Background

Motivated by our love for God and the needs of humanity, The Salvation Army began opening rescue homes and shelters in Canada in 1886. Since then, we have grown to be the largest non-governmental provider of social services in this country. We have more than 50 emergency shelters across Canada and operate nearly 1 in 5 of all emergency shelter beds.

The Operating Principles in this document provide The Salvation Army with a framework for delivering emergency shelter services. They affirm and renew our longstanding commitment to helping people find hope, transform their lives, and move on from homelessness.

## Housing First

The context in which we provide emergency shelter services has been changing. For the past three decades, the number of people experiencing homelessness has been increasing.[[1]](#endnote-1) Within the last ten years, the average number of nights that individuals and families spend in shelters, along with the median lengths of stay, has been increasing dramatically.[[2]](#endnote-2) To address these issues, many funders have begun to shift resources towards coordinated systems responses that focus on re-housing people as quickly as possible and helping them access the supports they need to stabilize in the community. This new approach, termed “Housing First,” has been adopted by governments across Canada, the United States, and Europe.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The Operating Principles are aligned with Housing First, but driven by The Salvation Army’s mission.

While “Housing First” is focused on long-term housing and supports for people with multiple challenges, emergency responses continue to play a valuable role. For someone facing a winter night on a park bench, access to an emergency shelter can sometimes mean the difference between life and death. However, the value of shelters goes beyond meeting immediate needs. Emergency shelters often serve as the “front door” to a broader system of supports. Salvation Army staff have extensive knowledge and strong community partnerships which help to ensure that people experiencing homelessness can access the resources and services they need to stabilize in the community.

In most Canadian cities, shelter occupancy rates are high; 70% of Salvation Army emergency shelters have an average occupancy rate above 90%. Rental vacancy rates are dropping, affordable housing stock is being lost as low-income neighbourhoods are gentrifying, social housing stock is diminishing, and social assistance rates and minimum wages are not adequate to secure housing stability. It is important that people experiencing homelessness have somewhere to go – immediately – and access to supports that can help them become and remain housed.

These Operating Principles affirm the value of emergency shelters as an intervention that saves lives, helps people find housing, and supports people to access the resources they need to achieve housing stability.

## Development of the Operating Principles

The National Advisory Board of The Salvation Army struck a Homelessness Task Team[[4]](#endnote-4) in 2013 with the following mandate:

* To understand what is best for those experiencing homelessness in terms of program delivery.
* To understand what funders identify as best for persons experiencing homelessness currently and in the future.
* To identify the processes and systems needed to respond to emerging opportunities, best practices, and funder policy directions.
* To provide recommendations to The Salvation Army to ensure effectiveness and efficiency of The Salvation Army’s response to homelessness, including benchmarking, best practice, evidence-based and research-informed responses, program definition, partnerships, and the development of national service standards.

The Task Team’s scope focused on emergency shelter services and the impact of Housing First approaches on these services. Between January and October 2014, the Homelessness Task Team conducted an extensive literature review, surveyed all 53 Canadian Salvation Army emergency shelters, visited shelters and other service providers in 7 cities, and consulted with 319 individuals:

* 207 Salvation Army officers and staff
* 39 service providers, researchers, funders, policy-makers, and other sector leaders
* 73 Salvation Army clients (38 men and 35 women)

The 7 site visits took place in Calgary (ANT), London (ONG), Winnipeg (PRA), Montreal (QUE), Vancouver and Abbotsford (BC), and St. John’s (NL).

In January 2015, the National Advisory Board endorsed the Operating Principles.

**In February 2015, the Territorial Management Board endorsed the Operating Principles and directed that they be implemented in emergency shelters across Canada and Bermuda.**

Timeline

### 2015

### 2014

### 2013

### 2019

### 2017

### 2016

1. (Hulchanski, Campsie, Chau, Hwang, & Paradis, 2009; Hulchanski, 2011; Laird, 2007; The Wellesley Institute, Shapcott, & Salazar, 2006) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. (Segaert, 2012) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Two resources available on the internet that provide helpful introductions to Housing First approaches are: Stephen Gaetz, Homeless Hub (2013): [www.homelesshub.ca/housingfirst](http://www.homelesshub.ca/housingfirst) and the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) and the Homeless Hub, The Canadian Housing First Toolkit (Polvere et al., 2014): [www.housingfirsttoolkit.ca](http://www.housingfirsttoolkit.ca). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Homelessness Task Team of The Salvation Army’s National Advisory Board: Daniel Burns (chair), Suzanne Herbert (past chair), Mary Ellen Eberlin, Joanne Tilley, Lieutenant-Colonel Ray Moulton, Major Les Burrows, Major Michael Hennessy, Karen Livick, Dr. Stephen Hwang, Robert MacFarlane, Susan Doniz, and Alison Kooistra. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)