

Homelessness, substance use disorder, and COVID-19

NATIONAL RAPID GUIDANCE DOCUMENT

PROVIDERS MAY TAKE THESE KEY POINTS INTO CONSIDERATION; HOWEVER THIS DOCUMENT DOES NOT SUPERCEDE PROVINCIAL / TERRITORIAL REGULATION OR CLINICAL EXPERIENCE

Why is it important to support people who use substances in shelter settings during COVID-19?

COVID-19 has put people experiencing homelessness/housing vulnerability and who use substances at high risk of negative health outcomes and death, from both COVID-19 and overdose.

What is the impact of COVID-19 on overdose?

If people overdose in public spaces, there may be no one around to help because of COVID-19 guidelines. If bystanders do see an overdose, they may not help because they are afraid of getting COVID-19, or afraid of giving the person who has overdosed COVID-19.

Shelter staff's ability to help during COVID-19 may be limited without enough protective equipment. Rescue breaths and CPR may be delayed until EMS arrives, increasing risk of harm and death to the person who overdosed.

What is the role of shelters?

Many shelters have reduced their capacity to meet COVID-19 guidelines.

This may lead to more people sleeping outside, where it can be hard to physically distance, self-isolate, use good hand hygiene, and follow mask guidelines.

Even though shelters try to support physical distancing and self-isolation, many still have trouble preventing COVID-19 spread. Studies in the United States have found 15-66% case rates of COVID-19 in some shelters.

What should shelter operators do to support people who use substances during COVID-19?

People should not be excluded from shelters because of bans on drug use or possession. Shelters should use harm reduction strategies to help reduce risk of harms and promote safety.

What can we do to support the health and safety of people experiencing homelessness or housing vulnerability?

COVID-19 highlights the need to provide housing for everyone. Housing is the first-line defence against COVID-19.

While shelters can work to reduce risks of COVID-19, they are a temporary solution and should not replace the goal to provide safe and adequate housing for all.

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