



HOMELESS ENCAMPMENTS:

Municipal Engagement Guidance

National Working Group on Homeless Encampments



A NOTE TO THE READER

The National Working Group on Homeless Encampments (NWG-HE) – convened by The Shift since January 2023 – presents a Municipal Engagement Guidance. This Guidance is intended to support municipalities in engaging homeless encampments in a constructive and peaceful manner. The Guidance is not a road map to solving homelessness. It is an effort to establish national standards, based in human rights, for municipal government engagement with encampments across the country. It is intended to help ensure the best outcomes for those living in encampments and their communities in the short term, while establishing a foundation for longer-term solutions.

The Municipal Guidance was drafted through discussions and with the input of the NWG-HE whose members include the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Big City Mayors caucus – Mayor Savage (Halifax) and Mayor Clark (Saskatoon), respectively – as well as Indigenous representatives, people with lived expertise, social medicine doctors, front line harm reduction workers, academics, and advocates. Representatives of federal and city governments and human rights institutions also participated as observers. The list of formal participants is at the close of the document. The Municipal Guidance was shared at the Big City Mayors Caucus in May 2023. It was also shared with the Federal Housing Advocate to inform her review of homeless encampments, expected to be concluded in early 2024.

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We would like to live in a Canada in which everyone is safely and adequately housed.

Homeless encampments are increasingly appearing in communities across Canada, whereby individuals erect tents or informal structures on public or private lands, including unceded territory, to provide themselves with shelter. Those residing in encampments live in very difficult circumstances and are often there because shelter spaces and appropriate long-term supportive housing options are either unavailable and/or do not provide adequate protections and supports for their specific needs.

This Guidance note is intended as a high-level road map to assist municipal governments in addressing homeless encampments by first advocating for appropriate long term supportive housing and in the absence of that, ensuring encampments support the human rights and dignity of those in them, in a manner that respects human rights and promotes human well-being and safe communities. It acknowledges that responsibility for addressing homelessness rests with the three orders of government which must act collaboratively and with a shared sense of urgency in the interest of those who are unhoused or at risk of becoming unhoused.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

The following basic principles should inform the approach:

- Homeless encampments will rarely satisfy the requirements of the human right to housing, and thus should not be understood as a solution to homelessness and should not be permanent.
- Residents of homeless encampments must be treated in a dignified, empathetic and culturally appropriate manner and are entitled to the necessities of life, including affordable, secure, and dignified housing.
- Municipalities do not always have the jurisdiction, capacity, and resources to ensure unhoused people have affordable, secure, and dignified housing. Significant support and intervention from other orders of government is required.
- Indigenous Peoples are dramatically overrepresented in homeless populations in many cities across the country, including in many encampments. Policies and approaches on encampments must be consistent with Truth and Reconciliation and the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Calls to Action and Justice.
- Many encampment residents have complex mental and/or physical health needs that require an integrated approach with healthcare supports.
- Residents who neighbour encampments have legitimate experiences and concerns that require consideration.

WAYS FOR MUNICIPALITIES TO PREVENT HOMELESSNESS, ADDRESS ENCAMPMENTS AND SUPPORT PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN THEM

1. **Solicit Provincial and Federal Government Support**

Coordinated, long-term financial and policy supports of federal and provincial governments are required for homeless encampments to be resolved. Municipalities should collectively escalate the issue on provincial and national political agendas as an urgent matter of fundamental human rights, for example by calling for an inter-governmental action-table on homelessness that includes Indigenous, civil society and lived-expertise participation. The focus should be twofold: preventing homelessness and addressing homeless encampments.

2. **Meaningfully Engage with those Living in Encampments**

Better, more peaceful outcomes will be achieved if people living in homeless encampments and the individuals and organizations they choose to support them, are meaningfully engaged and have the capacity to shape and co-create solutions with the aim of closing the encampment. Successful meaningful engagement can be a long process often taking months and requires consistency and patience.

Municipal governments, working with Indigenous partners, must consult with Indigenous residents of encampments and their representatives where appropriate, securing their free, prior, and informed consent with respect to any decision or measure that will impact them.

All engagement must be culturally appropriate.

See Appendix for the elements of successful meaningful engagement.

3. **Explore all viable alternatives to encampment eviction or removal**

While homeless encampments should not be permanent, every effort should be taken to avoid forced removal of encampments, recognizing court rulings in British Columbia and Ontario indicating that in some circumstances to do so violates the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Meaningful engagement with encampment residents (see below), good faith dialogue, and the offer of reasonable alternative housing options (eg: rent supplements; tiny homes; hotel rooms; modular units) will dramatically reduce the need to remove people involuntarily from encampments.

Issuing trespass notices, enforcing prohibitive bylaws, or otherwise coercing people in encampments into housing should be considered a last resort after all viable alternatives are exhausted.

Where an encampment is erected in a dangerous (eg: construction site) or inappropriate (eg: cemetery, playground, school, daycare) location, the municipality should engage those in the encampment to relocate to a more suitable site, even if it is an alternate tenting site.

4. Essential Services for Encampment Residents

Homeless encampments do not satisfy the requirements of the right to housing. However, where they exist, municipalities, working with their government and community partners, should ensure that to the greatest extent possible encampments meet the basic needs for survival of those living there. This will make encampments safer for those residing therein, as well as for neighbouring homes and businesses.

See Appendix for examples of essential services.

5. Encampments and Safety

People who reside in encampments must always be safe as must those living near encampments. Safety within an encampment is more likely if trusting relationships are built between residents (alongside those they rely upon for support), and municipal officials (including fire departments, emergency responders and police) healthcare providers, outreach workers and others supporting the encampment. Indigenous-led supports are critical to the safety of Indigenous persons living in encampments, and foundational to trust-building.

Municipalities should work with the above and other actors as appropriate to develop an encampment safety protocol, taking into consideration relevant power imbalances. This protocol should outline under what circumstances police and security personnel should be called into the encampment community and by whom. It should also include measures to address sexual assault, physical assault, and exploitation of vulnerable groups, such as women, gender-diverse populations, minors, and racialized populations.

People living in encampments should be provided training in safety procedures including with respect to potentially hazardous equipment and materials.

Personal belongings of encampment residents should always be treated with care, regardless of the security issue at hand, except in the case of an emergency, i.e. fire, extreme weather event.

APPENDIX

MUNICIPAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THOSE LIVING IN ENCAMPMENTS WILL BE MOST SUCCESSFUL IF IT:

I. INCLUDES TRAINING FOR ENCAMPMENT RESIDENTS WITH RESPECT TO THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS, AND SAFETY PROTOCOLS AND REQUIREMENTS;

II. INCLUDES THE INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS ENCAMPMENT RESIDENTS RELY UPON FOR SUPPORT IF SO REQUESTED;

III. IS IMMEDIATE, REGULAR AND ONGOING;

IV. IS PRACTICED IN GOOD FAITH;

V. IS INCLUSIVE, CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE AND NON-DISCRIMINATORY;

VI. OCCURS AT APPROPRIATE AND ACCESSIBLE TIMES AND LOCATIONS;

VII. PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ENCAMPMENT RESIDENTS TO RAISE CONCERNS AND ISSUES AND TO RECEIVE IMMEDIATE FEEDBACK AND/OR A COMMITMENT TO RETURN WITH INFORMATION AT A SPECIFIED TIME; AND

VIII. IS BASED ON THE UNDERSTANDING THAT ENCAMPMENT RESIDENTS ARE NOT HOMOGENOUS AND WILL ACCEPT AND REQUIRE DIFFERENT SOLUTIONS.

ESSENTIAL SERVICES

In consultation with those living in encampments, municipalities, working with other orders of government and community partners, should ensure the following are available on-site or within reasonable proximity to encampments:

- Durable tents or building code compliant structures that are fire retardant + can withstand inclement weather, that provide privacy, cots to sleep on, and bedding
- Access to safe and clean drinking water
- Access to warming/cooling areas
- Access to sufficient and appropriate quality clothing
- Resources and supports to ensure fire safety (eg: training on fire safety for those living on site)
- Assistance for those living in encampments to develop social protocols. For example: zero-violence policy; anti-racism and harassment policy for encampment residents as well as other users and abutters of public spaces where encampments exist.
- Access to hygiene and sanitation facilities
- Waste management systems including for drug-use related waste (needles, pipes).
- Power sources
- Facilities and resources that support access to healthy food supply and its storage
- Garbage facilities
- Proximate safe and secure storage facilities for personal belongings
- Rodent and pest deterrence
- Resources to support harm reduction
- Creation of safe areas where women, LGBTQ2S+ and others at risk of violence and exploitation may reside

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