

Update on COVID-19

Dr. Eileen de Villa, Medical Officer of Health

April 14, 2020 at 12 p.m.

Members' Lounge, Toronto City Hall, 100 Queen St. W.

- Good afternoon. As I shared yesterday, I continue to receive questions about the status of COVID-19 in our city's shelter system. I am very concerned about the devastating impacts of COVID-19 on our city's most vulnerable community – those experiencing homelessness. I'm therefore taking this opportunity to provide you with an update on work that is underway to minimize the impact of COVID-19 in this complex setting.
- Affordable, good quality, and stable housing is fundamental to health and overall well-being. People who enjoy stable living conditions are better positioned to lead their healthiest, happiest, and most productive lives.
- Unaffordable housing, poor quality housing, and housing instability are associated with a range of poor mental and physical health outcomes that can result in significant costs and strain to the health care system and society at large. These health outcomes and risk factors include injuries, chronic and communicable diseases, and risk factors for poor health such as food insecurity and stress.
- People experiencing homelessness are at increased risk of dying prematurely and suffer a higher incidence of health problems including infectious diseases.
- Early studies from the United States suggest that there may be higher frequency of COVID-19 diagnosis among the homeless population compared with the housed population.
- We suspect that people experiencing homelessness will have an increased burden of disease as they have a higher incidence of risk factors for poor outcomes related to COVID-19 compared to people who are housed. This includes pre-existing hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and respiratory disease. This deeply concerns me.

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- By way of a COVID-19 case update, as of 10:30 a.m. today, unfortunately there have been a total of 30 cases of COVID-19 among clients in 7 different shelter service settings in Toronto. While many of these cases are resolved, my team is currently working on 3 active investigations at:
 - The Willowdale Welcome Centre
 - Dixon Hall on Lakeshore; and
 - Seaton House
- Given that COVID-19 is spreading in our community it is not unexpected to see COVID-19 infections among those who are experiencing homelessness. We were prepared for the unfortunate situation of having cases in the shelter system. I am sincerely relieved to report that there have not been any COVID-19 deaths among clients in our shelter settings.
- Overall, I am still very concerned because COVID-19 continues to circulate in our community with approximately 30% of our cases attributed to community spread. This is why I keep asking people who are fortunate enough to have a home to stay home as much as possible, and practise social distancing.
- The individuals who access our local shelter services are some of our most vulnerable residents. We know that any infectious disease can spread easier and faster in congregate settings. We also know that many these people who use these services have chronic health issues. As a result, residents of the shelter system are very vulnerable to severe illness from COVID-19.
- Thankfully, we are extremely fortunate to have many partners and levels of government who are all contributing their unique perspectives, expertise and resources to address a shared goal to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in this complex sector.
- Providing comprehensive services to those who do not have stable housing encompasses the work of a myriad of agencies including: those that provide shelter, community agencies, municipal government, local public health, and provincial healthcare agencies, organizations and practitioners. These are operated by different agencies and funded by different sources: sometimes local government, sometimes provincial government and sometimes private funding sources.

- While each of these stakeholders has an independent mandate that they must consider, our partners have quickly convened to go above and beyond their independent mandate in the face of a global pandemic. This is truly amazing and nothing short of true collaboration at its best.
- To minimize the risk of COVID-19 outbreaks and prevent disease spread, my team actively works with our city partners and shelters in the community:
 - We provide guidance to ensure enhanced infection prevention and control, screening and physical distancing measures are in place to protect residents and staff at these facilities.
 - This includes enhanced cleaning and disinfection to reduce the risk of virus spread, prominently displaying signage on hand washing and COVID-19 signs and symptoms, and active screening for symptoms amongst both staff and clients.
 - We provide recommendations on self-isolation spaces and consultation on how to triage clients to self-isolation facilities, as needed.
 - And, importantly, we investigate confirmed cases of COVID-19 and conduct case investigation to thoroughly assess each situation to determine where a person may have gotten the infection and who they may have exposed.
- When COVID-19 first started to appear in our community a foundation of infection prevention and control work was already in place. My team had developed infection prevention and control resources focussed on shelter services settings, provided training sessions for shelter service providers, and provided on site supportive infection control recommendations.
- I'm very proud to share that this work has been recognized nationally and internationally. Our approach has been adopted by many jurisdictions and referenced in the Centres for Disease Control guidance.
- To prevent further spread of COVID-19, along with key partners, we have established a recovery site for people who test positive for COVID-19 in our shelter system. This space will enable individuals to be isolated while they recover and therefore minimize the chance of spread of COVID-19 to others. Ontario Health, Inner City Health Associates, the City of Toronto and other community partners are actively working to get this site up and running soon.



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- In closing, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the critical work of the staff who work in shelter settings in our city and sincerely thank them for their commitment to serving our community's most vulnerable residents. I also extend my sincere thanks to the many people who are working around the clock on our COVID-19 response. Our local health care system, community agencies and non-profit organizations are all working tirelessly to protect all of us during this pandemic.
- We all have a role to play in protecting everyone within the shelter system – both individuals who depend on these services and the staff who work there. We all play a part. So please, to help reduce the spread of COVID-19 in all areas of our community, remember to stay home, stay safe and take care of each other.

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