

Summary: People with Living Experience Consultation for Hamilton’s Emergency Shelter Standards

Introduction

In 2022, Homelessness Policy & Programs (HPP) staff began the process of updating the Emergency Shelter Standards for the first time since 2008. Updating the standards comprised of three main activities: conducting an inter jurisdictional review of existing Emergency Shelter Standards across Canada, forming a Standards writing committee consisting of shelter operators from each sector and Indigenous community partners, and engaging in a consultation process with people accessing emergency shelters.

Consulting individuals with lived expertise of homelessness was integral for updating the Hamilton Emergency Shelter Standards. This document summarizes the expertise shared from people with living experience (“PWLE”) during a 4-month engagement period where City staff visited 9 emergency shelters and 3 drop-in programs and spoke to almost 200 individuals about what was important to them, to be reflected in the Emergency Shelter Standards. Participants in the engagement sessions included single adults of all genders, youth, families, and people accessing an Indigenous drop-in program.

Highlights

The engagement process resulted in PWLE sharing knowledge and suggestions from diverse experiences which have been organized into 9 high level themes:

	Themes	# of comments per theme
1	Services offered	379
2	Importance of Staff	280
3	Rights and Responsibilities	257
4	Safety: Physical, Mental, and Belongings	192
5	Health and Mental Health Supports	172
6	Access	139
7	Accommodations - Facility	126
8	Cleaning/Hygiene	87
9	General	13
	Total Comments	1,645

Methods

The City hired peer support workers from Keeping Six to support the development of the consultation sessions and to be available to engage with and support PWLE during the sessions. Peer Support Workers would often encourage and inform people of the sessions, as well as take their feedback if they preferred to speak to a peer. Peer

support workers assisted with building rapport and trust with PWLE, facilitating more participation and feedback in many instances. There were 3 City staff in attendance to facilitate discussion, take notes, and perform the administrative task of issuing clients a gift card and bus tickets for participation.

These 90-minute drop-in sessions were advertised via posters and shelter/drop-in staff. On the day of the sessions, peer support workers would circulate and invite people to the process. PWLE would drop in for a few minutes or stay much longer. They were issued one \$15 gift card and 2 bus tickets as compensation for sharing their expertise. Depending on the number of participants, City staff would facilitate a small group discussion or one-on-one feedback sessions. Questions were open ended, and staff encouraged people to give their feedback on what was important to them to be reflected in emergency shelter standards.

To guide the questions, we had a visual of the four quadrant “KISS” feedback model – “What would you keep, improve, start, and stop?” Although people often gave feedback outside of these themes, we had four general thematic areas to prompt questions and answers. We asked people about their:

- Access to emergency shelters
 - Access to a bed, length of wait, length of stay, etc.
- Services received in shelter
 - Anything from food services and bedding, to housing and health services.
- Safety
 - Belongings, physical, or mental safety
- Rights and Responsibilities
 - Behavioral expectations, client rights

PWLE provided their feedback on these themes, and many others, to City staff who wrote their comments down, spoke to a peer worker who documented their words, or wrote out their own ideas on post it notes. City staff used prompts to encourage PWLE to expand on their responses.

We decided to forgo surveys and Likert scales for more open ended, guided small group or one-on-one discussions. We wanted PWLE to not be bound by our preconceived questions and themes, though we knew it would mean a lot of extra labour to analyze those open conversations in the end.

These Post-it notes were recorded and sorted into themes to inform the standards. Almost 200 people provided nearly 1,650 comments from 12 locations to contribute to our understanding of the experience of people who access shelters.

Limitations

Involvement of PWLE must be meaningful and the contributions of PWLE should be acknowledged, valued, and compensated for feedback leading to documented outcomes. There is currently no established baseline for compensation of PWLE at the

City. It was determined that \$15 gift cards and two bus tickets would be a welcome compensation, but some researchers recommend that each participant should be paid a living wage for their contribution. The Peer Workers hired through Keeping Six did meet the criteria of being paid a living wage.

Another limitation was that we only met with people who stayed at shelter or drop-in program on a particular day. Ideally, we would aim for a mix of people who are currently staying at shelter and people who have moved onto housing, noting that people may have a different perspective when not currently in crisis.

Personal or demographic data were not captured to provide as much anonymity as possible. The raw data was organized by site and with further time for analysis we could provide some insight into differences between the responses from those accessing services in specific sectors (however to maintain anonymity of participants we will not be sharing full raw data outside of the City).

The City’s bi-annual Point in Time Count has established the best practice of running an Indigenous-led “magnet event” to seek out the expertise of Indigenous people experiencing homelessness. This approach was not taken for this engagement, and therefore we likely engaged a disproportionately low number of Indigenous people relative to people experiencing homelessness.

Limitation in resources prevented capturing full transcripts of the consultations; however, City staff recorded as many direct quotes and insights as possible. More staffing at events would allow staff to work with smaller groups and record more verbatim feedback.

This was the City’s initial consultation of people living in emergency shelter as it relates to emergency shelter standards, therefore we do not have access to people’s expertise over time. We have proposed a 4-year review cycle, so this will set us up to do more consultations for the next round and allow us to start to have historical data as well.

Finally, in addition to our primary goal, we had hoped to improve PWLE engagement overall, as well as increase people’s understanding of the Standards and how the emergency shelter system works. Because we did not want to over-survey people, or take longer than 90-minute sessions, we decided against surveys to measure these particular outcomes. Although we can point to the number of sessions conducted (12 sessions, almost 200 people engaged), we did not measure the effectiveness of our consultations or the change in understanding of PWLE regarding standards and policy.

Results

Our goal was to tap into the expertise of PWLE to inform the writing of the Emergency Shelter Standards. Supplementary goals identified were to engage PWLE and improve our practice and relationships in this type of consultation, as well as increase PWLE understanding of emergency shelter standards and policy development processes.

The charts below summarize what we heard from PWLE at the consultation sessions. The first chart shows the general themes ranked from the greatest number of comments, to least number of comments. The charts following this separate each of those general themes and group comments into the top 5-6 sub-themes that fell under the general theme. After each chart there are selected quotes from that theme. A full list of feedback is available upon request.

People both told us, and showed us, that they were happy to provide their feedback, and hoped that it would impact the work. The almost 1,650 comments were sorted into 9 major themes, listed below. Many categories overlap but were separated because there were enough comments to warrant a separate theme.

When reviewing the theme summaries, please note that the categories are sometimes broad or overlapping and as a result the frequency of each topic should be considered carefully. For example, to combine “Accommodations – Facility” and “Cleaning/Hygiene” and that would make it the 4th most popular theme. Many of these themes could be combined and are closely related.

Theme: General - In their own words:

“Every little bit helps motivate you to do more”

“I won’t make it through this winter if I can’t get a shelter space.”

“Shelters need to tell the general public about what’s happening, what the housing crisis is like. The wider community needs to know.”

Theme 1: Services

Participants had diverse perspectives and experiences with accessing emergency shelters. People were critical of the services offered, or not offered, during their stay at the shelter. They shared many great ideas for engagement during the day, especially vocal on this topic were seniors. People feel that long days with nothing to do only lead to depression, recreational drug and alcohol use, and inter-personal conflict. The second most popular topic was an appreciation for what services are offered. Despite being in crisis and in very difficult circumstances, many people took the time to express appreciation for the services they received. We noticed that the feedback on food services varied greatly based on location. Some people felt their cultural or dietary needs were being met, and some did not. Some people appreciated the continuous access to food and snacks, some people felt the quantity was lacking. People were also concerned about the supports and options for housing supports. People noted that it wasn’t necessarily the housing supports offered at the shelter, but the underlying conditions such as housing affordability and availability. Other people were unaware of services being offered or noted that they were insufficient to the problems at hand.

Services	# of comments
Improve services: quality and quantity	103
Appreciate services offered	84
Food: Improve quality and quantity	41
Housing Services: Improve options and supports	26
Housing Affordability	26
Services offered don't help/don't offer services	24

Theme: Services - In their own words:

“There should be a service for every question [shelter staff] ask. For every problem you have or trauma you have to tell them about, they should be offering you a service or solution.”

“Boredom is the most damning. I try to get out walking, but my legs are killing me. Nothing to do but sleep to pass the time. I don’t know where to start.”

“Start on-site group programs to help give people direction. Programs keep people busy and off the street while waiting for a bed to be open. More programs would cut down on drug use.”

Theme 2: Importance of Staff

Not surprisingly, the importance and impact of staff was a common theme. Throughout the engagement sessions the impact of front-facing staff on the day-to-day lives of PWLE was clear. There is criticism of their experience with staff to date, primarily about favouritism and inconsistent treatment, but many of the comments were about what they want to experience in their interactions with staff. They want to see respect, empathy, de-escalation skills, and experience. People also expressed appreciation for skilled staff who have helped them, and concern about the supports and training staff receive. Numerous participants recognized that staff turnover is frequent and reported it has significant impacts on their experiences while in shelter.

Importance of Staff	# of comments
Favouritism and inconsistency	52
Improved communication	51
Respect, empathy, de-escalation, and experience	47
More staff and support	44
Staff training (general, trauma informed, anti-racism)	36
Staff appreciation	34

Theme 2 – Important of Staff: In their own words:

“One exceptional worker can make the difference and really help with housing.”

“Protect staff from burnout and make sure they have empathy for people even though they see a lot.”

“Hire peer workers who are trans, Indigenous, and experience with drug use, homelessness, LGBTQ”

“Staff that are friendly and smile at you. It feels good. For a lot of us it’s been a long time since someone smiled at us.”

Theme 3: Rights and Responsibilities

People shared insight into how their rights and responsibilities as clients are perceived, understood, upheld or not maintained. People were very interested in having structured time or processes for feedback to the shelters and gave us many practical ways this could be accomplished. People also spoke to the discrimination they received (or witnessed others experience) from staff, whether based in racism or otherwise. They also spoke to a desire to have responsibilities and participation requirements that would have them contribute to the upkeep of the shelter. The rules are “fine” or “reasonable” to some people, and some people like to see drug use or alcohol use as no longer a reason for service restrictions. People wanted clearer information about service restrictions and for behaviours to be the causing of restrictions rather than substance use.

Rights and Responsibilities	# of comments
Experienced discrimination from staff	27
Create structured time or process for feedback	25
Have shelter stayers clean and other participation requirements	18
R&R is fine as it is	16
Improve reviewing restrictions	16
Service restrictions for behaviour not drug use/alcohol use	13

Theme 3 – Rights and Responsibilities: In their own words:

“Have weekly goals for improvement at the shelter that are shared with clients (ex. on a board in the chapel) for feedback/ideas (keeps clients informed, know their complaints go somewhere, and see what's being worked on).”

“Have regular feedback and conversations with clients to empower them to have a say. This lets people know they have been listened to.”

Theme 4: Safety: Physical, Mental, and Belongings

Although staff asked participants about multiple aspects of safety, people most often expressed concern about their belongings, whether it was the common occurrence of theft, or concern that staff too often or quickly throw out people’s belongings. People also spoke to their appreciation for the security measures in place, i.e. locked doors, security, and safety plans. People would like to see an improvement in conflict resolution to decrease bullying and assault in the shelters. Interactions with other clients and environmental factors (e.g. noise) were noted as having negative impact on mental safety/well-being.

Safety: Physical, Mental, and Belongings	# of comments
Belongings are not safe	66
Appreciate lock doors, security, safety plans	28
Improve resolution of conflict, bullying, assault	25
Improve security	22
Difficult environment to live in	7

Theme 4 - Safety: In their own words:

“Do you think I carry this bag around all the time for fun? I have to carry stuff with me all the time.”

“They put us all together. You cannot choose your roommate and they can have lots of disturbing habits.”

“Having a personal safe is good for mental well-being and keeping belongings safe.”

Theme 5: Physical and Mental Health Supports

Feedback on health supports varied greatly between sites, however overall people were very concerned about drug use in shelter and people who use drugs. Participants reflected nuanced views on harm reduction and even people who wanted the shelters to be abstinence only spoke compassionately about people who use drugs needing a shelter of their own with appropriate supports. They spoke about the difficulties of trying to stay sober in a shelter environment, the difficulties of hiding your drugs and harm reduction equipment for fear of being service restricted, and generally for the lack of supports for people experiencing “disruptive” and “scary” mental health issues from the effects of using drugs. People expressed an interest in having greater access to health supports and mental health supports for all and several appreciated the supports available in shelter. In a few instances, people shared knowledge of supports with other participants during the engagement sessions.

Physical and Mental Health Supports	# of comments
Improve access to harm reduction supports and abstinence only spaces	77
Improve access to health supports	36
Improve access to mental health supports	34
Appreciate health supports	9
Appreciate current harm reduction services	6

Theme 5 – Physical and Mental health Supports: In their own words:

“People use for different reasons, like pain management. It shouldn't be illegal if it's helping me survive.”

“Provide safe consumption sites AND safe non-consumption sites.”

“Newcomers have very limited access to health care beyond shelter doctor while waiting for temporary health card.”

Theme 6: Access

People spoke mostly to the need for improved access to dorms, bathrooms, and showers especially during the day. They wanted access for the sick and elderly to take naps and pointed out that there is often nothing else to do during the day. People also wanted to see improved communication and standardized rules across shelters to help them navigate the system better. Curfew is different at different shelters, and some people found the curfew rules to be beneficial for maintaining safety and reducing disruptions during the time when most are asleep.

Access	# of comments
Dorm access – improve	29
Navigation – improve	26
Curfew – Improve	25
Curfew – keep	14
Extend length of stay	10
Hard to get in	8

Theme 6 – Access: In their own words:

“They tell you to keep calling and calling, but there aren't any beds.”

“When you're accessing a shelter for the first time in your life, you are scared, you don't know what to expect, or what is going to happen.”

Theme 7: Accommodations - Facilities

Having access to an emergency shelter bed was important for avoiding exposure to the elements and unsafe situations. People expressed a concern for people who can not find a bed in the shelter system, or their own wait time to get accepted into a shelter. Participants from the women’s sector engagement sessions identified that there are not enough shelter beds for women. There were criticisms of the congregate set up of many shelters and an expressed desire for more privacy. There was also a concern for the lack of accommodations for couples and pets and how these gaps may result in people staying outside or in unsafe situations.

Accommodations – Facility	# of comments
More beds	38
Against congregate	32
Couples	17
Pets	13

Theme 7 – Accommodations – Facilities: In their own words:

“Shelters are life savers. Without Emergency Shelters you'd be out under a bridge out in the cold or hot.”

“I wish I was able to stay in my own room. Own rooms to give privacy and keep safe.”

“Keep families together. That includes owners and dogs.”

Theme 8: Cleaning/Hygiene

People spoke at length about the bathrooms, laundry service, showers, and general cleanliness of the facilities. We could also see a difference between shelter locations – specific locations seem to have more issues with the bathrooms, or the politics of the laundry facilities. Inadequate number of bathrooms or frequently out of service bathrooms was more common feedback from the men’s sector. Participants across the singles sector identified that having the ability to shower at any time was important to them and not always possible depending on the shelter.

Cleaning/Hygiene	# of comments
Improve bathrooms	23
Improve laundry service	13
Improve Showers	9
Improve access to showers and toilets	8
Improve general cleanliness	6
Improve access to undergarments	4

Theme 8 – Cleaning/Hygiene: In their own words:

“Start having a bathroom attendant to keep people from destroying washrooms”

“There needs to be bathrooms and showers that are accessible to all 24/7”

“Clean showers make you want to shower”

Conclusion

The expertise of People with Living Experience is invaluable to shaping programs, facilities, and policies in the emergency shelter sector. The City is grateful to all the people who participated in the engagement sessions for sharing their knowledge, experiences, and ideas with us. Client satisfaction is a critical accountability measure, but more than that, People with Living Experience know how the system works, they know what their needs are, and experience the system at work on the micro-every day level. They can bring to light perspectives that may be unknown or unknowable at the staff or senior leadership level. Their expertise can and should have a foundational impact on policy formation, and this is being recognized more and more in policy and research settings.

For this project, the expertise and data from PWLE has directly informed Hamilton’s Emergency Shelter Standards. The City wrote the shelter standards in collaboration with a working group made up of leaders from emergency shelter agencies and Indigenous organizations. Throughout the writing process City staff brought forward feedback from PWLE and integrated responses from PWLE into the updated shelter standards. Many sections of the standards were expanded on in ways that reflect suggestions from participants or attempt to address gaps identified by PWLE. The City is working on a People with Living Experience framework. The goal is to ensure that people with lived/living expertise of homelessness are effectively and meaningfully engaged with in the development, implementation, monitoring and adaptation of homelessness policy and programs on an ongoing basis. As policy makers, we have a responsibility and an ethical imperative to ensure that those impacted by our decisions are meaningfully engaged and involved in policy and program review processes. PWLE should be viewed as more than just “research subjects” an instead should be seen as “...research designers, implementers, analysts, authors, and disseminators”¹. Involvement of PWLE must be meaningful and the contributions of PWLE should be acknowledged and valued, leading to documented outcomes.

Currently there are several recommendations from PWLE that exist, outlining how to meaningfully include and engage people experiencing homelessness and those in core

¹ A National Housing Strategy By and For Whom? Documented Experiences of People With Living Knowledge of Housing Need, Systems Planning Collective ([2022](#))

housing need in the development of policy and programming. Existing recommendations should be drawn on in the development of local strategies and approaches.

The [Lived Experience Advisory Council \(2016\)](#) has outlined seven principles for leadership and inclusion of people with lived experience of homelessness:

1. Bring the perspective of our lived experience to the forefront;
2. Include people with lived experience at all levels of the organization;
3. Value our time and provide appropriate supports;
4. Challenge stigma, confront oppression and promote dignity;
5. Recognize our expertise and engage us in decision-making;
6. Work together towards our equitable representation;
7. Build authentic relationships between people with and without lived experience.

Next Steps

By end of Q4, 2023 City staff will return to the communities of PWLE we engaged with and report back how we used their information in the Standards and other potential impacts of their knowledge. , Our results will be made into a one-page summary sheet to go with short information presentations we will deliver to PWLE.

Housing Services Division will continue to develop and commit to engaging people with living experience, and promote the principles listed above with our partners delivering emergency shelter services.