 8.0 staff positions for the Downtown CORE program are included in Toronto Public Health's 2025 Operating Budget. Toronto Public Health is funded by the Ministry of Health and the City of Toronto.

The Medical Officer of Health will report back on next steps and any associated financial impact for the Downtown CORE program in the first quarter of 2026.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the information as presented in the Financial Impact Section.

DECISION HISTORY

On November 18, 2024, the Board of Health considered the 2024 *Our Health, Our City Annual Progress Report*. The report highlighted the Downtown CORE Pilot as part of an update on the Strategy's strategic goal to advance community safety and wellbeing for everyone.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.HL18.2>

COMMENTS

The Downtown Community Outreach Response and Engagement (CORE) program is being piloted as a one-year initiative jointly led by Toronto Public Health (TPH) and the Toronto Police Service (TPS). Launched in December 2024, the pilot pairs public health nurses with Toronto police constables to deliver low-barrier, street-based outreach and case management services to individuals experiencing homelessness and living with mental health and substance use challenges in the Yonge-Dundas (Sankofa Square) area. The program boundaries are North to College Street and Carlton Street, East to Sherbourne Street., West to Bay Street. and South to King Street. Through outreach,

the Downtown CORE team proactively engages with individuals to facilitate access to services.

The program aligns with the City's Our Health, Our City strategy, which reframes mental health and substance use as health issues and prioritizes equity, harm reduction, and actions to address the social determinants of health.

Toronto Public Health and Toronto Police Service Partnership

The Downtown CORE program is a unique partnership between public health and policing to deliver integrated, non-enforcement led outreach.

- Public health nurses lead client engagement, provide health-related services, and coordinate short-term case management.
- Police supervisors and constables work alongside public health nurses to promote the safety of clients, staff, and the public.

Service Delivery Model

The Downtown CORE team operates seven days a week from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., delivering low-barrier, street-based outreach services in and around the Yonge-Dundas (Sankofa Square) area. The team is not an emergency or crisis response unit and cannot be accessed through 911 or 211. Outreach is proactive, with engagement occurring based on observed needs and relationships built with individuals in the area. Staff engagement with clients typically begins through informal conversation, wellness checks, and distribution of harm reduction supplies or personal care items.

Services are voluntary, client-oriented and grounded in trauma-informed care. They include health education, distribution of harm reduction supplies, hygiene items, warm clothing, and food, and appointment accompaniments. Public health nurses also provide short-term case management (up to 90 days), helping individuals navigate healthcare and social services. The Downtown CORE team also coordinates referrals to a range of services including primary and acute healthcare, mental health services, substance use services (including harm reduction, withdrawal management, and addictions medicine), and social services such as housing stability services, emergency shelter, income assistance, and identification services.

The Downtown CORE program is delivered by a multidisciplinary team that includes a TPH Manager, a Nurse Practitioner, up to six Public Health Nurses (PHNs), a Support Assistant, a TPS Staff Sergeant, two TPS Sergeants, and fifteen Constables.

The Public Health Nurses on the team have participated in over 200 hours of dedicated onboarding training covering trauma-informed care, non-violent crisis interventions, harm reduction and overdose response training, sexual health training, legal system navigation, and community safety. Toronto Public Health and the Toronto Police Service also participate in monthly joint professional development sessions, delivered by community agencies and subject matter experts, with a focus on client-centered service delivery.

Coordination with Other Service Providers and Outreach Teams

The Downtown CORE program is designed to complement existing outreach services in the Yonge-Dundas area by providing a distinct, health-focused case management service delivered through street-based engagement. The Downtown CORE program aligns with City strategies such as SafeTO and the Downtown East Action Plan, both of which emphasize improving coordination and integration of services in the downtown core.

In recent years, demands on the downtown service network have grown due to several intersecting factors, including the ongoing drug toxicity epidemic, and an increase in individuals experiencing chronic homelessness. These challenges have contributed to a growing need for flexible and coordinated services. The Downtown CORE team plays a role in responding to this need by providing coordinated, health-focused case management services for individuals who are often disconnected from traditional systems of care.

The Downtown CORE team regularly coordinates with a range of local service providers to facilitate service pathways. These include outreach, employment and housing service providers. For example, the Downtown CORE team may provide an individual with health education or harm reduction services and then refer or reconnect the client to an agency that provides housing assistance or identification services. Regular check-ins and coordination with these and other local providers help strengthen service pathways.

Governance and Oversight

The program is overseen by an Advisory Committee co-chaired by senior leadership from TPH and TPS. The committee includes representatives from City divisions, including Social Development and Toronto Shelter and Support Services, as well as external organizations including Toronto Metropolitan University, the Downtown Yonge BIA, and Unity Health. The committee meets quarterly to guide program implementation and review pilot data.

Community and Stakeholder Engagement

Prior to implementation, targeted engagement occurred with local health and community service providers operating in the Yonge-Dundas (Sankofa Square) area to inform the design and delivery of the pilot. The engagement involved raising awareness of the Downtown CORE model, gathering feedback to inform implementation, and exploring opportunities to align with existing local services.

The team connected with other Canadian jurisdictions that have similar multidisciplinary outreach models, including those in London, Hamilton, Victoria, and Windsor. Ongoing engagement activities include:

- Regular check-ins with local agencies and outreach teams
- Coordination with the Downtown Yonge BIA, which leads relationship-building with businesses and property managers in the area and
- Informal feedback from individuals accessing Downtown CORE services.

An internal evaluation is planned for Fall 2025. The results of this evaluation, along with additional community engagement, will guide future planning.

Current Status

In the first five months of implementation, the Downtown CORE team delivered a range of services. Table 1 provides a snapshot of key service metrics from December 17, 2024 to June 1, 2025, that highlight the scope and reach of the pilot.

Table 1

Key Service Metrics		
Category	Metric	Number
Client and Community Interactions and Case Management	PHN-Initiated Client Engagements	3,563
	Client-Initiated Engagements	240
	Case Files Opened	142
	Business Engagements	75
Crisis and Emergency Response	Overdose Responses	7
	EMS/ED Transfers	7
	Interventions with Clients in Distress	29
Supply Distribution	Articles of Warm Clothing	437
	Food Items	1,486
	Harm Reduction Supplies	671
Clinical & Supportive Referrals	Primary Care Services	243
	Psychosocial Services	745

In addition to providing immediate outreach and harm reduction services, the program provides case management. As of June 1, 2025, 142 case files have been opened. These files track progress towards jointly developed, client-centered care goals, including service connection and health improvement outcomes. Ten of the 142 case files have been closed, and an additional 15 to 20 are expected to close by end of June. In several cases, individuals have progressed from initial engagement to completing referrals, accessing medical care, and starting substance use treatment, or submitting housing applications. These outcomes point to positive early impacts. Several anonymous client testimonials have also described the pilot's positive impact.

Continued Implementation of the Downtown CORE Program

As part of its evolving service model and through its work with individuals in the area, the Downtown CORE team has identified a need to help clients with income and housing interventions. These include facilitating wraparound services such as assisting with access to mail, housing application completion and tax filing assistance through CRA-approved tax clinics. These services are often critical for client stabilization and system navigation. By integrating income and housing assistance into the Downtown CORE service delivery model, the program aims to reduce preventable deaths, promote continuity of care, and improve long-term health outcomes. Toronto Public Health requires City Council authority to deliver these wraparound services, which may involve the collection of clients' personal information.

Toronto Public Health is seeking Council authority for the continued implementation of the Downtown CORE program to address client health and social service needs.

Next Steps

With City Council approval, the Downtown CORE team will continue delivering integrated, low-barrier services in the Yonge-Dundas (Sankofa Square) area that respond to complex needs of clients.

An internal evaluation is planned to assess outcomes and gather feedback from clients to inform next steps. Findings will be presented to the Board of Health to inform decisions about the future direction of the program in the first quarter of 2026.

Toronto Public Health Strategic Impact

The Downtown CORE program aligns with Toronto Public Health's mandate to improve population health and reduce health inequities by addressing the social determinants of health through integrated, client centered service delivery. The program advances the following priorities of the Toronto Public Health Strategic Plan 2024-2028:

- Priority 3: Promote the conditions to support positive mental health and reduce the harms of substance use.
- Priority 4: Advocate to advance health equity.

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SIGNATURE

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