



Homelessness can affect people from all walks of life, of any gender, age or belief, and winter can be a particularly tough time for homeless members of the community.

Places of worship have a long tradition of helping those in need, and so it is no surprise that many provide shelter to homeless people every winter and throughout the year.

Every shelter project is unique and there are many different service models.

Most run during the winter months, anytime from November to the end of March. Many will open for a set period during this time, whilst others operate year

round. Some places of worship operate a shelter as part of a wider, cold weather program or network with other community services and charitable organisations in their area. Here, they work together on a rota basis to provide a warm and safe space. In addition to providing a safe space, many places

RISK HUB

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of worship will also offer a wide range of other support services. These include offering a hot meal, and providing advice on housing support, debt counselling, domestic violence and getting a job. Some offer washing facilities, some simply offer a warm place to sit and chat. Others have provided land for separate physical shelters such as 'tiny homes'.

Whatever the shelter project, it is essential that steps are taken to make sure they remain a safe space for both those in need and those who run them.



LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

Your duties under any provincial or federal health and safety law will depend on your circumstances. Generally, you will need to ensure that your shelter operation is properly managed so that people remain safe. For example, if someone is injured, you may need to show that you have met your duty of care regarding access to first aid treatment.

If you are an employer, you will have duties under your provincial occupational health and safety, and employment acts, and the regulations made under them.

You may need to:

- Document your arrangements and responsibilities for running the shelter, perhaps as part of your health and safety programs.
- Ecclesiastical Insurance recommends that risk assessments are completed to identify the precautions you need to take.
- Implement those precautions, providing information and training for any employees and volunteers on what they need to do.
- Keep records of what you have done.

Even if you are not an employer, but control non-domestic premises, you may still have a duty of care to make sure the premises are safe. If you are providing food, you must comply with any federal and provincial requirements to ensure this is done safely and hygienically.

Your shelter may need permission from the municipality and/or authority having jurisdiction to operate. You should speak with them before commencing any set up to ensure your facility will meet their requirements. It's also important to check your insurance policy, as you may not be automatically covered for such an activity. Another consideration might relate to the receipt of charitable funds. Many groups run under the charitable status applicable to the place of worship; however, some may want to apply for this as a separate entity. If you choose to do so, you will need to arrange separate insurance for this new entity.

HAZARDS TO LOOK OUT FOR

Some typical hazards include:

- Furniture and stored supplies or equipment creating obstructions that could cause trips.
 - Poor weather conditions (e.g. snow, ice, and rain) making sidewalks and parking lots slippery.
 - Inadequate lighting making sidewalks difficult to navigate.
 - Heavy or bulky items (such as beds and mattresses) that staff or volunteers may have to set up and take down.
- Illness and infection because of poor food hygiene practices, contact with soiled bedding, or inadvertently handling sharps (sharps is a medical term for devices with sharp points or edges that can puncture or cut skin, such as hypodermic needles).
 - Vulnerable adults suffering with mental health issues, which may be manifested by physical distress, self-harm, abusive or inappropriate behaviour towards others.

PRECAUTIONS YOU CAN TAKE

Some typical and practical precautions include:

- Planning carefully where items will be placed, both when in use, and during storage, so walkways are kept clear and free from obstructions.
 - Making sure sidewalks, other access routes and parking lots are safe and well-lit.
 - Clearing snow promptly and properly, and salting / sanding sidewalks and parking lots regularly.
 - Record the timing and details of all snow clearing, salting and/or sanding operations carried out.
 - If partnering with other agencies to provide a shelter program, ask that referrals include all relevant information about the people being referred before accepting any individual.
 - Ensuring that at least two people are working, and that you have staff who stay awake throughout the night.
 - Consider what areas of the facility should be accessible, have prominent signage, and keep all prohibited areas securely closed.
 - Maintain a comprehensive onboarding process for all staff and volunteers which includes a detailed orientation of all emergency procedures in place.
 - Making sure lone working is avoided where possible, particularly if staff may be left alone with a guest.
- Asking guests to sign an agreement in advance, agreeing to the 'house' rules relating to drugs, alcohol, weapons, smoking, conduct etc.
 - Making sure food is prepared safely (to health department guidelines), and hygienically.
 - Reviewing your kitchen knife handling and safety practices especially if your kitchen activity has increased and there are less experienced people present. Advice can be found here https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/resources/Documents/knife_safety_en.pdf
 - Providing suitable personal protective equipment (such as gloves, coveralls etc.) for staff where appropriate.
 - It maybe necessary to make special arrangements to handle/remove biological waste.



Making a Start

ACTION

1. Identify the needs you want to address in providing your shelter service and how these will be met.

Decide how you will meet any related legal and governance requirements.

ACTION

2. Check the precautions you have in place are adequate.

If they are not, identify any additional ones that are needed and who will be responsible for taking them.

Ensure that the precautions you have identified are taken and remain effective.

GUIDANCE

If you are considering opening a shelter, you will probably be aware of a need for one in your local area. Speaking to existing service providers and finding ways to compliment and support their work can be an effective way of responding to needs without duplicating existing provision.

It may be a good idea to speak to other local organizations who are providing a similar service to see how they have gone about it. You may also want to talk to your municipality to identify what they may require of you. Other government agencies, non-profit and charitable organizations may be able to provide further help and examples of best practice.

If you have any concerns about setting up your own shelter, an alternative might be to speak to other providers about how you can support them with an existing service.

Working in partnership could reduce the time you have to spend on organisational administration, which start-up services often underestimate.

GUIDANCE

You must consider the risks to your organization in running a shelter. A structured, formal risk assessment can help with this aspect by identifying any potential hazards and should help you determine what precautions are required.

Aside from this, it is sensible to plan activities anyway so that your shelter runs smoothly and remains safe for all.

The precautions required will depend on the nature of the services you are offering, your location and the needs of those guests likely to be using your shelter.

Examples of the things you may need to consider include:

- The suitability, layout and accessibility of the accommodation
- Winter weather precautions to prevent slips and trips (e.g. repairing any defects to sidewalks, making sure outdoor lighting is sufficient and in good working order, and making sure a ready supply of salt or sand is available).
- The equipment required for washing, the preparation of food, cleaning the facilities etc. and how this will be used, moved, stored, and maintained.

- The adequacy of fire precautions, including availability of fire extinguishers, well marked and lit fire exits, evacuation procedures etc., updating your fire plan if you have one.
- Emergency arrangements, including any first aid kits, telephone and emergency contact numbers (including those of the project leader/coordinator, local doctor, police, all-night pharmacy, local priest or minister). It is good practice to notify them that you are running the shelter.
- Consult with the appropriate authority having jurisdiction regarding the occupancy load for the building given the change in use and the fact that individuals will be sleeping there.
- The correct number of staff or volunteers required to run the shelter safely and any special skills or training that they may need.
- Any support or input needed from other service providers or agencies.
- Any 'hand over' procedures necessary at the end of a shift, or staff change-over.
- Preventing unauthorized access to areas not intended for use.
- Secure areas for guests to leave any valuables etc.
- Gather information about guests in advance to better understand their needs and any vulnerabilities.

In some situations, you may need to make a note of any checks or inspections you make to ensure these precautions are being taken and equipment remains safe.

You should correct any defects identified in good time.

ACTION

- 3. Consider using a logbook for guests.**

GUIDANCE

This will normally contain details of who did and did not arrive; any accidents that occurred etc.

The project lead/coordinator should be responsible for making sure that it is available on the days the shelter is running. It should be updated by the shelter coordinator or shift leader with information that would be useful to the next shift.

It is a good idea to have an agreement that is signed by guests before using your facility. These rules should be kept as simple as possible.

ACTION

4. Consider using an agreement ('house-rules') for guests.

GUIDANCE

Guests should be aware of what they can expect from the shelter, as well as what they will not get from it. This will make sure that there is no confusion over what is expected. The agreement may state that:

- The drinking of alcohol or use of drugs (except prescription drugs) is not permitted.
- Violent, threatening, racist or other antisocial behaviour or language will not be tolerated.
- Offensive weapons are not to be carried on the premises.
- Smoking is not permitted anywhere in the facility.
- Pets (except service/guide/hearing dogs) are not permitted, unless you are considering offering a pet friendly shelter – if so seek further guidance.

Some guests may not have English or French as their first language, so provision will be needed for them so that they understand the rules too.

ACTION

5. Ensure that employees and volunteers know what precautions to take.

Make a note of any information or training that is provided to individuals in these situations.

GUIDANCE

The level of information and training required will vary depending on the nature of the work and your circumstances. In all cases, it is likely that you will need to consider providing this in relation to:

- Any required emergency procedures.
- Mental health awareness.
- Drug and alcohol awareness.
- Precautions to ensure personal safety.

Your staff and volunteers do not necessarily need to be experts but providing them with a better understanding of the context in which they are working and the issues relevant to homelessness will help them work more safely and effectively.

ACTION

6. Document your arrangements and responsibilities for running a shelter.

Review these where necessary, particularly if you suspect that they are no longer valid.

GUIDANCE

If you have prepared a health and safety policy, record your arrangements as part of it.

ACTION

7. Communication

GUIDANCE

A clear external communication policy is vital for the organization to connect well with clients, partners, and the public. It should set guidelines for how the organization communicates its message, ensuring consistency and professionalism across platforms like social media, email, and press releases. The policy should cover how to handle inquiries, feedback, and crises, maintaining the organization's reputation and building trust with external audiences. Overall, it's essential for achieving goals and earning trust outside the organization.

NEED TO REPORT AN INCIDENT INVOLVING AN INJURY?

If an incident occurs that may result in a claim for injury, please retain any accident investigation records, e.g. accident book entry, photos etc. and contact our specialist claims team on 1-888-693-2253 (24 hour emergency claims response) for advice. Where you have received correspondence about a claim being made against you, it is important that you notify us immediately – please visit our website: <https://ecclesiastical.ca/claims-centre/report-a-claim/>

POLICY COVER QUERIES

For queries about your policy cover, please call your broker.

This guidance is provided for information purposes and is general and educational in nature. It should not be used as a substitute for taking professional advice on specific issues and should not be taken as providing legal advice on any of the topics addressed.

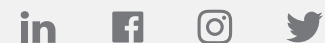
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