

# *The role of healthcare researchers and workers in policy engagement:*

## **Lessons from our experience in Toronto**

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# Today's goals

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Highlight strategies for researchers/healthcare workers to engage with policymakers, advocates, and the public.

- effective strategies and barriers encountered during advocacy efforts
- provide a helpful example of how researchers can more effectively engage in policy processes
- how community service providers might engage with researchers to collaborate for policy change

# Part 1 : The Issue

# Toronto – Winter 2022

- People Experiencing Homelessness:  
7,347 (2021); 8k+ presently; reality = 10k+
- Shelter space: 100% occupancy (approx. 8,200 bed spaces used nightly)
- Decreased bed spacing, increased number of beds
- 2 Warming Centre Centres: about 60 spaces
- -15C threshold for activation of warming centres





Photo: Eduardo Lima



# Part 2 :

## Strategies for

### Policy Engagement – A Story

# A statement from Unity Health Toronto on winter, homelessness and the care we all deserve

January 17, 2023



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## What Happened?

1. Raising concerns – meet with City Staff
2. Change in government
3. Finding a champion
4. Deputations
5. Develop a plan that addresses the issue in multiple ways (working with partners, adding pressure in the media, open letters, institutional statements)
6. Institutional statement and open letter (with or without affiliation)
7. Research to provide evidence

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## ***Find your people: Key Stakeholders***

1. Counsellors/champions at the City of Toronto
2. Community Service Providers/Advocates
3. Healthcare providers operating as individuals
4. Hospital Leadership and the Communications Team at UHT
5. Other hospitals
6. Interfaith Coalition



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# Outcomes

- Toronto Public Health – board of experts on housing and health, homelessness and health to inform their work
- -15C threshold for activating warming centres changed to -5C
- Winter Plan more robust than last year

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# Outcomes

- Research studies:
  - PEH 14-18x more likely to visit ED for cold-related injuries than housed (Richard et al., 2022)
  - At SMH, not identifying 40% of PEH
  - Upcoming: Trends in ED visits during cold weather seasons (Richard et al., ?)

# Part 3 :

## Current challenges

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## *Current challenges*

1. Even if we achieve success in these realms, not the battle we want to be fighting (we need long term solutions, but fighting for warm winter space)
2. Refugee and asylum seeker housing crisis
3. Gender-appropriate services lacking
4. Different City departments operate differently (e.g. division clearing encampments different from division running shelters)
5. Current winter plan still not enough



# Part 4 :

# Lessons learned

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## *Lessons Learned*

1. Find points of power and leverage them as you are able
  - Healthcare workers have power in the policy world
2. Communicate with policy makers
3. Community service providers felt supported
4. Know policies around institutional affiliation
5. Existing data can be used to create evidence
6. Get into the media – inform the public

\* Use multiple strategies. They serve different functions.

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# Thank you!

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