



Giving Hope Today

Submission to

Parliamentary Finance Committee

The Government of Canada's Consultation on

The Impact of COVID-19

on Housing and Homelessness Stakeholders

April 17, 2020

We would like to thank the Finance Committee for the opportunity to contribute to the discussion regarding the impact of COVID-19 on stakeholders in the area of housing and homelessness. The Salvation Army has a long history in Canada of providing high quality, compassionate service to individuals experiencing homelessness or at risk of experiencing homelessness. We are committed to innovative, outcomes-focused, sustainable solutions, and look forward to collaborating with our partners and all orders of government in responding to the pressing challenge of providing safe and adequate services and supports to those in our communities who are experiencing homelessness.

The Salvation Army in Canada

The Salvation Army is a Christian church and registered charity present in more than 400 communities across Canada. The Salvation Army began operating residential facilities in Canada in 1886. Since then, we have grown to be the largest non-governmental provider of direct social services in the country. In Canada, The Salvation Army operates more than 110 residential homelessness programs and provides over 5,500 shelter, transitional, and supportive housing beds for adults, youth, and families experiencing or at risk of homelessness, plus outreach, housing stability supports and prevention work. The Salvation Army also operates more than 260 community and family services offices and last year helped more than 1.6 million people to access food, clothing, and other goods necessary to making a house a home. We do this in a variety of communities to diverse demographics with a wide range of partnerships, including various levels of government. The Salvation Army does not have a “one size fits all” approach to sheltering but works intentionally within various contexts to deliver services appropriate to specific communities.

Background

The Salvation Army offers support to people who are experiencing homelessness and social exclusion. We offer a range of services, which include homelessness prevention programs, emergency shelters, transitional and supportive housing, and wrap-around supports. Our services are designed to take a person-centred, holistic approach, aiming to meet the complex vulnerabilities and multi-faceted needs of those we serve.

We feel that The Salvation Army's unique place among Canadian service providers, providing a wide array of shelter services in major centres from coast to coast and at all points in the housing continuum, offers us a unique opportunity to reflect our observations to the Government of Canada.

How The Salvation Army has responded to COVID-19

Since mid-March, we have intentionally adhered to recommendations from the Chief Medical Officers of Health across the country, and as a result have modified shelter service delivery as well as programs associated with those operations. In some locations, this has meant a reduction in the number of available shelter beds to ensure physical distancing. In others, it has resulted in additional shelter spaces or drop-in programs opened in other facilities, in collaboration with other service providers and local governments. Wherever they exist, we have actively participated in comprehensive community plans to protect at-risk and highly vulnerable populations.

As spring arrives, extreme weather response agreements (e.g. in British Columbia) are being extended to serve as capacity extension for emergency shelters – but these are often mat programs and are therefore the least conducive to adequate self-isolation/physical distancing.

As community-based meal programs and public spaces have continued to close their doors, some of our shelter operations (e.g. in Yellowknife, NWT and Medicine Hat, AB) have extended their hours and increased access to washroom facilities. Without access to washroom facilities, it is very difficult for people experiencing homelessness to maintain the recommended personal hygiene (i.e. regular/adequate handwashing).

In many communities across the country, The Salvation Army is playing an integral role in the expansion of services to homeless populations. For example, in Fort McMurray, AB and Hamilton, ON, The Salvation Army is being an active participant in the isolation plans for these communities – providing outreach staff and oversight at designated isolation sites (e.g. motels). We welcome the opportunity to partner in this way in other communities as well, wherever there is adequate medical/health care supports also in place to care for those suffering from COVID-19.

To date, we have reported cases of confirmed or presumptive cases of COVID 19 in our residential facilities in 4/13 provinces and territories. We are consistently monitoring reported and presumptive cases and are communicating that information with local health officials.

Impact of COVID-19 on The Salvation Army and its clients

COVID-19 intensifies an already complex set of challenges in operating congregate residential settings. Of The Salvation Army's 5,500 bed units for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, only (approx.) 460 of the spaces available have the infrastructure for proper self-isolation (with private washroom and kitchen facilities), which is only ~8% of all the people we're caring for during the pandemic. Approximately 1,440 of our units are private rooms (26%) – contrasted with typical shelter beds which are in large dormitories ranging from 10-100 beds. Understandably, some people would rather live outside than in dormitory environments.

Based on what is classified by communities as "housing," these private rooms may be considered by public health authorities to be adequate facilities for self-isolation. When residents of those rooms have tested positive for COVID 19 at assessment centres, we have seen them returned to those congregate living facilities to self-isolate and recover. But since washroom facilities are shared and meals are communal in these settings, the risk of spread to the rest of the resident population and staff will be high. Where needed, staff will deliver contactless meals to isolated individuals. But a private room in a large residential facility is not adequate to meet the basic, health-related, and emotional support needs of a person suffering from COVID-19. In our view, these are not adequate isolation spaces and community plans need to address this gap.

As one can imagine, the costs of adhering to enhanced health standards (e.g. maintaining existing staff, hiring additional staffing for touchpoint cleaning, purchase of personal protective equipment for staff and residents) has added to the already challenging reality of shelter fiscal health.

In recent years, only 6% of The Salvation Army's operating agreements for residential homelessness programs have seen funding level increases to meet inflation and the growing complexity of client needs. During the current pandemic, our staffing levels

are progressively strained and funding packages we receive from government partners to provide these essential services have limited our ability to pay workers a wage that matches the critical role they are now playing in protecting clients, themselves, and their wider communities from COVID-19 spread. Hazard pay is being processed for our shelter workers in certain jurisdictions, but not yet all.

We are grateful to governments at all levels for the additional resources they have provided to address the complexities of self-isolation in these contexts, as well as additional resources to protect the health and safety of both shelter guests and staff. At the same time, we acknowledge the need for longer-term sustainable solutions.

Where our shelters are well-connected to a homeless-serving system (e.g. in 30/61 Designated Communities under Reaching Home) we're able to rely on government funders and public health officials for leadership and isolation plans which protect the most vulnerable. But in communities that lack strong system coordination for homeless sector services, Salvation Army services feel more precarious. We feel the need for a coordinated, systemic approach and for our public health officials to be adequately resourced so even in small communities with less developed networks, there would be sufficient mechanisms to test and protect clients and staff. For example, Edmonton has a clear plan for coordinated services under one roof and with the participation of local and provincial health programs. Toronto has defined a strategy for risk stratification measures for protecting the most vulnerable and begun securing hotels and motels for isolation. We would like to see these types of actions taken in more Canadian cities.

Closing Remarks

Public health advice for preventing the spread of COVID-19 depends on housing – walls, roofs, doors and a safe place to call “home” – for people to isolate. Those without housing are exponentially more vulnerable, unable to protect themselves. As the pandemic forces communities to find housing and isolation space for those experiencing homelessness, we also see an opportunity. We hope that solutions to homelessness are found not just in the short-term, for the length of the pandemic, but also after that; that access to safe and affordable housing is not just a COVID-19 priority. The federal government and its provincial counterparts have an opportunity

to ensure that an adequate supply of affordable, safe housing is made available as soon as possible – during the pandemic – and that anyone accessing suitable private space now gets to keep it afterward. As long as our homelessness neighbours are vulnerable, all Canadians are vulnerable. This feels truer in the case of COVID-19, but it has always been the case. The housing crisis existed before the pandemic and we hope that this challenging time will raise awareness and generate the collective will to solve it for good.

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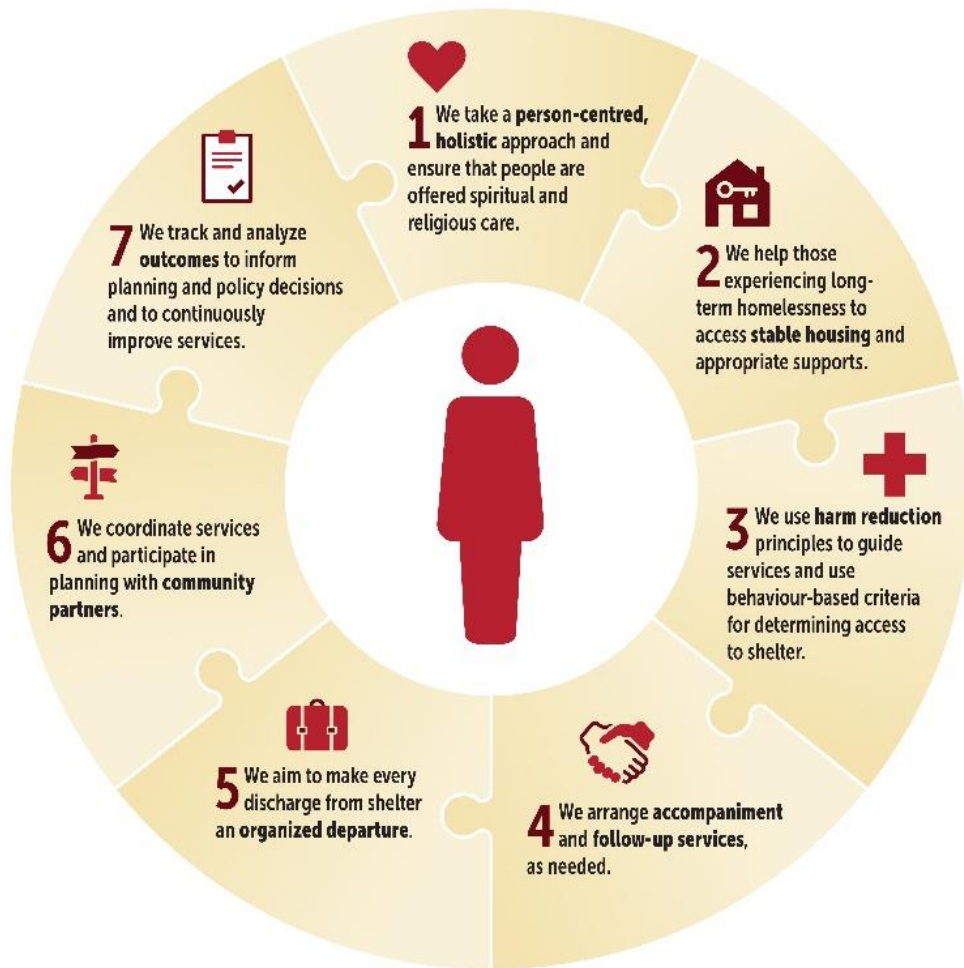
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Appendix: The Salvation Army and Housing First

In recent years many funders have begun to shift resources to a coordinated systems response that focuses on re-housing people as quickly as possible and helping them to access the supports they need to stabilize in the community. This approach, called “Housing First,” has been adopted by governments across Canada, the United States and Europe. The Salvation Army in Canada has developed seven operating principles in order to align itself with Housing First practices, while at the same time staying focused on its mission.

Emergency Shelter Operating Principles



www.SalvationArmy.ca/shelters