

Toronto Shelter Providers: A Short Survey

Preliminary Results

At the end of February 2013, Social Planning Toronto initiated a short survey to better understand the experiences and perspectives of Toronto shelter providers regarding access to shelter for people who are homeless. We have contacted 55 shelters from the City of Toronto's website.

This bulletin provides preliminary results from 12 community organizations operating 15 shelters, including 10 emergency shelters, 3 violence against women (VAW) shelters, 1 transitional shelter, and 1 out of the cold program. Participating shelters included those operating in the downtown core and the inner suburbs.

Shelters serve single men (3), single women (3), singles and couples with pets (1), single women and youth (1), women and children (4), refugees (1), all adults (1), single youth (1).

Shelter Access

On Saturday, February 9:

- 10 out of 15 shelters were full with no available beds
- 5 shelters had between 1-2 beds available each

On Saturday, February 16, the City of Toronto declared an extreme cold weather alert. During an extreme cold weather alert, an additional 172 beds are added to the shelter system.

On Saturday, February 16:

- regular beds in 11 out of 15 shelters were full
- 4 shelters had 1-2 regular beds available each
- 6 shelters opened extra beds in response to the extreme cold weather alert
- extra beds in 2 of these shelters were full
- extra beds in 4 of these shelters were available – 1-9 beds depending on shelter

In the past month, all shelters had to turn people away at least some of the time because they were full.

Shelter staff either found people another shelter with a free bed (or mat) or referred people to the Peter Street Assessment and Referral Centre. Six shelter providers mentioned referring people to the Peter Street location specifically. Most respondents mentioned providing a token for transportation. Some shelter providers also mentioned providing food, support, phone and facility access while people waited to access another shelter. One VAW shelter said that they never turn a woman away during extreme cold weather alerts regardless of whether she meets the criteria for admission.

Should the City of Toronto Open Emergency Shelter Space?

- 8 organizations said yes, additional emergency shelter space is needed
- 2 said what we really need is supportive and affordable housing, but additional emergency shelter space would alleviate immediate need
- 1 said if other shelters are as full as their shelter, then yes, additional emergency shelter space is needed
- 1 said no, what we need is to end homelessness
- All respondents identified the urgent need for affordable and supportive housing

“If other shelters are not available, no special circumstances beds are available, then the person is sent to 129 Peter Street.”

“Ninety women were turned away [in the past month] due to lack of space, and referred to the Assessment and Referral Centre [Peter Street].”

“Generally we send people away every night ... and refer out.”

“We run at 100% capacity, year round. If all shelters are in the same situation, more beds are needed in the system. I know that some of our ‘regulars’ move into the Out of the Cold in the winter, but it has no effect on our occupancy. It stays at 100%.”

“What the city needs to do is ensure that no Toronto resident is homeless. People are not choosing to be homeless. This city needs to take a more proactive response to homelessness. No one can afford housing in this city and they certainly cannot afford it on the funds [from] OW and/or ODSP...the working poor cannot afford the rents in this city.”

“Supportive housing would be a better option, but we would not say no to additional beds.”

“Our experience is that there is a need for single beds for women – particularly adult women.”

“Additional beds are needed in the youth sector due to the closing of one of the shelters in the Fall of 2012. There are days when there is no capacity at all and there are days when we are able to accommodate. I understand based on overall numbers, there is capacity in the youth sector to address demand but there are times when we wish more spaces were available.”

“Yes I agree that the City should open more emergency beds, particularly in the youth sector.”

“It appears that way [need for additional shelter space] since making referrals to other shelters is difficult. With the exception of [one men’s shelter], no one else has space available.”

“Except here, there is nowhere to refer people who have pets or people with physical disabilities, i.e. people who need a wheelchair.”