

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Seeking Shelter: Homelessness and COVID-19

February 2021

An RSC Policy Briefing



The Royal Society of Canada has implemented a COVID-19 task force charged with producing evidence-informed policy briefs for decision-makers concerning the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable populations. This task force was struck as the burden of COVID-19 is not shared equally throughout communities within Canada,

Those experiencing homelessness in Canada are impacted inequitably due to their increased exposure, vulnerability of environment and medical comorbidities, and their lack of access to preventive care and treatment in the context of the pandemic. In shelter environments one is unable to effectively physically distance, maintain hygiene, obtain a test or isolate. As a result, unique strategies are required for this population to protect them and those who serve them.

The recommendations provided in this Policy Brief are intended to reduce or prevent further negative consequences from the COVID-19 pandemic for people experiencing homelessness. This brief can also be applied to other rapidly emergent acute respiratory infections.

In creating this Policy Brief, a systematic review of the literature was undertaken, as well as a jurisdictional scan. Where evidence did not exist, expert consensus from key providers and those experiencing homelessness throughout Canada was included.

These recommendations recognize the need for short term interventions to mitigate the immediate risk to this community, including coordination of response, appropriate precautions and protective equipment, reducing congestion, cohorting, testing, case and contact management strategies, dealing with outbreaks, isolation centres and immunization. Longer-term recommendations are also provided with a view to ending homelessness by addressing the root causes of homelessness and by the provision of adequate subsidized and supportive housing through a Housing First strategy.

The authors of this report feel that this is an ideal opportunity to make meaningful changes in how we serve those experiencing homelessness and how we mitigate specific vulnerabilities. This Brief calls for intersectoral, collaborative engagement to work for solutions targeted towards protecting the most vulnerable within our community through both immediate actions and long-term planning to eliminate homelessness.

## Summary List of Recommendations

### The Immediate Response to COVID-19 in the Homeless Environment

**Recommendation 1.1:** Implement an effective regional COVID-19 response for people experiencing homelessness that is centrally coordinated, meaningfully resourced, locally

delivered, adaptive, data informed and integrated between the diverse partners.

**Recommendation 1.2:** Ensure that services providers and shelter staff and the people they serve are safe, informed and included in systems planning.

**Recommendation 1.3:** Engage shelters and housing partners in strategies to reduce overcrowding through temporary housing and appropriately distribute services and service delivery models to areas of increased need.

**Recommendation 1.4:** Develop and implement an evidence informed Outbreak Prevention and Mitigation Plan for all facilities/providers supporting people who are homeless.

**Recommendation 1.5:** Create Isolation Sites for those individuals who are homeless who cannot safely self-isolate while awaiting test results as well as those who test positive for COVID-19.

**Recommendation 1.6:** Establish and implement Screening, Testing and Case and Contact Management strategies that are evidence informed, flexible and applied consistently.

**Recommendation 1.7:** Establish culturally sensitive and trauma-informed approaches to care, service delivery, and support that apply to the wide diversity of individuals who reside within the homeless community.

**Recommendation 1.8:** Develop and implement a coherent and practical immunization strategy for the homeless community.

## **Decreasing the Prevalence of Homelessness as a strategy to reduce the harms related to COVID-19**

**Recommendation 2.1:** Recognize that homelessness is an independent risk factor contributing to the vulnerability of this community to COVID-19.

**Recommendation 2.2:** Recognize that initiatives that prevent homelessness are a priority as a component of effective outbreak prevention.

**Recommendation 2.3:** All levels of government adopt and implement, a comprehensive and realistic national housing strategy to effectively end homelessness.

**Recommendation 2.4:** Plan for and implement a reconfigured shelter system that supports a Housing First approach with rapid triage to subsidized housing or stabilization of mental health and addictions followed by transfer to a supportive housing environment.

## **Improving the Evidence Base for Informed Decision Making**

**Recommendation 3.1:** Implement a comprehensive research strategy with targeted funding from Canada's research councils focusing on interventions aimed at reducing the vulnerability of those experiencing homelessness.