

HANDBOOK

A Toolkit for Local Electeds Climate Action

PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

A Part of The [Community Engagement Councillor's Handbook](#)



Stay tuned for the up-to-date version of this resource!

This document is undergoing fact checks and updates... you will be able to access the new version in September 2025.

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Introduction

Climate change is exacerbating the homelessness crisis across Canada, due to heatwaves, snowstorms, urban flooding, and other extreme weather events. With natural hazards worsening over time, people experiencing homelessness are especially vulnerable and unfairly impacted more than others.

People who are experiencing homelessness include:

- The unsheltered living on the street
- The emergency sheltered, staying in overnight shelters

- The insecurely housed, who are at risk of homelessness, and whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards.

People who are experiencing homelessness can be easily missed in any type of civic engagement. Most lack trust in governments of all levels because their basic needs have not been met; so engagement can be challenging but is crucial given the severe impacts of climate change on these groups. Climate plans that neglect the needs of people experiencing homelessness can easily worsen their situation.

Specific Challenges Faced by People Experiencing Homelessness

- **Exposure to the elements:** Unlike many of us, people experiencing homelessness cannot turn to the comfort of a home when temperatures rapidly increase or decrease, or when torrential rains fall, or when sooty air quality clouds the city.
- **Access to public space** is often limited for people lacking shelter increasing their vulnerability to the elements.
 - For example, people lacking shelter are often asked or forced to leave business establishments, streets, and transit hubs in the name of public safety.
- **Climate change-induced homelessness** is linked to a lack of available resources, limiting the ability of precariously-housed people to respond to environmental disasters and to recover from the damages suffered ([Bezgrebelna et al., 2021](#)).
- **The stigma** attached to homelessness can mean they receive less consideration in all aspects of municipal planning , including climate plans.
- **Limited access to weather warnings** and extremely limited ability to move to safer areas.

Engaging People who are Experiencing Homelessness

Key principles:

- Everyone is respected, and input is important no matter who you are or how you present.
- Lived experience is of consequence and an equal, collaborative relationship is essential.
- Base engagement on facts. Be aware of common myths around homelessness (i.e are all adults, don't have jobs, all use drugs, have only themselves to blame, are all mentally ill, they choose to live on the street etc.)
- All engagement should be viewed through a lens that minimizes stigma and harm.
- All people experiencing homelessness have experienced significant trauma and so engagement should be trauma-informed.
- [Trauma-informed engagement](#) includes recognizing the power the city has, the ways it has used and abused that power, and how that power can be shared equitably.

Barriers:

- Often people experiencing homelessness are overwhelmed with surviving and securing their basic needs.
- Unmanaged mental illness and/or addictions among some segments of this group.
- Lack of trust, especially if they feel poorly served by the local government in terms of housing and/or where they are allowed to congregate, and/or if they have had negative encounters with bylaw officers and police.
 - In many communities a legacy of forced displacement, disinvestment and inconsistent services has created a pervasive and deep sense of distrust of city-led initiatives.
- Difficulty contacting people without phones or fixed addresses.
- Difficulty engaging people who are insecurely housed as they may not attend shelters and services where consultation with people facing homelessness often occurs.
- Stigma
 - stigma attached to homelessness making people feel unwelcome in public consultations
 - Stigmatizing language, labeling people as "The homeless"

Key strategies:

Preparation

- Take time to learn about the population, support organizations for people who are experiencing homelessness, and local leaders.
- Involve peer support facilitators and researchers if available.
- Repeat engagements to build trust.
 - Partner with local agencies and staff who are already trusted by their clients to facilitate or attend engagements.
- When meeting with individuals and groups, frame this work as reaching out to individuals in a community not “The homeless”.
- Be prepared to hear criticisms of how your local government operates.
- Stay safe: see tips from [City of Calgary and the Calgary Drop-in & Rehab Centre Society](#)

Approach

From [Engaging with People who are Homeless](#) National Coalition for the Homeless July 2020.

“Here are some basic tips for engaging with people who are experiencing homelessness:

- *Introduce yourself. Explain why you are there.*
- *Ask for a person's name and address them by their name. Maintain personal space.*
- *Be compassionate, respectful and genuine.*
- *Let the person you approach dictate the conversation after your introduction.*
- *Encampments/tents do not have doorbells - give a shout or hello to alert residents to your presence.*
- *Have something to offer - bottles of water, food, gift cards, toiletries or other types of care packages are all good options.*
- *Be prepared to answer questions about community resources...:*
- *Be honest. In most communities, there are not enough appropriate shelter beds, and definitely not enough affordable housing, for everyone who needs it. It is likely that someone who is facing homelessness has been turned away many times. Imagine asking for help and being told no, over and over again. Also, be honest about what you/your organization are doing/trying to achieve.*

- *Remember you are often asking people who are unhoused to share very specific information about their personal life - this is hard for any of us to do with strangers!"*

Follow a [Trauma-Informed Approach](#)

Key areas for engagement

The active participation of people who are experiencing homelessness is particularly critical in:

- Affordable low energy housing plans.
- Planning for outdoor spaces, parks and natural areas where unhoused people may live.
- Urban canopy plans which often favour higher income neighborhoods leaving people experiencing homelessness without shade.
- Land-use development that can lead to gentrification, pushing out people experiencing homelessness from city centres where they can more easily access services.

Case Studies:

Case Study - City of Vancouver, BC

Recent engagement with people who are experiencing homelessness in the City of Vancouver included:

- Putting up posters in areas frequented by people who are homeless
- Holding picnics with food supplied
- Hand delivering information to encampments
- Speaking one on one with people
- Providing information on how to use alternate IDs

- **Toronto** : [Engaging communities in First Step Housing and Services](#)
- **Greater Victoria** [Coalition to End Homelessness Resources](#)
- **Montreal** ["I Live Here" Participatory Engagement Game](#)

City of Albany, New York - [Equity in Sustainability](#) (Page 32)

- After using keypad polling to anonymously collect demographic data, Albany was able to identify which constituents required additional engagement.
- They found that people experiencing homelessness and poverty were being missed, so they conducted face-to-face surveys by walking around low-income neighbourhoods and going to shelters.

Frameworks to Address Homelessness

Housing First:

[Housing First](#) is a recovery-oriented framework to homelessness that involves moving people that are living with homelessness into independent and permanent housing as quickly as possible, with no preconditions, and then providing them with additional services and support as needed. The underlying principle behind this framework is that people are more successful in moving forward with their lives if they are housed first.

See for more details: [Canadian Housing First Toolkit](#)

A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention

A complement to *Housing First*, [A New Direction](#) is a prevention-oriented framework. It is rooted in a human rights perspective that argues that all people have the right to housing that is safe, appropriate, affordable, and sustainable, and that allowing people to fall into, and remain, homeless because of structural, systemic, and/or individual factors is not acceptable.

- [A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention Webinar](#)
- [Raising the Roof: About Homelessness Prevention](#)

Initiatives for people who are experiencing homelessness

*Resource expertise level:

■ Green = beginner

■ Blue = intermediate

◆ Black = advanced

◆◆ Double black = expert

****Climate Caucus has ranked the following initiatives from beginner to expert, based on Complexity to implement, Staff time & expertise, and Political capital. Please note, these rankings are our own best judgements.*

Short Term Action:

■ **Implement Heat-Health Warning Systems** that are activated based on meteorological criteria. When initiated, homeless shelters are requested to remain open, cooling stations are identified, transit tokens/fares are distributed to homeless populations and outreach programs are activated.

■ **Reduce urban heat island effect** by planting big leafy trees in high impoverished neighbourhoods.

■ **Provide free public transit** for vulnerable populations during extreme heat events.

■ **Extend the hours of public community hubs**, such as wading pools, splash pads, swimming pools, libraries, and community centres.

■ **Target outreach** to vulnerable persons during extreme heat events.

Long Term Action:

■ **Create a [municipal heat response plan](#) for homeless populations.** The Plan could identify alert, response, and recovery phases, and the roles of stakeholders during each phase. Learn more [here](#) and [here](#) (for both urban & rural communities).

◆ **Fund and implement a working Poverty Reduction Strategy**, starting with an Advisory Committee that represents diverse backgrounds, specifically lower-income groups and individuals.

■ **Encourage the development of [tiny home](#) communities**

■ **Incorporate discharge planning into your Homelessness Strategy.** Discharge planning is important for people who don't have a solid support system or resources to rely upon after their release. Learn more [here](#).

◆ **Develop a community of practice for your city's approach to Coordinated Access.** [Coordinated access](#) is a standardized, system-wide approach designed to meet the needs of diverse individuals and families experiencing or at imminent risk of homelessness. It triages and matches individuals and families with housing and services based on their current situation, their vulnerability and needs, and the support they currently receive.

◆◆ **Form a coordinated, partnership-based approach to address homelessness.**

◆◆ **Develop a long-term residential/non-residential treatment plan** that includes housing plans and supports for release, institutionalized periods, and all associated supports.

■ **Establish regular interagency dialogue among organizations** whose work affects homelessness in your city to create awareness, increase communication, reduce duplication of services, and leverage possible partnership opportunities.

■ **Establish an advisory committee with people with lived and living experiences with homelessness.**

Examples:

City of Medicine Hat, Alberta: Canada's first city to achieve functional zero chronic homelessness

In June 2021, Medicine Hat became the first Canadian city to functionally end chronic homelessness. Functionally ending chronic homelessness means that there are 3 or fewer individuals experiencing chronic homelessness in a community and that this has been sustained for three consecutive months. Learn how they did it [here](#) and read their Plan [here](#).

End Homelessness St. John's (EHSJ), Newfoundland and Labrador

[EHSJ](#) is a system-planning organization for the homeless-serving sector in the City of St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. The organization plays a central coordinating role and funds important initiatives pertaining to long-term planning. In 2019, the EHSJ created the St. John's [Coordinated Access Manual](#).

North Shore Homelessness Task Force, British Columbia

The [task force](#) serves as the Metro Vancouver's North Shore's wide entity whose focus is on homelessness in the North Shore. Membership is open to any individual, private organization, not-for-profit organization, or public agency or institution. They develop, adopt, implement, monitor, maintain and promote a long-term North Shore Homelessness Work Plan. They also identify and prioritize program and service gaps for the homeless population, and coordinate, support, and advocate for actions to fill these gaps.

City of Toronto, Ontario: "Poverty Reduction Strategy"

The [Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy](#) is a long-term action plan that focuses on "housing stability, services access, transit equity, food access, the quality of jobs and incomes, and systemic change." The 2019-2022 Term Action Plan was adopted in 2019 by the City Council. Currently, there are 17 recommendations included in the strategy, including Improving the quality of all affordable housing and increasing the supply of affordable housing. The Strategy is chaired by the Lived Experience Advisory Group that partners with the city to address ongoing actions.

City of Toronto, Ontario: Fred Victor's Zero Homelessness in Toronto

In May 2018, the [Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness](#) launched the [ZERO TO campaign](#) to end chronic homelessness in Toronto. The plan works with a Housing First Approach to quickly house people who are homeless. Further, the plan aims to create new affordable housing units, advocate for housing benefits and tax credits, and engage the community to uncover long-lasting solutions to end homelessness.

City of Greater Sudbury, Ontario: Hot Weather Response Plan (partnership with Salvation Army and Red Cross)

The [Hot Weather Response Plan](#) was developed to alert those who are most at risk of heat-related illnesses and to take the appropriate precautions. The plan covers essential components such as public education and preparedness, monitoring weather forecasts and identifying weather situations that adversely affect human health, and response action plans. During extended heat warnings or heat alerts, the City will partner with community partners such as Red Cross and Salvation Army to distribute bottled water to vulnerable populations.

Did you know Climate Caucus offers an “Ask Us Anything” service for elected officials in the network?

You could ask questions like “can you help me find this resource?” “Do you know of funding for X?” “Do you have examples of X policy language?” or “can you connect me with an expert in X?”

[Send us your questions here!](#)

Saskatchewan

- [Saskatoon's Homelessness Action Plan](#)
- [Everyone is Home: A Five-Year Plan to End Chronic and Episodic Homelessness in Regina](#)

Additional Resources

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- Victoria Homeless Hub
 - [Key Engagement Principles](#)
 - [Engagement toolkit: BC Capital Region](#)
 - [Messaging toolkit](#)
 - [Communications framework](#)
 - [Engagement and language protocol](#)

- [Engaging with People who are Homeless](#) National Coalition for the Homeless July 2020.
- [Homeless Hub: Outreach](#)
- [Strategies for engaging the homeless population](#)
- [Guidelines for conducting research with people who are homeless](#)
- [BC housing tools for engagement](#)
- [City of Calgary - Engaging Vulnerable People](#)

Climate Caucus Resources:

[Climate Caucus Municipal Grants List](#) - detailed list of relevant municipal grants
[Policies and Resources Library](#) - list of motions, bylaws, council reports and briefing notes