

MARCO Program Evaluations: Round 1

The MARCO Project is evaluating how local efforts to respond to the pandemic have impacted people who are marginalized, and how these interventions can be improved.

The following six programs have been selected for the first round of evaluations. Additional programs will be selected for a second phase of the project, which is slated to start in the fall or early winter.

- Violence Against Women (VAW) Services
- Housing and Shelter in COVID-19 Recovery and Isolation Hotels
- Encampment Outreach
- Hotel Substance Use Program
- Toronto Developmental Service Alliance's Sector Pandemic Planning Initiative (SPPI)
- Reintegration Services Trailer

Learn more about the programs and evaluations below. To learn more about the MARCO Project, visit <https://maphealth.ca/marco>

Violence Against Women (VAW) Services

The VAW Services Evaluation will be a formative and process evaluation. We want to understand how organizations have had to adapt to this public health emergency, how contextual factors have influenced these processes, and how service adaptations have affected staff and survivor wellbeing.

In particular, we aim to investigate the adaptation of in-person services, including the implementation of new public health regulations and the transition to virtual or mobile formats. Our goal is to draw actionable recommendations for participating organizations, the sector, funders, and policymakers to strengthen the response to VAW during this pandemic and any future public health emergencies.

The VAW Evaluation team will:

- Offer VAW organizational reps a logic model building session, where we clarify how services have had to adapt and how program activities aim to help clients.
- Conduct one round of interviews and focus groups with organizations' leadership, frontline staff, and clients to understand their experiences before and during the pandemic. Honorariums will be provided to participants.
- Conduct one round of short online surveys to further explore key themes that emerged from our interviews.

Housing and Shelter in COVID-19 Recovery and Isolation Hotels

We will evaluate housing and shelter in COVID-19 recovery and isolation hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic. The evaluation will focus on the movement of individuals experiencing homelessness from shelters or the street to one of the hotels.

The COVID-19 recovery and isolation hotels consisted of three hotels that were established to service people experiencing homelessness. Organizations that shared in the administration of at least one hotel included University Health Network, Inner City Health Associates, The Neighbourhood Group, Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre, and the City of Toronto's Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration. These hotels supported both people experiencing homelessness who tested positive for COVID-19 as well as close contacts or persons under investigation for COVID-19. Many people experiencing homelessness were unable to self-isolate and follow physical distancing guidelines due to their lack of permanent, stable, and appropriate housing. The hotel sites provided one of the largest COVID-19 care facilities in the country for people experiencing marginalization.

Clients of the hotels were provided with private hotel rooms and were supported by peer support workers, community workers and harm reduction staff, nursing supports and physician teams. The City of Toronto Shelter Support and Housing Administration provided food, linen, and cleaning services. Around 300 people per month were served by these hotels. Recovery hotel stays supported housing transitions upon discharges where possible, and connected individuals to comprehensive primary care for those interested.

The hotel sites provided individuals a safe space, access to basic dignified supports and essential services. They also aimed to reduce COVID-19 transmission in the community and to connect individuals to primary care and mental health supports. Understanding the benefits, harms, and areas of improvement of these sites is critical to better respond to COVID-19.

Encampment Outreach

We will evaluate outreach to people living in encampments across Toronto. This program is a mobile outreach initiative that serves a community of people who are experiencing homelessness, many of whom use drugs. Resources that are offered include water, hand sanitizer, masks, harm reduction supplies, food, naloxone training and kits, nursing care, supportive counselling, case management, and other social services support.

Some people experiencing homelessness who were previously staying in Toronto's shelter system have moved to living in groups of tents, called encampments, in several parks across the city. This has led to a number of challenges for these individuals related to safety, security of person and belongings, as well as exacerbation of pre-existing mental health conditions, risk of overdose, and chronic health conditions. These additional challenges, in combination with service modifications and closures of supervised injection services, have significantly reduced the accessibility to overdose prevention interventions for those who need them most. In response, the Encampment Outreach program was created by South Riverdale Community

Health Centre in collaboration with other community agencies in Toronto in April 2020 in an effort to continue to reach and support these communities.

Community agencies face a number of obstacles, including sufficient staffing to ensure that COVID-19 precautions were maintained, keeping track of people they were supporting, and accessing additional resources and supports. The encampment outreach work was successful in improving access to care, building strong relationships, and establishing a sense of community safety for people experiencing marginalization. However, the City of Toronto recently passed a bylaw banning tents and camping in city parks, citing safety risks – which in turn, has prompted a court challenge. An evaluation of the encampments can provide important information to inform this policy discussion. The evaluation may also explore how agencies can effectively support peer-led initiatives.

Hotel Substance Use Program

We will evaluate the Hotel Substance Use Program, which delivers substance-use related harm reduction and treatment services to people living in the COVID-19 isolation and recovery hotels. The program was developed in April 2020 as a partnership between the Inner City Health Associates (ICHA) and Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre.

While the hotels provide housing support and an opportunity to isolate for individuals experiencing homelessness who tested positive for COVID-19 or who may have been exposed to someone with COVID-19, the location and nature of the hotel program poses several challenges to people who use substances. Moving to a hotel involves displacing people from their communities and isolating them in a new and unfamiliar environment, which limits access to usual drug supplies and harm reduction services. These circumstances can put individuals at a high risk of withdrawal and overdose. If they use drugs in the hotels, they may also fear arrest and additional challenges related to facing the housing system when their stay is terminated.

The Hotel Substance Use program includes managed alcohol, opioid agonist treatment, and risk mitigation prescribing including hydromorphone. This program is novel in quickly connecting experts in substance use and harm reduction with people in need of service and in the provision of hydromorphone to a large group of individuals. Approximately 50 people per month were reached by this service, some of whom did not access conventional treatment models and harm reduction services. Outreach workers report a greater ability to retain people in programs. Evaluation of this program will help to inform how to address the intersection of homelessness and substance use during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Toronto Developmental Service Alliance’s Sector Pandemic Planning Initiative (SPPI)

We will evaluate the Toronto Developmental Service Alliance’s Sector Pandemic Planning Initiative (SPPI), an initiative implemented by the Toronto Developmental Service Alliance to guide the response to COVID-19 for people with developmental disabilities in a variety of living

situations (including people living in group homes, with families, and independently) with a focus on women, as well as for caregivers who support individuals with developmental disabilities and staff working in this sector. During the COVID-19 pandemic response, people with developmental disabilities are experiencing a major disruption in support services, which affects their social well-being due to social isolation and impacts physical and mental health as well as financial security (such as food and housing insecurity).

The Toronto Developmental Service Alliance is a partnership between 28 Toronto agencies that serve people with developmental disabilities. Together, the agencies provide services to approximately 300 people. During the COVID-19 pandemic response, the Sector Pandemic Planning Initiative has been scaled up through in-kind contributions from numerous stakeholders. The work of the SPPI is shared with the local Toronto Developmental Services Planning table, agencies across Ontario, the Ministry of Children Community and Social Services, and agencies that support women with developmental disabilities.

The SPPI addresses multiple challenges, including issues related to lack of understanding of the pandemic and the need for physical distancing, lack of access to timely information, lack of access to technology and skills to use technology, lack of access to healthcare due to physical distancing measures, poverty, lack of access to PPE for care providers, and issues specific to marginalized families caring for people with developmental disabilities in Toronto (including barriers related to language, poverty, and having a parent with developmental disabilities). Evaluation of this program will include assessing reach and impact of SPPI as well as how to provide a coordinated response across services.

Reintegration Services Trailer

We will evaluate the Reintegration Services Trailer, a program to assist individuals in need of reintegration support after release from incarceration. The trailer, which is operated by the John Howard Society, was located in the parking lot of the Toronto South Detention Centre and provided support to approximately 100 people per month.

The trailer was run by peer support workers and staff with lived experiences. Services provided include harm reduction, overdose education, clothes, hygiene, phone charging stations, TTC fare, and trauma-informed referrals. Common issues for individuals who are released include: having no fixed address post-release, having a history of complex needs including mental health issues, and having a history of substance use. The services offered by the trailer have had a significant impact on their clients' health outcomes and overall quality of life and help to keep people from returning to jail.

The Reintegration Services Trailer is currently closed due to difficulties adhering to COVID-19 emergency public health measures. The trailer doesn't have adequate space to allow service users and staff to safely maintain a 6-foot distance. These challenges occurred against the backdrop of prior strains due to insufficient resources.

This evaluation aims to learn what happens when a beneficial service for people experiencing marginalization is removed, with a focus on how those services can be delivered alternatively during the COVID-19 pandemic response and how to safely re-introduce these services.

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