

Supporting people who use substances in shelter settings during the COVID-19 pandemic

NATIONAL RAPID GUIDANCE KEY POINTS

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The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded risks already posed by the overdose epidemic, and placed people who use substances and are experiencing homelessness or housing vulnerability at high risk of negative health outcomes including death.

For shelters providing care to people who use substances during COVID-19, a pragmatic approach assumes that some level of drug and alcohol use will continue irrespective of formal or informal bans or criminal prohibitions.

Under a harm reduction approach, modifying risks associated with unsafe substance use practices or settings takes precedence over enforcing abstinence, and residents are supported to access care based on self-determined needs and goals.

Design and deliver of shelter services should incorporate perspectives of people with lived or living experience of substance use and homelessness or housing vulnerability.

Supervised consumption services in shelter settings

Integrating supervised illegal drug consumption services into shelter settings is feasible, and has the potential to reduce overdose-related mortality and other negative health outcomes.

A variety of supervised consumption service models can be operated during COVID-19 through use of appropriate infection prevention and control measures and personal protective equipment.

Supervised consumption services should regularly review infection prevention and control and personal protective equipment procedures to ensure they remain consistent with the latest public health guidance in their jurisdiction.

Pharmacotherapy in shelter settings

Shelters should facilitate access to healthcare providers who are able to assist with substance use disorder treatment, withdrawal management, and substance use stabilization/risk mitigation.

A variety of first- and second-line substance use disorder treatments are available to support shelter residents who wish to abstain from drugs and/or alcohol.

Not all residents will accept or stabilize on evidence-based treatment options for their substance use disorders. In these cases, health care professionals should consider providing access to replacement medications for withdrawal and craving management, and to mitigate harms associated with ongoing procurement and use of substances from the illegal drug market.

Managed alcohol programs are a promising option for supporting shelter residents whose pattern of alcohol consumption may place them at increased risk of harm during COVID-19.

There are multiple possible avenues for shelter residents to receive their prescribed medications, including multi-day dispensing, pharmacy deliver, and on-site pharmacy services.

Psychosocial interventions and supports should be routinely offered alone or in conjunction with prescribed medications or managed alcohol.

Any resident receiving substance use disorder treatment, replacement pharmacotherapy, and/or managed alcohol should be assisted in achieving continuity of care following discharge from the shelter.

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