

COVID-19 Guidance for Emergency Warming Centres

Extreme cold weather conditions can adversely affect the health and well-being of many of Toronto's residents. Some of the health impacts of cold weather include hypothermia, frostbite, frostnip, and trench foot. Cold weather can make existing health conditions worse, such as cardiovascular and respiratory disease and can even lead to death. Emergency warming centres can provide relief and protection for vulnerable groups who may be at an increased risk from the direct health impacts of cold weather.

This guidance is intended to help owners, operators and volunteers in emergency warming centres, such as those operated by the City of Toronto, to reduce the spread of COVID-19. More information about COVID-19 can be found in the Toronto Public Health (TPH) [COVID-19 Fact Sheet](#).

Responsibility of Owners and Operators

Owners and operators of emergency warming centres are responsible for ensuring that their facility is in compliance with these public health guidelines, and all emergency orders made under the [Reopening Ontario Act, 2020](#). As every emergency warming centre will be different, it is the responsibility of owners and operators to review their own policies and procedures, assess their facility and operations, and implement measures to reduce the risk of infection among staff, volunteers, and clients.

COVID-19 Transmission

Respiratory transmission: COVID-19 is an illness that is spread mainly from person-to-person through close contact from respiratory droplets and aerosols of someone with COVID-19. The respiratory droplets can travel up to two metres when we cough, sneeze or talk, while aerosols can stay in the air for longer.

At-risk populations: The risk of severe illness from COVID-19 is greater for older adults, and people with an underlying medical condition or a weakened immune system (e.g. due to a medical condition or treatment). People living on a low income, who are under-housed or experiencing homelessness, or living in congregate settings such as retirement homes or rooming houses may also be more impacted by the virus. Organizations should consider the vulnerability of employees, volunteers, clients and visitors when planning their services and programs.

Protective Measures to Keep Everyone Safe

- Get [fully vaccinated for COVID-19](#) as soon as possible.
- Stay home when you are sick, even if symptoms are mild.
- Maintain physical distancing of at least two metre from those you don't live with.
- Wash your hands often and avoid touching your face with unwashed hands.
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow.
- Wear a face mask or covering when you are in indoor public spaces, as per the [provincial requirements](#) and City [bylaw](#), and when you cannot maintain a two metre-distance outdoors.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces throughout the day.

Encourage COVID-19 Vaccination

- Encourage staff, volunteers and patrons who were born in 2009 or earlier to get vaccinated with the COVID-19 vaccine.
 - Read and share information [about the vaccine and where to get vaccinated](#).
 - Post signs and share [COVID-19 vaccine resources](#), available in multiple languages.
- It is strongly recommended that all employers implement a [workplace vaccination policy](#).

Measures for all Workplaces, Businesses and Organizations

Review the [Guidance for Employers on Preventing COVID-19 in the Workplace](#) to plan and implement protocols to keep staff and customers safe. Operators must also consider the following:

- **Cleaning and disinfection**
 - Provide chairs/furniture that are easy to clean and disinfect.
 - Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces at least once per day, and more frequently as needed.
- **Hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette**
 - Post signs on proper [hand hygiene](#) and [respiratory etiquette](#).
 - Provide 70-90% alcohol-based hand sanitizer dispensers near entrances and other high-touch locations for visitors and staff use. Monitor and refill, as needed.
 - Remind staff and clients not to share items, such as food, water bottles, equipment, toys, and supplies.

Safety Plan

Operators must prepare and make available a safety plan. The plan must:

- Describe measures/procedures that have been or will be implemented in the business, place, facility or establishment to reduce spread of COVID.

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- Include measures for screening, physical distancing, masks, cleaning, disinfecting, PPE and preventing and controlling crowding.
 - Be in writing and made available to any person for review, on request.
 - Be posted in a visible place to come to the attention of those working or attending the location.
- Use the [COVID-19 Safety Plan Checklist](#) to develop your safety plan.

Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC) Systems

- Increase the introduction and circulation of outdoor air by maximizing the outdoor air ratio of the HVAC system settings, or by opening windows and doors, where possible. Avoid recirculating air.
- Ensure the HVAC system(s) are properly maintained.
- Where provided, use the highest efficiency filters that are compatible with the HVAC system.
- Increase air-exchanges if possible.
- Keep areas near HVAC inlets and outlets clear.
- Seating and activities should be arranged away from areas with high airflow (i.e. not in front of air vents).
- Facilities without HVAC systems should increase ventilation by opening windows and doors. However, do not open windows and doors if doing so poses a safety risk to staff and customers.
- Rooms where ceiling fans are used should have an upward airflow rotation.
- If portable fans are used, limit the blowing of air across people and surfaces by positioning them to provide an upward movement of air.
- There is no evidence for the use of portable air purifiers to prevent the spread of COVID-19. If used, follow the manufacturer's directions (and possibly the advice of a service professional) to decide where best to place the device. Follow the manufacturer's instructions on maintenance.
- For more information, review the [COVID-19: Transmission, Aerosols and Ventilation](#) fact sheet.

Health Screening for Staff and Patrons:

- [Actively screen](#) staff and volunteers before each shift.
- [Actively screen](#) all patrons who enter for COVID-19 (available in [multiple languages](#)) prior to entering the facility.
- All staff must be aware of the [signs and symptoms](#) associated with COVID-19.
- Staff should be trained to contact emergency services (i.e. 911) should a person experience severe illness requiring medical attention.
- Designate an alternate room/space which is separate from the main warming room/area to accommodate individuals who answered **YES** to any of the screening questions or develop symptoms while at the warming centre.

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- If an alternate room/space is not available for individuals with symptoms or high-risk exposures, consider creating a private space within the main warming room/area using dividers or curtains.
- Where possible, the alternate room/space should have:
 - A separate entrance and exit.
 - A separate washroom.
 - Partitions separating individuals, in addition to other physical distancing measures.
- Environmental cleaning and disinfection should be conducted after each use of the alternate room/space.

Proof of Vaccination

- Guests are not required to provide proof of full vaccination against COVID-19 to access the emergency warming centres.

Track Attendance

- It is strongly recommended that facilities maintain voluntary attendance records of all staff, visitors and families.
- Toronto Public Health will use this list to help with contact tracing efforts in the event that a person tests positive or an outbreak is identified.
- Your facility should:
 - Obtain a person's consent to collect their personal information.
 - Inform them the information requested is voluntary.
 - Inform them of the purpose and legal authority for collecting this information.
 - Only collect personal information for COVID-19 contact tracing purposes, unless an individual provides their consent.
 - Protect the personal information you collect (e.g. locked drawer/office).
 - Keep records for 30 days, and then destroy the information (i.e. shred/delete).
- Call TPH at 416-338-7600 if you have been notified that a staff, visitors and families has tested positive for COVID-19, and/or you have concerns that others may have been exposed while at the facility.

Support and Encourage Proper Use of Masks

- The use of masks or face coverings is mandatory in all indoor public settings, as per [Ontario Regulation 364/20](#) and City of Toronto [By-law 541-2020](#).

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- Masks or face coverings are strongly recommended outdoors when physical distancing cannot be maintained.
- Facility owners and operators **must develop a policy** on the wearing of masks, as per City of Toronto [By-Law 541-2020](#), and train staff on the policy.
- Staff should receive clear instructions on mask requirements and the proper [use of masks/face coverings](#). Masks should be changed when moist or dirty, and in areas away from patrons (e.g. lunch room, private office).
- [Ontario Regulation 364/20](#) and City of Toronto [By-law 541-2020](#) allow for certain exemptions, including children under two, people with health issues, people who are unable to put on a mask without assistance, and temporary removal of a mask or face covering while engaging in certain activities.
- Staff should understand who is exempted from wearing a mask. Proof of exemption is not required.
- More information is available [here](#).

Monitor the Capacity Limit

- Calculate the maximum number of people permitted in the emergency warming centres that allows for two metres physical distancing, or complies with provincial gathering limits, which ever is less.
 - To calculate the maximum occupancy for physical distancing in an emergency warming centre calculate one person per two metres squared (four square metres or 43 square feet) of publicly accessible floor space.
 - Post signs in high visibility areas indicating the maximum number of people permitted in the emergency warming centre at any one time (e.g. entrances, washrooms).
- Once the maximum number of people is reached, allow one person in for every person that leaves.

Manage the Flow of People to Promote Physical Distancing

- Modify and arrange site/floor plan to maintain physical distancing and reduce contact within the emergency warming centre.
 - Arrange chairs/seating/cots at least two metres apart and/or place signs in fixed seating spaces.
 - Mark seating locations with tape on the floor so that seating can be repositioned easily.
 - Consider creating separate spaces for family units (i.e. families who live together do not need to maintain physical distancing between each other), and for people with pets.

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- Design a walking flow for the emergency warming centre (e.g. creating one-way routes with prominent signage and/or floor markings every two metres), where appropriate (e.g. entrances, washrooms).
- Discourage the unnecessary movement of people within the emergency warming centre.
- Assign a staff member to direct clients to seating areas as they become available.
- Remind staff, families and visitors to maintain a physical distance of two metres as best as possible. Members of the same household do not need to maintain physical distancing between each other.
- Display posters in high-visibility areas in your setting to promote messages about how to stay safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. See [COVID-19: Posters & Graphics](#).

Use of Cots for Resting/Sleeping

- Where provided, cots should be arranged at least two metres apart, with alternating head to toe placement of beds, if space allows.
- Consider the use of temporary barriers between cots (e.g. curtains) unless clients are part of the same household.
- If space is available, put fewer people within the facility's designated resting/sleeping space.
- Masks are not required while sleeping at the emergency warming centre for health considerations.
- Assign and track the use of cots nightly to help with contact tracing.

Maintain Water Fountains and Bottle Filling Stations

- Water fountains and bottle filling stations can be used provided they are cleaned and disinfected as often as is needed to maintain a sanitary condition.
- Encourage staff and clients to bring their own water bottle to stay hydrated.

Increase Communication with Staff and Clients

- Inform staff and clients about the measures that have been implemented to protect them against COVID-19 such as using posters, websites, and other communication platforms.
- Provide clients with information about [COVID-19](#) and how to protect themselves from the effects of cold (e.g. [Health Impacts of Extreme Cold Weather](#) resource).
- Designate a point of contact (e.g. supervisor) who will be responsible for responding to COVID-19 concerns from staff and clients.
- Encourage staff, visitors and families to download the [COVID Alert app](#). They will be notified directly if they have been in close contact with someone who was contagious with COVID-19.

Other Resources

[Guidance for Employers on Preventing COVID-19 in the Workplace](#)

[Guidance for Employers on Managing COVID-19 in the Workplace](#)

[Staying Healthy in Extreme Cold Weather](#)

[Strategies for Community Partners to Practice Physical Distancing and Reduce the Spread of COVID-19](#)

More Information

For more information, visit our website at www.toronto.ca/COVID19 or call us at 416-338-7600.

References

Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). *COVID-19 and Cooling Centers*. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/cooling-center.html>

Public Health Ontario (2020). *COVID-19 Preparedness and Prevention in Congregate Living Settings*. Retrieved from: [COVID-19 Preparedness and Prevention](#)