



Why does a shelter need a medical clinic?

If some day in the future you find yourself homeless, you are also likely to find yourself facing serious health problems.

You might have already had a health problem – a back injury, diabetes, asthma or a mental illness like depression or schizophrenia – before you lost your job and apartment. The stress of life on the street will only make it worse.

Perhaps the health problem will start after you become homeless. You might develop foot problems from walking everywhere in worn-out shoes. As a homeless person, you also face a higher risk of being attacked and injured.

But whatever health problem you face, you will find it harder to get proper care than someone who has a place to live.

If you are sick and need medicine, you have to carry it everywhere you go – even if it is supposed to be refrigerated. Medical advice as simple as resting in bed for a day or two may be difficult for you. Day surgery is out of the question: you have no place to go to recover.

If you go to an emergency department with your health problems because you do not have a family doctor, you cannot expect help for your non-medical problems. The doctor or nurse can patch up your foot, but can't solve the problem of how you will get to a shelter blocks away when you can hardly walk.

Without proper rest, food and treatment, even a small problem like blisters on your feet can turn into a major problem. You may find yourself in hospital having an operation, but with nowhere to go to recover when the hospital discharges you.

As a homeless person, you will pay a large personal cost for your untreated health problems. Studies published by the Canadian Medical Association show that the mortality rate of homeless adult men in Toronto is 3.7 times higher than that of the general population. For youth and women, the rate is 8 to 10 times higher.

Effective and affordable health care

Locating a medical clinic in the same place where homeless people come for shelter and food makes sense. It makes sense for homeless individuals – no extra walking, and they know staff can help connect them with services that meet the unique needs of the homeless.

It makes sense for the whole community as well. Early detection can stop the spread of infectious diseases. Early treatment can keep health problems from turning into severe, chronic conditions that are difficult and expensive to treat.

(For information on Good Shepherd Centre's Health Care Services see over)



Good Shepherd Centre's

Health Care Services



Good Shepherd Centre's medical clinic gives homeless individuals easy access to basic health care and referrals. The clinic serves anyone in need, without charge or distinction.

Who uses the clinic?

Many of the clinic's clients also use Good Shepherd Centre's other services: overnight shelter, the daily drop-in, the meal program. They use the clinic because it is convenient – no extra walking, no need to make an appointment.

Some clinic clients find housing and food in another shelter, but turn to the Centre's clinic because it provides health services sensitive to a homeless person's unique situation. Some clinic clients live precariously in the community. They come to the clinic because staff can help them access medical services, and can teach them how to manage their health condition.

During the course of a week, the clinic receives more than 100 visits from homeless and marginalized individuals.

What services does the clinic provide?

The Health Care Co-ordinator, an experienced RN, operates the clinic five days a week. Three times a week, St. Elizabeth nurses provide evening clinics. A Shared Care team from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health sees clients with mental health issues three to five mornings a week.

Clinic staff see clients with a wide range of health problems. Some problems – colds, headaches, minor injuries, body and head lice, rashes caused by bed bugs – can be treated quickly on site.

However, many health problems common among the homeless – diabetes, hepatitis C, asthma, bronchitis, congestive heart failure, arthritis, mental illness – need more care than the clinic can provide. The Co-ordinator refers clients to other health care providers, arranges transportation to appointments, networks with social workers, housing workers and street nurses.

The Co-ordinator also organizes a foot-care clinic once a month, helps clients apply for free eye-glasses and arranges affordable dental care.

The Health Care Co-ordinator also assists Public Health staff. By helping to coordinate flu clinics and on-site testing for tuberculosis and by tracking an infected individual's contacts, the Co-ordinator helps to protect the health of the community as a whole.