

## Q&A's

March 17, 2020, 5:00PM

### Shelter Support & Housing Administration Division

#### Questions and Answers Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV)

This FAQ sheet has been developed to answer some questions that staff may have about Covid19, measures to protect themselves and action that SSHA is taking to ensure that staff and clients remain safe.

Note that as the situation is changing rapidly, the answers we provide today may change tomorrow based on updated circumstances and information. SSHA continues to monitor the situation and while there is still no community transmission at the moment, we are being proactive to plan for the near future when this might change.

Please stay up to date with the most recent information to keep yourself informed of new developments by referring to credible sources of information, such as Toronto Public Health's [website](#) and the [City's intranet web page](#).

#### **Q. How will SSHA staff learn about changes/developments to the Covid19 situation?**

As the situation with Covid19 continues to evolve rapidly, we are committed to providing regular, updated email communications to keep you informed of the latest developments.

We are providing you with a centralized email address [sshadoc@toronto.ca](mailto:sshadoc@toronto.ca). You can send any work-related questions and concerns to us via this address. We will do our best to provide responses to these frequently asked questions through our regular update emails.

All Corporate HR queries should be sent directly to [covid19staffsupport@toronto.ca](mailto:covid19staffsupport@toronto.ca).

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#### **Q. What action has SSHA taken to protect staff and clients from Covid-19?**

Based on the evidence and medical advice we have received, we know we need to quickly take actions to delay the spread of COVID-19 to significantly reduce risks. We need to provide additional time for planning so we are prepared for what will happen in the coming days and weeks.

We are implementing a 3 tier response:

First, we are creating the ability for additional social distancing spacing within the existing shelter system through creation of new programs.

The first opened on Monday 16<sup>th</sup> March and service will ramp up over the next week.

The focus is to create more than 200 spaces as quickly as possible within City facilities that are currently empty. Those services are planned to open as early as tomorrow and will ramp up services over the week. As services open, that information will be available on our website and shared with our community partners.

This is NOT to create additional capacity in our shelters, but will allow us to move people within existing programs, particularly our 24-hour respite sites and 24-hour drop-ins.

This is to create more social distance space for those who use the system.

Second, we are creating additional isolation spaces for people identified through screening and assessment processes that are waiting for test results. This process has been initiated and we'll continue to move people who need it over this week into isolation.

Currently we are implementing screening processes using the Toronto Public Health recommended screening questions at all points of entry by phone or in-person for all those seeking shelter.

Anyone wanting to access the shelter system who should be assessed for COVID-19, is being referred to one of the province's assessment centres.

People who are experiencing homelessness who are being tested for COVID-19 will not be admitted into regular our shelter system. Instead they will be isolated in separate spaces at a designated program location.

This is the first program of its kind in Canada, as a medically supported isolation service for people who are homeless while they wait to receive their test results.

On the third tier, we are still working with our provincial partners to identify an appropriate service for people who have tested positive for COVID-19.

So far, we have not had anyone who has tested positive, and we want to make sure we have a program available when that occurs, that has the appropriate medical supports in place to protect staff, community partners and those we serve.

#### **Q. Can staff work from home?**

You have received communication from the City Manager messaging that all non-essential staff work from home until further notice.

The frontline work that SSHA does provides essential services for our vulnerable clients and most of our staff will be required to continue to provide those services.

If you work in a head office function, please speak with your direct supervisor or manager today about your ability to do your current work from home.

Please note, that as we are currently in the process of developing plans to implement our emergency response strategies and maintain frontline services, you should be prepared to be redeployed to support core functions and frontline services as needed.

As these plans will develop over time and the situation changes, your work assignment for re-deployment may change. Please stay in daily communication with your immediate supervisor to determine when and where you will be redeployed.

**Q. I have an existing health condition that will make me more vulnerable to Covid-19. What should I do?**

If you feel you cannot perform frontline duties due to an existing health condition or medical vulnerability due to a past illness or medical treatment, please speak with your immediate supervisor as soon as possible.

**Q. Will other divisions be re-deployed to SSHA?**

We are assessing our need for staff support in order to maintain our frontline services, and will request support from other divisions if needed.

**Q. If staff have been abroad within the past 14 days but are not exhibiting any symptoms, should they be ready to be re-deployed?**

Toronto Public Health has directed that all people who have left the country self-isolate for 14 days, whether or not they are exhibiting symptoms. Any SSHA staff who have been abroad within the past 14 days should not be at work and should not present for re-deployment and should self-isolate immediately for 14 days. Please contact your immediate supervisor as soon as possible if this applies to you.

**Q. What should staff do if they are contacted by a City Councillor or their staff for information?**

The City has activated its *Councillor Liaison Emergency Support Function*, which is a single channel for Councillors to send and receive information relating to emergencies, and will support the response to the novel coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic.

City Councillors or their staff may send queries directly to SSHA head office staff or to SSHA shelter staff related to COVID-19. All SSHA staff should direct any emails from Councillors and their staff to [cnlemerg@toronto.ca](mailto:cnlemerg@toronto.ca). If possible, please include in your message any applicable information that may answer the query so that an appropriate response can be developed.

**Q. Will SSHA job competitions underway be postponed?**

All non-essential job competitions will be postponed. People & Equity will provide additional direction.

**Q. Are additional PPE available for Street Outreach to wipe down cars etc.?**

Access to PPE is being coordinated through the EOC Corporately. SSHA has requested the division be prioritized for PPE supply and will issue additional supplies across frontline teams as soon as possible. If additional PPE are available they will be shared with POS providers as well.

**Q. Are SSHA Street Outreach still required to support the posting and clearing of sites?**

Encampment clearances are being put on hold until further notice.

**Q. Are Street Outreach required to continue to transport clients to shelter/respice sites?**

Street Outreach staff are to suspend client transport until further notice. Staff should continue to focus on outreach and check-ins only.

If clients are interested in accessing shelter/respice services, Outreach staff should direct them to public transport.

**Q. Can Street Outreach staff access additional uniforms (street outreach or city of Toronto sweatshirts) given that advice is to change clothes regularly?**

Yes. Staff should connect with their immediate supervisor to arrange additional uniforms.

**Q. Should staff be taking clients to apartment and unit viewings at this time?**

Housing viewings will be very limited given the current situation and given that SSHA staff are putting client transportation on hold.

**Q. What are the symptoms of the Covid-19 virus? How is the Covid-19 virus spread? Am I at risk of contracting Covid-19? How can I protect myself from contracting Covid-19?**

Comprehensive and up to date information about Covid-19 is available via Toronto Public Health's [website](#). We encourage staff to check the website regularly for up to date information.

**Q. Will regular work continue for all SSHA staff?**

SSHA is currently in the process of identifying essential work that needs to continue. All non-essential work will be postponed at this time, including monthly 24-Respite Standards site visits, upcoming Shelter Standards Assessment site visits and the 2020 Street Needs Assessment.

Our top priority is ensuring our front-line shelter operations are kept open. Head office staff should be prepared to be redeployed as needed to ensure we are able to continue providing critical services to our vulnerable clients.

**Q. I am a parent/caregiver. With recent announcements from the Province about school closure and the City about licensed childcare closure, how will my childcare needs be accommodated by SSHA?**

The City is currently working to identify and develop a response to this issue. We will share more information as soon as possible.

**Q. Where can SSHA staff get masks to use at work?**

We understand that access to PPE is critical to providing our services. The City is currently assessing what PPE is available, we are asking to be prioritized for supplies.

We are taking direction from Toronto Public Health on who should be using masks in the workplace. To date, no additional need for masks has been identified beyond those that are required in accordance with

the job duties outlined in TPH's [IPAC guide](#). If at any time the City identifies a need for additional masks for its employees, they will be provided by the City.

**Q. Can I refuse to service a client who is showing flu-like symptoms?**

Infection prevention and control procedures are in place where required to safely provide service to clients. Following established protocols to provide the service would be the expectation. A face mask would be worn if standard PPE for the job duties.

**Q. What is the recommended procedure if I encounter a shelter client with symptoms but the person has not travelled recently?**

General prevention from respiratory viruses are recommended:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are ill.
- Stay home when you are ill.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then immediately throw the tissue in the garbage and wash your hands.
- If you don't have a tissue, sneeze or cough into your sleeve or arm.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.

**Q. How are funded agencies being supported to protect staff and clients? What actions has SSHA taken to ensure our funded agencies are supported?**

SSHA has sent out communication to all of our funded shelter, respite and 24-drop in service providers requesting them to increase IPAC and routine cleaning practices immediately. SSHA will be providing additional funding to shelters, respite services and 24-hour drop-ins to support increased infection control and prevention activities. Providers will be asked to cancel meetings that bring people on-site.

We have established a centralized email address for all sector staff to use for operational questions related to COVID-19. We have also shared information about TPH's COVID-19 hotline and links to other useful resources available on TPH's website. We have requested that all organizations establish a planning group with a focus on service continuity. We have requested a point person to be identified to receive ongoing communication from TPH and SSHA.

We are also working to develop tools and resources for service providers.

**Q. Community agencies we fund have sent queries about SSHA supplying them with PPE. Can SSHA issue City supplies to agencies we fund?**

The City is not currently issuing PPE to external service providers. There is lots of work being done to redistribute PPE between City divisions to ensure all essential services are properly protected. We do not have surplus supplies to redistribute to community agencies at this time. SSHA is advocating for homeless services to be prioritized for PPE. If we are able to access additional supplies, we will distribute them to agencies.

SSHA will be providing additional funding to shelter and 24-hour respites and 24-hour drop-ins to support increased infection control and prevention activities. More information will be provided shortly about distribution of this funding.

**Q. How should sites be screening clients for COVID-19?**

Screening tools specific to shelter locations, and referral options for isolation and quarantine of clients who may require it, are currently in development in partnership with Toronto Public Health and Inner City Health Associates. A screening tool is being developed and will be distributed shortly.

In the meantime, the Ministry of Health has developed a [self-assessment screening tool](#) that shelter providers can use as a guide to screen incoming clients.

**Q. What should sites do if a client meets screening criteria for COVID-19?**

People who meet the screening criteria for a probable case established by the Ministry of Health and who have current symptoms, should be referred for testing at one of the Covid-19 testing centres. More information is available on the [TPH website about locations of testing centres](#).

Questions about who should be referred for testing should be directed to Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000 for further guidance.

Prioritization of testing for people experiencing homelessness, as a particularly vulnerable group, has been requested at local, provincial and national levels.

More information about transportation to testing sites will be provided shortly.

**Q. Where should clients go who have been tested for Covid-19 and are waiting for results?**

Over the weekend, SSHA opened a designated program to provide isolation and quarantine spaces for people experiencing homeless who are awaiting Covid-19 test results, in partnership with ICHA. Referrals into this program are through Healthcare Providers only, following a medical assessment.

Individuals who have been tested and medically assessed will then be supported to access the new program for isolation pending the results of the test. Upon confirmation of a negative test result, individuals may return to the shelter/respice/drop-in program they were previously admitted to.

**Q. Will recent arrivals to the country who are seeking emergency shelter in Toronto be screened for Covid-19?**

Given the recent advice of the Medical Officer of Health that anyone returning to Canada from another country self-isolate for 14 days, the City has requested the federal government to put the necessary provisions in place to screen and quarantine people at border locations themselves, in particular for people who have nowhere to go through their own means where they will be able to self-isolate.

As an interim measure, clients requesting shelter beds through Central Intake and SHARC will be screened and referred to spaces suitable for self-isolation for a 14 day period if they have been out of the country in the past 14 days.

**Q. Will new services be activated to increase social distancing?**

We are planning additional service locations to be able to reduce capacities and increase social distancing within existing programs, focusing on those programs where the risk is greatest including the SHARC, 24-hour respites and 24-hour drop-ins.

We have opened the first of these locations and will ramp up services throughout the week.

In addition, the Out of the Cold program is currently winding down ahead of schedule. SSHA is working with Dixon Hall to identify possible locations that could be activated to ensure sufficient capacity within the system. As these locations are confirmed, details will be shared with the sector and posted on our website.

#### **Q. How can shelter operators encourage social distancing in shelters?**

We continue to work closely with our partners at Inner City Health Associates (ICHA) who are in the process of developing social distancing guidelines for homeless services. As these are being developed, we encourage you to consider the feasibility of implementing any of the following best practices at your sites:

- Increase spacing between beds where possible
- Arrange beds so that individuals lay head-to-toe (or toe-to-toe)
- Use neutral barriers (foot lockers, curtains) to create barriers between beds
- Stagger mealtimes to reduce crowding in shared eating facilities
- Stagger the schedule for use of common/shared kitchens
- Create a staggered bathing schedule to reduce the amount of people using the facilities at the same time
- Create a schedule for using common spaces

#### **Q. What can shelter operators do to reduce risk of infection at their sites?**

To reduce the risk of infection and ensure ongoing service capacity, we ask that all providers implement the following measures:

- Implement social distancing strategies at your sites where feasible
- Suspend shelter to shelter transfer practices
- Temporarily limit service restrictions, except in cases where a shelter provider determines that the service-restricted client poses an immediate threat or danger to another individual's health or safety, or the security of the shelter
- Limit walk-in referrals to 129 Peter Street and move to phone based service referrals through Central Intake, where possible
- Divert resources as needed to ensure continued delivery of core support services
- Support clients with family reunification where possible to reduce their risk of exposure
- Eliminate non-essential visitors and service providers on-site, and screen all visitors on entry to the premises

In keeping with these recommendations, SSHA will be suspending non-essential initiatives at this time. Monthly 24-Respite Standards site visits and upcoming schedule Shelter Standards Assessment site visits will be postponed until further notice. The Street Needs Assessment, planned for later in April, will also be postponed until further notice.

We encourage each service provider to review your own operations and suspend non-essential services. These decisions should be made by your organization. Please email [sshadoc@toronto.ca](mailto:sshadoc@toronto.ca) to report any changes to your services and copy your lead SSHA staff.