



Toronto Shelter Service Model

TORONTO SHELTER & SUPPORT SERVICES

2026



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Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that the City of Toronto is located on the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Metis peoples. We also acknowledge that Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississauga and Chippewa bands.

The work we do spans the entire geographic area of the City of Toronto, encompassing vital waterways and lands that have served as homelands and gathering places for Indigenous nations for thousands of years.

We express our deep gratitude to these nations for their enduring stewardship of the land. We also recognize our responsibility to uphold and support the priorities outlined in the City of Toronto's Reconciliation Action Plan, and we remain committed to meaningful action and accountability in the spirit of reconciliation.



African Ancestral Acknowledgement

The City of Toronto acknowledges all Treaty peoples, including those who arrived as settlers, whether in this generation or generations past, as well as those who were brought to these lands involuntarily, particularly through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the system of slavery. We honour the ancestors of African origin and descent whose resilience and contributions continue to shape our communities.

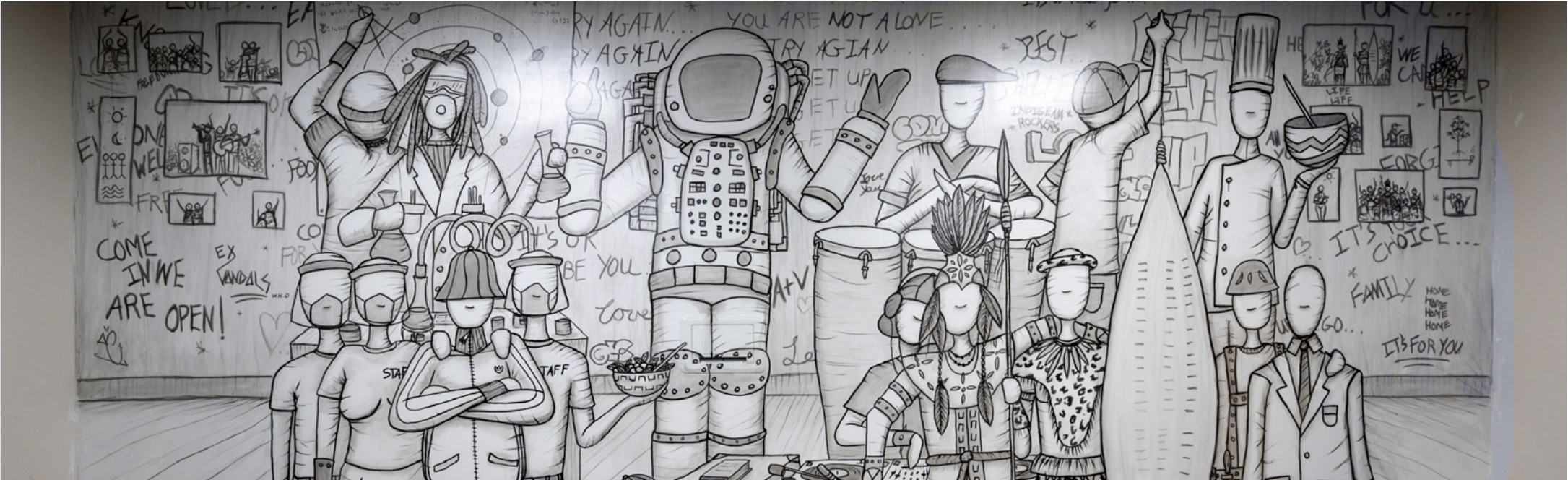
We recognize the enduring legacy of anti-Black racism and are committed to confronting and dismantling its systemic roots. As part of our ongoing journey toward equity and justice, we are dedicated to preventing and addressing anti-Black racism through meaningful action, accountability, and sustained partnership with Black communities.



Lived & Living Experience Acknowledgement

The City would like to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of individuals with lived and living experience of homelessness who generously shared their time, insights, and feedback. Their voices are essential to shaping a homelessness system that truly meets the needs of communities. Every story shared deepens our understanding and guides us toward meaningful, informed change.

We also recognize and deeply appreciate the dedication of staff and service providers who continue to provide vital support under increasingly challenging circumstances. Their commitment, compassion, and resilience are foundational to this work. Together, through listening, learning, and collaborating, we move closer to building a more responsive system rooted in equity and informed by lived experience.



Shelter Service Model: A Framework for Service Delivery

WHAT IS THE SHELTER SERVICE MODEL?

Toronto's Shelter Service Model (SSM) provides a structured framework to articulate and visualize the types of services delivered across Toronto's shelter system and draws connections to standards, toolkits, and other strategic resources intended to support and inform service practices. The Model guides a sector-wide service delivery approach grounded in Housing First principles that are identity-focused, evidence-based and community conscious.

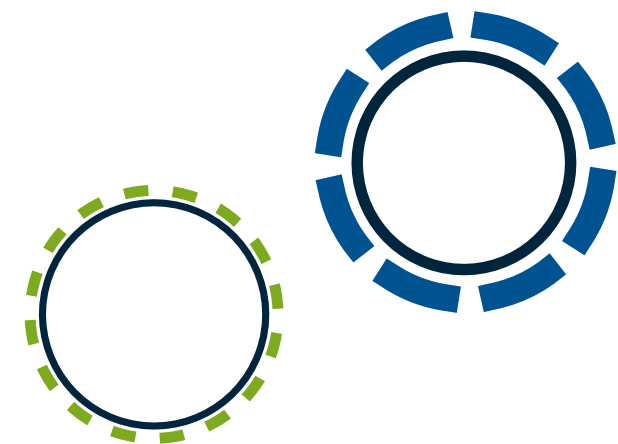
The Model defines Toronto Shelter & Support Services' (TSSS) core service components and activities, aligns service delivery with City standards, and supports consistent, person-centred services across Toronto's shelter system. It also shares a unified vision for the types of supports the City wants people to have while residing in shelter and contextualizes the role and responsibility of TSSS shelters in City-wide efforts to address homelessness.

The Pillars of Service Delivery outline the five foundational components found in all City-operated and funded shelters, articulating the visions that promote consistency and effectiveness and drive positive outcomes for people experiencing homelessness. These pillars align service delivery across programs and communicate a shared goal for the system.

Practices of Service Delivery are the everyday actions that bring the pillars to life. They reflect how staff engage with shelter clients, build trust, build on progress and create safe, welcoming environments. Grounded in collective expertise, these practices help ensure services are delivered with dignity and accountability. While not an exhaustive list of all programs or approaches used across

sites, they provide a baseline of core practices broadly available throughout the shelter system.

In a shelter system as large as Toronto's, it is important to recognize that service delivery in shelters may look different depending on the needs of the populations served at different sites. City-funded shelters will receive operational funding that ensures services are delivered in a manner that is rooted in the SSM and compliance with [Toronto Shelter Standards](#). In addition, programming and services available at community-operated sites may benefit from funding provided by other levels of government (e.g., health care) or be supported by partnerships within that community. As such, the SSM acknowledges this diversity and has been designed to reflect the need for flexible, evolving approaches to continue building a strong and coordinated system while ensuring a consistent level of service across all City-funded emergency shelters. The SSM may be adjusted when applied to winter respite sites, warming centres and other temporary shelter programs where not all pillars and practices may be feasible to be implemented.



HOUSING FIRST
PRINCIPLES THAT
ARE IDENTITY-
FOCUSED,
EVIDENCE-BASED
AND COMMUNITY
CONSCIOUS.

BACKGROUND

Across Canada, the number of people experiencing homelessness has grown since the COVID-19 pandemic and continues to be a significantly challenging issue to address and resolve. This is evident in the Street Needs Assessment (SNA) Point-in-Time (PiT) Count, which illustrates the extent of homelessness in Toronto, including individuals staying in shelters, outdoors and in provincially-administered sites.

In Toronto, emergency shelters exist within a complex environment that is impacted by many external factors. While the reasons why individuals experience homelessness can vary significantly from person to person, basic factors consistently contribute to the experience of homelessness in Toronto. These factors include but are not limited to:



The Shelter Service Model emerged from public consultation in 2017, with a goal of rethinking how emergency shelters are planned, designed, operated, and communicated to the public, and was piloted at select sites. Today, the SSM has evolved as the guiding document to reflect the current state of Toronto’s emergency shelter system, while establishing a path for continuous improvement and longer-term enhancements in service delivery.

In 2022, City Council directed TSSS to create a dedicated refugee shelter system to better meet the needs of refugees, and

the SSM applies to both the broader shelter system and this new dedicated stream.

In 2023, City Council also approved the [Homelessness Services Capital Infrastructure Strategy \(HSCIS\)](#), establishing a long-term approach to modernizing Toronto’s shelter system through the development of permanent, purpose-built infrastructure. HSCIS sets out a 10-year plan to deliver 1,600 new shelter spaces by 2033, with a focus on reducing reliance on temporary shelter programs and creating a more stable, predictable, and cost-effective system. The SSM will play an important role in how these new shelter programs are developed.

OUR VISION

The Shelter Service Model envisions an emergency shelter system that is intentionally designed and person-centered with integrated support and referral pathways to meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Drawn from consultations and key frameworks and strategies, including the [Toronto Shelter Standards](#), [Shelter Design and Technical Guidelines](#), [Homelessness Services Capital Infrastructure Strategy](#), [Meeting in the Middle Engagement Strategy and Action Plan](#), and

the Divisional Strategic Plan, these principles reflect shared values that guide support services across City-operated and funded shelters. These principles articulate what matters most to TSSS and our partners in creating shelter environments that are safe, effective, and responsive:

Equity Principles

- **Respect and Dignity:** Upholding the inherent worth of every individual.
- **Equity, Diversity & Inclusion:** Creating a safe and respectful environment for everyone.
- **Non-discrimination:** Ensuring an environment free from discrimination, bias and harassment.
- **User-Centred Service and Design:** Services that reflect the needs and experiences of shelter users.
- **Harm Reduction:** Providing compassionate, lifesaving, client-centred harm reduction services that help protect lives and foster trust and reduce stigma.
- **Social Determinants of Health:** Recognizing the social, economic, and environmental factors that impact health, well-being and housing stability.
- **Confront Anti-Black Racism:** Ensuring homelessness services are delivered with an approach that recognizes and addresses the reality of Anti-Black racism.
- **Advance Reconciliation:** Working in partnership with Indigenous partners and organizations to meaningfully address Indigenous homelessness.

System Principles

- **Access:** Ensuring timely access to shelter services.
- **Service Quality:** Delivering consistent, high-standard services across the system.
- **Housing First:** Supporting pathways to permanent housing as a central goal.
- **Community:** Fostering a sense of belonging within neighbourhoods.
- **Collaboration:** Fostering partnerships and engaging communities in service planning and delivery.
- **Flexibility:** Adapting services to meet diverse and changing needs.
- **Health and Wellness:** Promoting physical, mental, and emotional well-being.
- **Safety and Security:** Creating environments that are safe for shelter clients and staff.

These principles ensure service delivery is grounded in a values-based approach. In TSSS, they provide a common foundation for decision-making, program design, and collaboration across the shelter system, helping to align efforts among City staff, service providers, and community partners.

Connection Points: Linking Practice to Strategy

The City and its partners are engaged in a continual evolution of the shelter system to improve service delivery, user experiences and reporting outcomes. To best reflect this work, connections are made throughout the SSM to draw attention to key resources that align and inform the delivery of shelter services. Connection points refer to the key frameworks, guides, strategies and guidance documents

that provide further clarity and direction on important elements of service delivery in shelters. Connection points included in this document serve to strengthen alignment between service practices and broader City goals. They provide a link to operational resources that guide staff to help build capacity, support training, and ensure a shared understanding of how to deliver high-quality, person-centred services.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

The SSM outlines an evidence-based approach to service delivery across City-operated and funded shelters in alignment with the Toronto Shelter Standards and the Shelter Design and Technical Guidelines.

Since 1992, the homeless serving system has been guided and overseen through the [Toronto Shelter Standards](#), which provides system-wide oversight and clear expectations for shelter operations. These standards ensure accountability through ongoing engagement and compliance monitoring.

Design and built form can also have significant impact for people living and working at shelter sites. In 2023, City Council adopted the Shelter Design and Technical Guidelines, a living document that reflects evolving best practices to improve shelter environments for clients, staff, and surrounding communities.

The SSM together with these key documents forms an overarching framework that guides the infrastructure, operations, and oversight of Toronto’s emergency shelter system.



Connection to Housing

The [HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan](#) serves as the City’s strategic framework for addressing needs across the full housing continuum, including homelessness, rental housing, homeownership, and long-term care for seniors, with the overarching goal of fostering an inclusive city where housing opportunities are available to all. Emergency responses, like shelters, are critically important to support people who are in housing crisis by responding their immediate needs. The SSM aligns with Action 10c in the HousingTO Action Plan by supporting the implementation of a shelter service model that guides high-quality, housing-focused services at all shelters.

Stemming from the HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan, the Toronto Housing Charter reflects the City’s policy approach to housing as one that is grounded in human rights principles, recognizing its obligation to progressively realize the right to adequate housing. It is grounded in the principle that every shelter client should have an equal opportunity to housing and adequate housing is fundamental to personal dignity, well-being, and the development of healthy, sustainable communities. It guides the City in delivering housing services and programs to clients using a human rights-based approach, including shelter services.

Understanding and Using the Shelter Service Model

The SSM is designed to offer a high-level overview of service delivery across Toronto’s shelter system. It is not a detailed operational manual or performance evaluation tool. Instead, it highlights key connection points to standards and resources, helping users navigate the broader system and apply the Model to inform and improve operational approaches. It clarifies what services and practices are available in a shelter and establishes a consistent foundation for service delivery across all shelter providers. The SSM helps inform infrastructure planning, program design, staff onboarding, and continuous service improvements.

While the SSM establishes a shared foundation, each shelter program can be customized in different ways given the populations served, local context, and client needs. The Model supports consistency in service standards while allowing flexibility for site-specific responses and innovation.

The SSM reflects an ongoing journey of system evolution, building on decades of community learning and growth. It is both a reflection of current practice and a foundation for future development, supporting transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement.

Pillars of Service Delivery

The Shelter Service Model has five pillars of service delivery:

The pillars of service delivery are the essential building blocks that support high-quality, consistent, and responsive shelter services across Toronto. These foundational elements help guide how services are structured, delivered, and improved to meet the needs of people

experiencing homelessness. By grounding shelter services in core pillars, the SSM aims to build a shared understanding of how shelters operate. When service delivery is transparent and well-understood, it builds a consensus of the role shelters play and the value they provide in the broader context of homelessness.

The pillars and practices framework offers a clear overview of the essential components that guide how shelters respond to emergency needs, support stabilization, and help individuals transition toward housing. It also serves as a valuable tool for service providers, establishing

a baseline to assess current practices, uncover opportunities for improvement, and inform strategic planning and future investments. Each pillar has service practices, which inform and contextualize the daily operations of shelters.

ACCESS & SYSTEM COORDINATION



Shelters provide administrative services and collect data to ensure accountability, ease of access, and an accurate understanding of the needs of clients

LIFE NEEDS



Shelters provide basic life needs of individuals during the experience of homelessness including food, clothes, hygiene, shelter, and personal support needs.

SPACES



Shelters provide welcoming and inclusive spaces in indoor environments which enhance positive outcomes for shelter users, staff, and visitors.

CASE MANAGEMENT



Shelters provide outcomes-driven and collaborative case management services that support individuals experiencing homelessness to engage in activities to achieve individualized goals to advance housing outcomes.

IDENTITY & LOCALIZED SERVICES



Shelters respond to the needs of its shelter users by providing community-based, localized services through collaborative programming and referral partnerships.



Access & System Coordination

PURPOSE

Support and administrative functions that improve access and strengthen system coordination form the basis of successful, data-informed, and accountable shelter operations.

SERVICE PRACTICES

- Centralized Intake
- Privacy and Information Management
- Admission Data
- Orientation
- Intake Assessment
- Reporting and Monitoring
- Occupancy Reporting

CONNECTION POINTS

- Toronto Shelter Standards

PURPOSE

Access & System Coordination activities promote good governance and adherence to standards of accountability in management and operation of emergency shelters. Clear administrative processes help providers understand who is on-site, assess immediate needs, and respond in a timely and coordinated manner. These activities are essential for the consistent delivery of services and for capturing critical data that reflects system pressures and emerging trends. By recording and reporting this information, providers contribute important insights that help the City balance urgent response efforts with longterm planning and resource allocation. These activities are the foundation of operations by ensuring accountability, good governance, and strategic oversight of daily activities.

PRACTICES

Centralized Referral

Central Intake (CI), a 24-hour centralized telephone-based service, is the primary point of access to Toronto's emergency shelter system. CI plays a vital administrative role in service delivery, by confirming availability, program eligibility, and making referrals to the most appropriate shelter space in real time.

Privacy and Information Management

City funded shelters collect, use, and disclose personal information in accordance with applicable legislation. The shelter provides individuals with a notice of collection to inform them that the shelter is collecting their personal information, the legal authority that allows the shelter to collect their personal information, the principal purpose(s) for which the personal information is intended to be

used, and contact information for a staff person who can answer questions about how personal information is being used. Shelters will only use and disclose personal information in accordance with applicable legislation to support the delivery and coordination of shelter and support services. Shelters treat all client personal information and records as confidential, and access to client personal information is limited to authorized personnel.

Intake Assessment

Intake assessments are a series of questions uniquely designed to identify urgent needs and coordinate the most appropriate resources for stabilization of the person accessing services. As part of an intake assessment, City funded shelters collect basic information about the identity, health and accessibility concerns of the individual. This information helps providers to effectively match

people with services that best meet their needs and supports diversion from the shelter system when appropriate.

Admission Data

Timely completion of intake into the City's Shelter Management Information System (SMIS) provides essential baseline information that supports both immediate triage and long-term planning. This initial data helps providers assess urgent needs and begin identifying the types of ongoing supports individuals may require. It also helps inform and document case planning, guiding efforts to help individuals progress toward housing stabilization.

Orientation

Providing orientation to a shelter's layout, rules and responsibilities, and available services helps people navigate spaces with ease and confidence. When people understand how the space works and what supports are available, they are better equipped to navigate their surroundings, engage with services, and begin their path toward stability with confidence.

Toronto is home to many vibrant and diverse neighbourhoods, each offering unique resources and experiences. Providing orientation to the surrounding resources promotes neighbourhood awareness, connections and enables shelter clients to access community-based resources.

Monitoring & Reporting

Timely and accurate reporting of shelter data demonstrates transparency and strengthens accountability, while better informing system-wide decision-making. Data helps drive better outcomes across the shelter system to reduce long stays and increase planned exits to housing.

Occupancy Reporting

Timely and accurate reporting of bed use and availability including timely discharge data by service providers, is the primary method to measure inflow and outflow of the shelter system. This information is not made available to the public, except in aggregated form.

Connection Points

- Toronto Shelter Standards





Life Needs

PURPOSE

Meeting the basic needs of people experiencing homelessness requires culturally responsive supports, including safe indoor spaces, nutritious food, hygiene facilities, toiletries, and clothing.

SERVICE PRACTICES

- Meal Programming and Cultural-specific food programming
- Access to clothing
- Access to toiletries and hygiene-related products
- Access to bedding
- Access to Health & Safety Kits (Harm Reduction supplies)
- Storage
- Transportation
- Communication

CONNECTION POINTS

- Toronto Shelter Standards
- Shelter Design & Technical Guidelines
- Our Health, Our City: A Mental Health, Substance Use, Harm Reduction and Treatment Strategy for Toronto

PURPOSE

Life needs are the provision of necessities fundamental to well-being and function that sustain health, promote wellness and restore dignity. Access to basic needs such as nutritious food, personal care products, clothing, and other daily essentials, play a critical role in helping individuals and families maintain their health and well-being. Timely access to basic needs that are culturally sensitive, fosters dignity and respect.

PRACTICES

Meal Programming and Culturally Specific Food Programming

Providing nutritious meals and snacks helps sustain and improve health outcomes. Meals are offered to meet individual needs and may be culturally specific or locally adapted to reflect the demographics of each site. This approach ensures that food is not only nourishing but, when possible, considerate of cultural identities and preferences.

Access to Clothing, Toiletries, Personal Care Products and Bedding

Access to seasonally appropriate clothing and footwear helps protect individuals from environmental hazards while supporting social mobility. Access to toiletries and personal care supplies ensures basic grooming and comfort, contributing to overall health. Clean

bedding fosters rest and recovery, creating a stable and healthy environment.

Health & Safety Kits (Harm Reduction Supplies)

Harm reduction supplies such as naloxone, safer sex supplies, sterile drug use equipment, and drug-checking test strips are vital health tools that help prevent overdose, reduce the spread of infectious diseases, and minimize injury. Supplies and equipment are distributed along with education and resources for safer use and disposal to improve safety outcomes for shelter residents, staff and the broader community. These resources are provided without judgment, recognizing that health and safety must be prioritized regardless of circumstance. By offering access to harm reduction supplies, service providers not only protect lives but also foster trust and reduce



stigma. These tools are critical in supporting health, autonomy, and community well-being.

Storage

Personal possessions are a meaningful part of people's lives, often tied to identity, stability, and well-being. Providing secure storage for belongings offers peace of mind and enables individuals to move freely and access support services without fear of loss. In emergency shelter settings, unexpected departures can occur, and it is essential to have clear policies in place for the storage, retrieval, and disposal of personal items. These policies should offer reasonable opportunities for individuals to reclaim their belongings, even after unplanned discharges, helping to preserve trust, reduce distress, and support continuity of care.

Transportation

To reduce barriers, shelters may offer transportation assistance to individuals for a variety of reasons including people with mobility limitations or those requiring accommodations for safety planning. While not always available, this support can be critical in helping people attend housing appointments, medical appointments, access shelter, or connect with legal and social services.

Clear guidance in shelter policy on when and how transportation support may be provided helps manage expectations and ensures that those with the greatest need are prioritized.

Communication

Ensuring access to a range of telecommunication options reduces isolation, supports continuity of care, and enables individuals to manage their affairs during times of instability. Reliable access to communication tools such as internet connectivity, telephones, and mail services is essential to stay connected to personal supports and access services. These resources help individuals maintain contact with family, case workers, and healthcare providers, while also supporting eligibility for benefits that require a mailing address, including government-issued documentation.

Connection Points

- Toronto Shelter Standards
- Shelter Design & Technical Guidelines
- Our Health, Our City: A Mental Health, Substance Use, Harm Reduction and Treatment Strategy for Toronto



Spaces

PURPOSE

Shelters are welcoming, inclusive, and accessible spaces that support individuals on their path to housing. Designed with natural elements and architectural features that enhance neighborhood aesthetics, these environments promote dignity, wellbeing, and a sense of belonging.

SERVICE PRACTICES

- User centred spaces
- Privacy
- Safety
- Proactive health measures (i.e. pest control, IPAC)
- Accessibility
- Communal programming
- Housekeeping/ maintenance

CONNECTION POINTS

- Connection Point to Toronto Shelter Standards
- Connection to Shelter Design & Technical Guidelines
- Homelessness Services Capital Infrastructure Strategy

PURPOSE

Spaces refers to the design, infrastructure and functional components of shelters that provide protection, privacy and stabilization for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Emergency shelters provide welcoming, accessible spaces that temporarily accommodate individuals and families experiencing homelessness. These environments offer safety and stability, allowing shelter clients to meet basic needs, recover, and engage with services that support transitions to permanent housing.

Shelters contribute to the City's goals of maintaining healthy and safe communities by offering inclusive spaces and supportive services to meet urgent needs of persons experiencing homelessness. The SSM reflects current practice while acknowledging that not all shelters currently align with best practices within the Shelter Design & Technical Guidelines. Through the Homelessness Services Capital Infrastructure Strategy work is in progress to improve shelter infrastructure, support the transition toward purpose-built shelters and support service delivery needs. All aspects of this pillar may not be met in spaces including 24-hour Respite, Warming Centres, Alternate Space Programs and surge spaces.

PRACTICES

User-Centred Spaces

Shelters can be designed or arranged to support shelter practices and user needs including enhance positive outcomes, accommodating pets, programming, and access to health and other supports. Thoughtfully designed indoor communal areas encourage social interaction and reduce isolation by creating opportunities for connection and shared experience. Vibrant outdoor spaces that

reflect local creativity offer welcoming environments where clients can interact, feel embraced and part of the surrounding community. Flexible design allows shelters to respond to diverse needs, ensuring that individuals can balance feelings of safety, and autonomy in shared environments.





Privacy

Maintaining privacy in shelters remains an important consideration due to its close connection to dignity and overall well-being. When people have control over their personal space, it helps promote a sense of autonomy and self-determination. Private areas for personal care and confidential staff interactions are important for creating trauma-informed environments. Flexible private spaces can offer opportunities for reflection and connection to personal values but should be supported with clear policies regarding use. Together, these design features help create a balanced environment that encourages both engagement and independence.

Safety

Safety is a foundational aspect of shelter environments, supporting both individual well-being and overall stability. Features such as access control and monitored entry points help maintain secure spaces. Emergency exits equipped with alarms ensure staff can respond quickly to potential concerns. Thoughtful integration of safety features supports trauma-informed practices and ensures shelters remain responsive and protective spaces for those seeking support.

Proactive Health Measures

Integrating health-focused design elements into shelter infrastructure is essential for maintaining safety and well-being in communal environments. By embedding health considerations into the built environment, shelters can better protect clients and staff, while promoting operational reliability and continuity of care during public health emergencies. Proactive health measures help shelters identify and manage outbreaks more efficiently, reducing transmission risks, operational costs and response times. Design elements such as improved ventilation, designated

isolation areas, private on-site spaces for providing basic health services, and sanitation stations support preventative care, early intervention and containment with family, case workers, and healthcare providers, while also supporting eligibility for benefits that require a mailing address, including government-issued documentation.

Accessibility

Accessibility is a holistic concept that includes considerations for physical, mental and cultural access in shelters. The design and layout of a space impacts functionality and inclusivity.

- Physical accessibility ensures everyone can navigate the space safely and independently, through features such as ramps, elevators, wide doorways, accessible washroom and shower facilities.
- Environmental accessibility can be supported through features such as noise reduction, natural lighting, colours, and quiet zones, which help accommodate sensory sensitivities and cognitive needs and support comfort and focus.
- Cultural accessibility can be supported through inclusive design elements like multilingual signage, culturally relevant visuals and spaces for gathering or reflection, helping people feel recognized and respected.

Together, these elements contribute to environments that are functional, inclusive and responsive to a range of needs and experiences, and supports dignity, independence, and equitable access.

There is a duty on the shelter operators to accommodate under the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) and Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and that the duty should be clearly articulated in their policies.

Communal Programming

Spaces for communal programming offer opportunities for connection, peer support activities and personal growth. In shelter settings, these spaces help reduce isolation and build trusting relationships. When available, having spaces that could host community members to participate in relevant programming such as workshops, recreational activities or cultural events can promote integration, strengthen local relationships, and expand support networks.

Housekeeping/Maintenance

Ongoing maintenance is essential to keeping communal spaces safe, clean, and welcoming. Regular upkeep ensures that anyone living,

working, or volunteering can do so in comfort and with dignity. Well-maintained environments help prevent health and safety issues and signal respect for the people who use the space every day. In congregate living settings, cleanliness and care are not just operational necessities, they are foundational to creating a stable and supportive environment.

Connection Points

- Toronto Shelter Standards
- Shelter Design & Technical Guidelines
- Homelessness Services Capital Infrastructure Strategy





Case Management

PURPOSE

Empowered by collaborative planning and consistent support, case management is a dynamic, client-driven process that coordinates essential services to foster measurable, lasting improvements in individual lives and promote community wellbeing. The goal is to prevent individuals from becoming chronically homeless.

SERVICE PRACTICES

HOUSING FIRST CASE MANAGEMENT & PLANNING

- Service Planning
- Financial Planning
- Planning for Housing
- Service Triage & Referral Supports (STARS)
- Goal Setting
- Referral and Coordination
- Monitor & Progress Support
- Discharge Planning
- Follow-up Support

CONNECTION POINTS

- Toronto Shelter Standards
- Shelter Design Guidelines

PURPOSE

Case management is a structured, person-centred approach used in the shelter system to drive progress and achieve tangible results for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. It is a client-centred and consistent approach where individuals are able to participate in making decisions that impact them. Through engagement that builds trust and rapport, case managers assess individual needs, establish clear goals, and coordinate access to essential services with referrals and warm introductions. This process includes planning, implementation, clear documentation, ongoing meetings, and monitoring progress to overcome barriers and support the transition towards housing.

At a systems level, case management contributes to more coordinated service delivery with clear measurable milestones across the shelter system and the ultimate goal of supporting all clients to secure housing. By aligning personal goals with broader Housing First service objectives, case management supports improved resource utilization that promotes flow in shelter services, enhances data-informed decision making and facilitates timely access of pathways from emergency shelter to stable housing.

PRACTICES

Service Planning

Planning and documentation are foundational to effective case management. Under the Toronto Shelter Standards, all clients must have an up-to-date housing and financial plan. These plans serve as essential tools that guide service providers in identifying needs, coordinating supports, and enabling access to income, housing, and other critical resources.

Embedding this planning into the service process ensures a structured, person-centred approach focused on successful transitions to housing.

Financial Planning

Financial plans are a key part of service planning, enabling access to housing opportunities, subsidies, and supports. By confirming and documenting key documents such as income sources,

identification, tax assessments, and active housing applications, shelter providers strengthen clients' ability to secure and maintain stable housing.

Planning for Housing

Housing plans are a vital part of service planning, ensuring clients are provided supports to pathways to stable housing. Shelter providers support individuals by completing the STARS Housing Checklist (Service Triage, Assessment, and Referral Support), exploring housing options, facilitating applications, and making connections to housing benefits and supports. All efforts to engage are documented, including when support is declined, to promote coordinated, accountable service delivery.

Service Triage Assessment and Referral Support (STARS)

Accessing housing supports requires a combination of valid documentation, informed consent, and coordinated assessments. Client consent is needed to be added to the By-Name List, which allows for the secure sharing of personal information with housing providers and partners to help match individuals with appropriate supports. There are three components to the STARS tool and two are used regularly in shelters. Independently they are critical milestones that gather relevant information to inform progressive case planning. Together, these tools form a coordinated approach that supports timely, accurate, and person-centred pathways to housing.

1. The Intake and Triage Tool helps determine the level and type of support a person may need during their shelter stay, guiding initial service planning, including case management supports.
2. The Housing Checklist tracks the possession and completion of essential documents such as identification, income verification, tax records, and housing applications, required to qualify for housing and related benefits.
3. Toronto's STARS support assessment tool is a point-in-time tool used at the point of a housing offer from the By-Name List. This assessment helps ensure individuals are

appropriately matched with available housing and support services through Coordinated Access that meets their specific housing, finance and personal needs.

Goal Setting

Supporting people in achieving stable and sustainable housing is a core goal at TSSS. Understanding personal priorities and goals is key to motivating progress and shaping effective, person-centred case planning. By incorporating these goals, alongside housing history and current support needs, case managers can develop tailored plans that coordinate the right supports and referrals that align with what matters most to those we serve. Maintaining thorough documentation ensures goals are not lost and supports continuity of care.

Referral & Coordination

Coordinating community-based supports ensures individuals receive the care they need across multiple domains, including health, mental health, finance and skills development. Referrals are documented in SMIS to reflect the connections to the supports that are required and/or available.

Monitor & Progress Support

Effective case management relies on building connection and trust that facilitates the coordination of supports to ensure people receive the most appropriate supports at the right time (meeting people where they are at). Achieving successful housing outcomes requires case managers to create a more responsive, effective, and goal-oriented journey to obtaining housing by monitoring and supporting people's progress and fostering collaboration across service providers. This approach can strengthen relationships, increase stability and improve case plan outcomes that ultimately support individuals' transition to housing.



Case Management continued

Discharge Planning

In a large and dynamic shelter system, discharges can be either planned or unplanned. Each situation requires a different approach to support continuity of care. Making sure the planning and efforts are captured each time is vital for understanding service effectiveness, identifying gaps, and informing future planning.

- When discharges are planned such as discharge to housing, case managers play a key role in preparing shelter clients for transition by offering guidance on community resources, completing referrals, and ensuring follow-up support are in place based on the individual's needs. Discharge planning begins at intake.
- When discharges are unplanned, tracking where individuals go can be challenging. Some unplanned discharges are expected as part of the process of meeting individuals where they are at, including failure to return to the shelter or when an individual is referred to another program for noncompliance to health and safety guidelines.

Follow-up Support

During initial transitions to housing, follow-up supports provide a supportive bridge between the shelter environment and independent living. Supports ensure that individuals are not immediately left to navigate independent living or manage their tenancy on their own. Planned coordination of supports during this transition strengthens the likelihood of reaching housing stability and improves long-term outcomes. Follow-up supports including check-ins, referrals, or assistance navigating new systems, can help maintain continuity of care, reinforce connections to community resources, and reduce the risk of returns to homelessness.

Connection Points

- Toronto Shelter Standards
- Shelter Design & Technical Guidelines





Identity & Localized Services

PURPOSE

Shelters provide culturally safe, community-based services that are informed by an equity lens and delivered using trauma-informed approaches, with the aim of reducing barriers and responding to the diverse experiences of the people they serve.

SERVICE PRACTICES

BASELINE PRACTICES:

- Community Integration
- Connection & Partnerships
- Refugee Supports
- Harm Reduction Partnerships
- Pet Policy

BASED ON POPULATION NEEDS:

- Site-specific Programming
- Cultural Programming
- Social Activities
- Educational Programming
- Life-Skills
- Peer Programming

CONNECTION POINTS

- Toronto Shelter Standards Homelessness Health Services Framework
- Shelter Design & Technical Guidelines
- Ten Point Harm Reduction Plan
- Meeting in the Middle Engagement Strategy & Action Plan
- Toronto Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism
- Homelessness Services Capital Infrastructure Strategy

PURPOSE

Identity & Localized Services honour unique needs, leverage strengths and support people to thrive in their communities through programming and referral partnerships with local services. These activities are trauma-informed and are continually evaluated and informed by user feedback with the goal of reflecting the diverse identities of shelter users. Grounded in local partnerships and inclusive practices, they foster trust, dignity, and connection, ensuring care is consistently accessible and relevant.

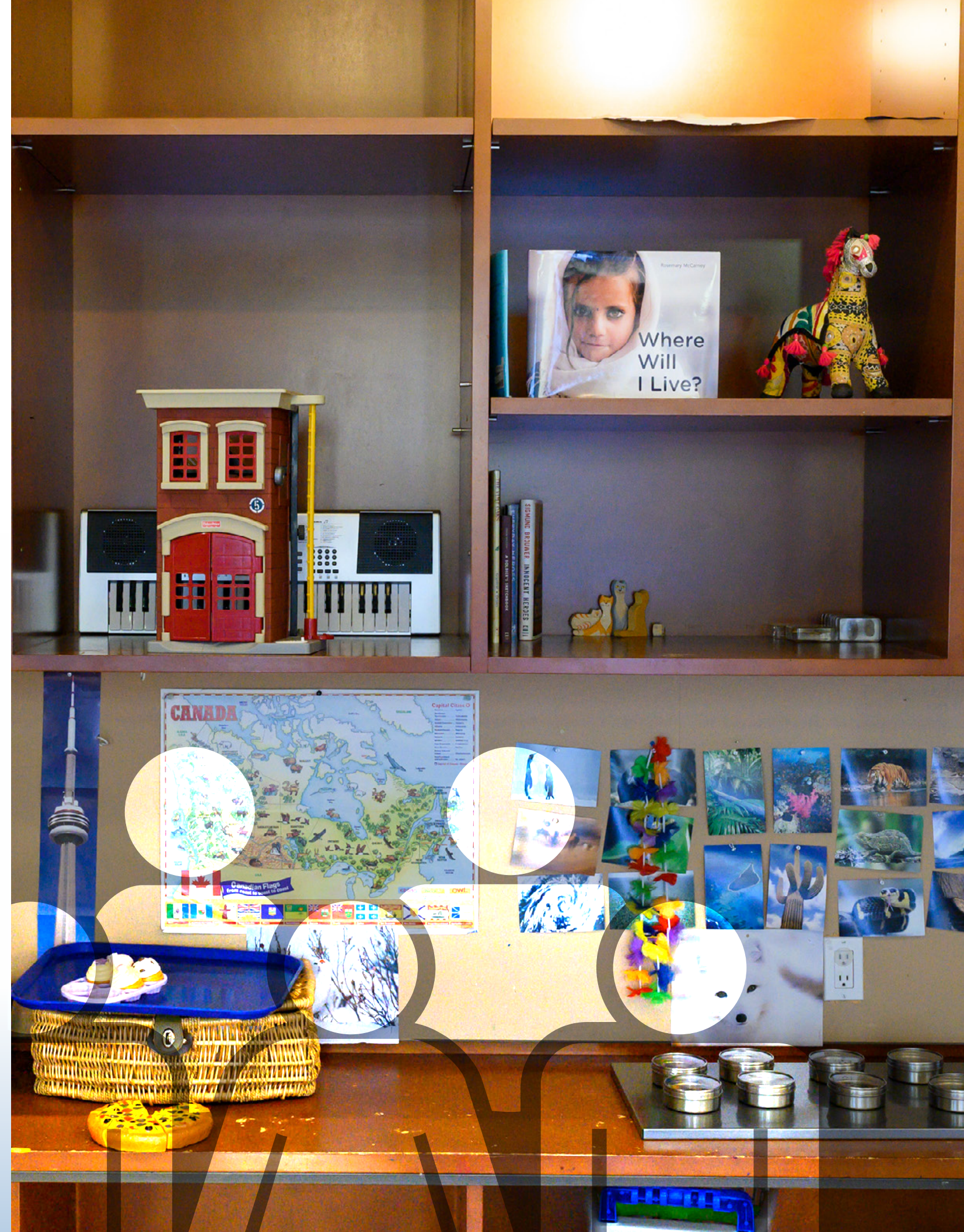
Through effective and sustainable neighbourhood-based programming and strong referral partnerships, shelters are better equipped to respond to client needs, build trust in services delivered and ensure the successful integration of the shelter operation into the community. Success in a community is built on the support and strong partnerships of our community partners, including Business Improvement Areas, resident associations, community agencies, and libraries. Creating shared spaces for dialogue between shelter users and local residents fosters mutual understanding, accountability, and collaborative problem-solving.

PRACTICES

Community Integration

Community integration is essential to the success of shelter programs and its clients, as well as the vitality of the neighbourhoods they are situated within. Shelters are a community asset by offering supports that improve local wellbeing, reduce street homelessness, and contribute to City goals of creating safer, more stable neighbourhoods. Shelters

have good neighbour policies and procedures to facilitate how the shelter engages, communicates and works with the surrounding community to foster positive relationships and address any concerns. Ongoing community engagement builds positive relationships, identifies opportunities for cooperation, and helps address concerns through open, collaborative, solutions-focused dialogue that strengthens transparency and accountability. Participation





Identity & Localized Services

in dialogue with shelter providers reduces stigma and misinformation about people experiencing homelessness and the role of shelter services, promotes mutual understanding, strengthens social cohesion, and makes neighbourhoods more inclusive and welcoming for all.

Connection and Partnerships

Building strong connections and partnerships with community agencies and local businesses is essential for the success of emergency shelters. These partnerships expand access to critical services and supports, allowing shelters to address the complex needs of individuals more effectively. Partnerships also help integrate shelters into the broader community, reducing stigma and fostering shared responsibility for addressing homelessness. By working together, shelters and community partners can create more sustainable pathways toward stability and independence for those experiencing homelessness. Partnering with local organizations and businesses to co-create programming and opportunities for shelter clients can ensure that services are not only relevant and responsive to shelter client needs, but also reflective of community priorities.

Refugee Supports

The dedicated refugee shelter system provides a safe and inclusive environment that recognizes the unique needs and experiences of refugee claimants. Refugee shelter operators provide specialized services and support along with resources, and referrals to help clients navigate the refugee claim process.

Harm Reduction Partnerships

Compassionate, lifesaving, client-centred harm reduction services are brought directly into shelters through partnerships with health and community partners for people who use substances. A harm reduction approach and strategies include a continuum of services that are adapted to shelter residents' needs including, but not limited to, overdose prevention and

response tools, access to harm reduction supplies, mental health supports, and access to substance treatment and peer-led programming to mitigate the harmful impacts of the drug toxicity epidemic. Abstinence-based treatment and recovery services are also an important part of the broader system of care. This collaborative approach strengthens frontline efforts and ensures a more connected, health-focused, and safer shelter environment, rooted in the City's response to the [Our Health Our City Strategy](#).

Pet Policy

Pets provide comfort, emotional support, and a sense of stability for many people experiencing homelessness. Shelters that implement pet policies help create inclusive environments, while also considering clear guidelines around animal welfare, pet care and shared living expectations to ensure that both clients and pets can reside together safely and respectfully.

Site-Specific Programming

It is essential to design programming to meet the unique needs of individuals at each shelter and the local context. Effective service delivery requires understanding the distinct characteristics of each location, including available resources, and cultural context. It means recognizing and responding to the experiences of the population served, including children and youth, Indigenous people, racialized people, and 2SLGBTQ+ individuals. By adapting supports to reflect these differences, staff and partners can provide more responsive, relevant, and person-centred care that strengthens outcomes for everyone across the system.

Cultural Programming

Intentional cultural and spiritual offerings play a vital role in supporting personal well-being and honouring the diverse backgrounds of shelter clients. By creating space and partnerships for reflection, expression, and connections to the larger community, we foster inclusion, respect, and a deeper sense of belonging.

Social Activities

Engaging in social activities is a powerful way to reduce isolation, offering opportunities for connection that enhance emotional resilience. These interactions not only improve mental well-being but also contribute to stronger communities by encouraging mutual support and shared purpose.

Educational Programming

Educational programming advances housing opportunities and stability and plays a transformative role in supporting newcomers, individuals experiencing displacement, and youth or adults needing training opportunities. By offering opportunities or referring to external programs to acquire new skills and credentials, educational programs help foster self-confidence, open pathways to social and economic mobility, and lay the foundation for long-term financial stability.

Life Skills

Life skills programming is essential for empowering people, especially youth, to navigate future independent living and sustain housing. By teaching practical skills, such as budgeting, paying bills, managing appointments, and understanding tenancy responsibilities, these programs help people build self-efficacy and prepare for stable, long-term housing. When delivered in supportive environments like shelters, life skills

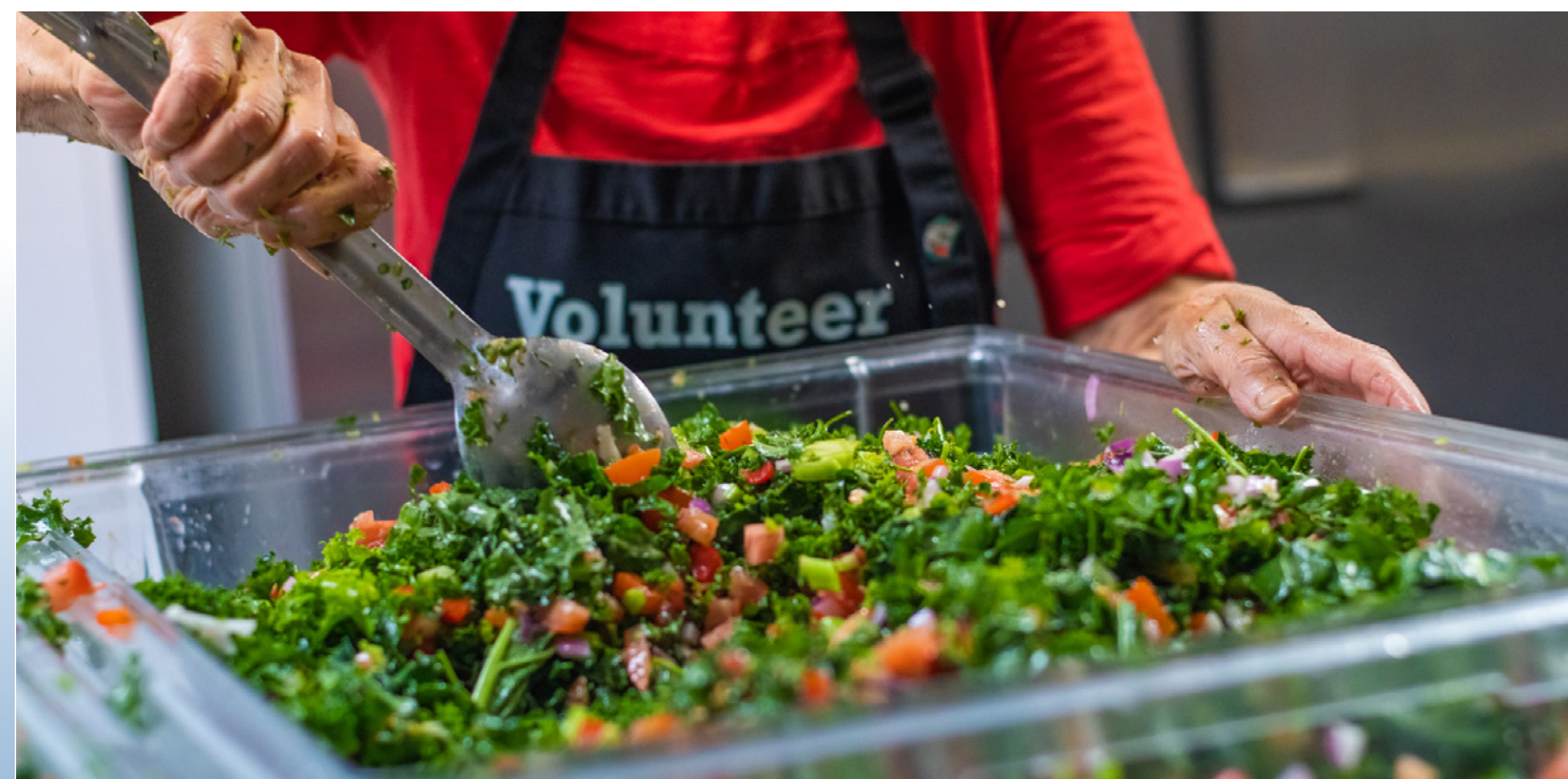
education not only enhances personal development but also contributes to improved housing outcomes and smoother transitions into independent living.

Peer Programming

Peer programming is a powerful tool for fostering trust and connection among individuals with shared lived experiences. By creating spaces where people can offer mutual support, insight, and encouragement, peer-led initiatives help reduce isolation and build rapport. These relationships are often more relatable and impactful, as peers bring firsthand understanding of the challenges others face. When integrated into shelter programming, peer support not only strengthens individual resilience but also contributes to a more inclusive, empowering (learning) and community-driven environment.

Connection Points

- Toronto Shelter Standards
- Homelessness Health Services Framework
- Shelter Design & Technical Guidelines
- [Guidance Document for Harm Reduction in Shelter Programs: A Ten Point Plan](#)
- Meeting in the Middle Engagement Strategy and Action Plan
- [Toronto Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism](#)
- Homelessness Services Capital Infrastructure Strategy



Conclusion: Building Awareness and Capacity Through the Shelter Service Model

The SSM provides a framework for understanding and setting clear expectations for how shelter services are delivered across Toronto. By outlining broad service categories and grounding them in practices informed by evidence, expertise, and lived experience, the SSM helps clarify what effective, equity informed service delivery looks like in action.

The Model is a tool for reflection, learning, and improvement. It invites shelter staff, leaders, and partners to deepen their awareness of system values, such as traumainformed care, cultural safety, and coordinated planning, and to recognize how these values are expressed in everyday practice. It also supports a shared expectations of service consistency across shelters, while acknowledging the need for flexibility based on client needs, and local context. This flexibility allows for shelter providers to implement further programming and services above and beyond what is included in the SSM, while remaining aligned with the commitments they make in their operating agreements.

The SSM can be used as a reference document for program development, performance measures, staff orientation, and service improvements. By engaging with the SSM, shelter operators can strengthen alignment with system goals, identify opportunities for growth, and contribute to a more responsive and inclusive shelter system. For the broader community, this is an opportunity to better understand the role and goals of shelters, and how they can support people experiencing homelessness in a cohesive, evidence-informed way.

