

Guidance and Tips for Client Wellness Checks in Homeless Service Settings Shelter, Support & Housing Administration

Purpose:

The Guidance and Tips for Client Wellness Checks in Homeless Service Settings was developed to support staff working at a SSHA-funded Shelter or 24-hour Respite Site to conduct client wellness checks using a harm reduction, trauma informed approach. This document will allow staff to identify any issues requiring prompt attention, and comply with standards in Toronto Shelter Standards (TSS)/24-hour Respite Site Standards (TRS). It targets homeless services that have staff on site 24 hours/7 days a week.

For the purpose of this document, a **wellness check** is a *brief check-in with a client with a focus on their wellbeing and safety through personal engagement while in their living environment.*

Scope:

SSHA-funded homeless Service Settings are not a health care settings. As a result, the Client wellness checks are not intended to be a medical intervention, nor are they exclusively performed by staff with clinical training. There are standards on case management and/or service planning in the TSS and TRS, to guide staff on determining client's immediate needs/concerns (e.g., health, harm reduction needs, safety considerations) and conducting client referrals to professional health care settings/services.

Background Resources:

- Harm Reduction [Directive No. 2021-01](#)
- [TSS](#)
 - 10.1 Case Management and Service Planning (c)-(d)
 - 10.2 Health and Mental Health Services (a)
 - 11.2: Safety Standards (f)
- [TRS](#)
 - 8.2 Service Planning (b)-(c)
 - 8.3 Health and Mental Health Services (a)
 - 9.2: Safety Standards (f)
- Relevant [Public Health COVID-19 Guidance Resources](#)

How Providers can use this Guidance and Tips:

Introduction: This tip sheet is provided as guidance for how staff should conduct client wellness checks while completing the regularly scheduled rounds required by the TSS and TRS as noted above. The use of the tips in the guidance document is not mandatory, but is provided as a best practice resource which will encourage consistency and standardization in the practice of wellness checks. The list of tips is not exhaustive and Providers can adapt it as needed according to their site policies and program model.

Frequency: It is suggested that staff complete one wellness check round daily to visit all clients who are onsite. If a client is not onsite during the wellness check, best efforts should be made to check in with them later on the same day or during the wellness check round on the following day. The different portions of the process can be completed simultaneously or separately based on operational needs and existing site processes.

Timing: Staff should consider not carrying out wellness checks around mealtimes, in the late evening, early morning or when clients may be sleeping. Alternatively, during the mid-morning, mid-afternoon and early evening is recommended.

Roles and Responsibilities: The best practice is for one staff/Site Lead(s) be assigned to conduct wellness checks and document findings.

Documentation: Objectivity by the assessor is essential. What is observed at the site during the point-in-time check-in is what should be reported to the Site Lead and/or case worker for follow-up, as per site policies.

The staff who conduct the wellness checks are responsible for formally documenting issues observed in accordance with the site's policies, which may include documentation in SMIS, communication log, and/or incident report. Examples of information to document may include: identifying clients with increased need for overdose-related support, emerging conditions that introduce a new or increased risk of overdose (e.g., potent drug circulation), possible hoarding issues, emerging health issues, etc.

Part 1 | General Tips to Conducting Wellness Checks:

Staff are encouraged to use a harm reduction approach to conduct client wellness checks, while being respectful of client autonomy, privacy, and balancing safety concerns. Consider the following:

- Use a trauma-informed and harm reduction approach with every interaction;
- Prepare for the checks by bringing naloxone kits, PPEs, bed/room board, tools for note taking, illness monitoring log/screening forms;
- Engage clients in conversation and actively listen while remaining aware of body language; maintain compassion and kindness;
- Be non-punitive, non-judgemental to drug use onsite;
- Be respectful of the client's property, space, and time;
- Follow through, as much as possible, with client requests without making promises;
- Be alert to signs of overdose or other forms of medical distress and responding decisively (including dispatching back up, and as appropriate, administering naloxone, etc.);
- In family shelters, be alert to signs of child safety and welfare issues, and act accordingly.

Part 2 | Tips to Assess Client Wellness During Room/Bed/Sleeping Space Checks:

Conducting wellness checks when the client is in their room/bed/sleeping space is a good opportunity to also assess how the client is coping in their living environment and proactively attend to emergent needs. Consider including:

- ✓ Ask clients about how they are doing today
- ✓ Screen clients for COVID-19 symptoms using COVID-19 screening tool shared by SSHA
- ✓ Ask clients if anything is required at this time (e.g. referrals, PPE, Harm Reduction, support services and other supplies, etc.) and provide if requested
- ✓ Remind clients about safe drug use practices: buddy witnessing, virtual/phone based spotting, informing staff that they are using
- ✓ Remind clients to alert staff if they see signs of overdose, or other medical emergencies, in a peer and/or roommate
- ✓ Ask clients if they have been trained on overdose prevention, recognition and naloxone administration
 - If no to above, ask clients if they are interested in being trained on overdose prevention, recognition and naloxone administration
- ✓ Ask clients about any concerns with their bed/room/sleeping space
 - Ask clients about signs of pest infestation such as bed bugs or cockroaches.
- ✓ Ask clients if sharps containers are full
 - Arrange for full sharps containers to be changed if full
- ✓ Ask clients if waste receptacles in the room/sleeping space need to be emptied
 - Arrange for full waste bins to be changed if full

- ✓ Scan for signs of hoarding, drugs and paraphernalia, alcohol, weapons or prohibited items in bed/room/sleeping space
 - **Note:** If above are noted, discuss with supervisor
- ✓ Check if the client bed/room/sleeping space has been altered in any way that could pose a safety risk to the client
 - **Note:** such as fixtures removed, window safety features removed, additional lock installed on the door barring staff from entering, furniture disassembled, etc.
- ✓ Check if food is safely stored in bed/room/sleeping space, in a manner that complies with the site procedures
- ✓ In family shelters, check that child safety practices are followed by the family
 - **Note:** securely storing harmful chemicals/cleaning supplies; storing medication, drugs and paraphernalia out of reach (e.g., safe/lock box/locker etc.); measures to prevent children from climbing around/through windows; and measures to protect children from accidental burns.

Part 3 | Tips to Assess Client Wellness During Building Rounds:

Remote or isolated areas of a building may be used by clients for increased privacy and/or reduced perceived scrutiny. These areas should be regularly checked for client safety. If clients are found in these areas it is also an opportunity to engage them in a wellness check. Consider including:

- ✓ Check stairwells for client presence, signs of drug-use, and any drug paraphernalia
- ✓ Check communal/public washrooms for client presence, drug-use, and any drug paraphernalia
- ✓ Check whether back/side doors are closed to ensure building is inaccessible to unregistered visitors
- ✓ Check other client common areas for client presence, signs of drug-use, and any drug paraphernalia
- ✓ Arrange for safe cleaning/pick up of any drug-use paraphernalia in the stairwells, communal/public washrooms, and other common areas
- ✓ Ask clients about how they are doing today
- ✓ Ask clients if anything is required at this time (e.g. referrals, PPE, Harm Reduction, support services and other supplies, etc.) and provide if requested
- ✓ Remind clients about safe drug use practices: buddy witnessing, virtual/phone based spotting, informing staff that they are using
- ✓ Remind clients to alert staff if they see signs of overdose, or other medical emergencies, in a peer and/or roommate
- ✓ Ask clients about any concerns with their bedroom/sleeping spaces
- ✓ Provide/arrange for first aid support to clients who require it