

Challenging Perspectives on Homelessness: Public Education Campaign

This version: March 30, 2017

Myth

Homelessness is a downtown problem.

People who experience homelessness come from every community in Toronto. While living through a housing crisis it is important to keep people connected to their local community and resources. Shelters are needed across Toronto to make sure people don't become displaced from supports and instead are assisted to get back into housing as quickly as possible.

Myth

Homeless people are different from me.

In fact, anyone who is living paycheque to paycheque could become homeless, and would need a place to stay while they get back on their feet. Most people who use the shelter system are there for economic reasons, and use it for a short period. Half of all people using the shelter system exit in less than two months and don't return.

Myth

People are homeless by choice.

90% of people who are homeless say they want permanent housing. Most say that having help to meet Toronto's expensive rents would be the best way to support them to end their homelessness.

Myth

Property values will go down if we let a homeless shelter into the neighbourhood.

Have you checked out Toronto real estate prices lately, in particular in the downtown core where homelessness services are most concentrated? There is no evidence to support the myth that homeless service facilities drive down property values in Toronto.

Myth

Homeless shelters are a place of last resort—they just warehouse people.

Shelters are in fact places of hope and opportunity. They are run by professionals who follow a housing first approach. This means case management and housing assistance, including housing allowances as well as hands-on help to find and secure appropriate housing and supports. In 2016, the City updated its Shelter Standards that raise the bar

with respect to the services provided and the physical environment in all municipally funded shelters. More work will be done in 2017 to continue to harmonize services across the system to meet these new standards.

Myth

If the shelter doesn't come to my community, it will go somewhere else.

Although we know that facilities need to be near 24-hour transportation and close to needed services such as employment supports and drop-ins, there is no perfect place for an emergency shelter. A recent poll underscores the fact that shelters don't have a lot of community support anywhere in Toronto: when asked if they would support a homeless shelter in their neighbourhood, 36% said 'yes', while 32% said 'no' with the same number either indifferent or don't know (24% + 8%, respectively). The fact is the City needs to find more places from which to provide services that provide shelter to people and the housing and case management services that will help them get back on their feet. There is widespread agreement that the best way forward is to work with the local community from early on in the process to collaboratively create ways to identify and respond to potential problems as the program is being developed. As one participant in a conversation to review the community engagement process around the siting of new emergency shelter locations bluntly put it: "do you want these people sleeping in your ATM or a shelter?"

Myth

Shelter users will congregate in the local park, leave garbage and needles around, and squeeze out the local kids and anyone else who wants to enjoy the space.

Like every member of the community, people staying at the local shelter are entitled to use public space provided they do so in a manner that respects others. If there are problems, the shelter provider will have a process in place to address these.

Toronto Shelter Standards require that all providers have board-approved good neighbour policies and procedures to govern how the shelter engages, communicates and works with the surrounding community. Fostering a positive relationship with the neighbours just makes good business sense. Operators are professionals who often rely on public funding to provide the services they do. They are very interested in dealing with neighbourhood issues in a way that does not jeopardize this. Public parks are also subject to codes of conduct and rules. The City has processes in place to deal with park issues such as inappropriate behaviour. And there is always the Ombudsman's Office.

Myth

Homeless men are all criminals, drug addicts, pedophiles, and sex-offenders. No one is safe around them.

Homeless men are among the most vulnerable and vilified residents in our city. Family breakdown is a leading reason for service, often the result of heads of households dying, or determining that they can no longer take care of physical and mental health needs. Some end up alone and homeless as a result of work injuries that take away their livelihoods. Many of the men and women who access shelter services are living with the impacts of traumatic brain injuries that occurred before they became homeless.

But being in a situation of homelessness can, and does, happen to anyone—your cousin, your brother, your mother, your great aunt.

Seaton House, Toronto's largest shelter for men, sees everyone from professionals who have given up hope to labourers who have lost limbs. Here are just a few recent snapshots from this facility, where taxis regularly pull up with passengers freshly discharged from hospitals. Often, they are still dressed in hospital gowns:

- Members of an African running team who sought refuge at Seaton House when they defected; several months later, and they are now living in the community, winning running awards, and getting sponsorships for their sport
- A leading producer in Toronto's financial world who drank away all his considerable earnings and had nowhere else to go ended up in the managed alcohol program
- A former municipal employee who developed mobility issues and started to drink as a way to self-medicate to deal with the depression. He became homeless
- Three African singers who fled their homes because the protest songs they performed took issue with the way women are treated

Myth

Homeless shelters are poorly maintained and operated.

Shelters in Toronto are operated by well-known and professionally managed not-for-profit organizations. Ten of the 59 or so shelters are operated by the City of Toronto.

All City-administered shelters are held to the Toronto Shelter Standards—Toronto being one of the few municipalities in North America to have such quality controls. These govern everything from access requests and customer service, to health and safety guidelines, meal programs, sleeping areas, personal needs, and case management supports.