



Homelessness is a complex societal issue with many underlying causes like job loss, lack of affordable housing, mental illness, substance abuse, and more. Many individuals experiencing homelessness want to work but face significant barriers to employment. It's important to avoid stigmatizing or criminalizing homelessness itself.

Homelessness can present unique challenges for businesses, from concerns about safety and property damage to wanting to respond with compassion. This section guides business leaders on interacting with individuals experiencing homelessness, while protecting their operations. Also find more context, community resources, and applicable action steps that businesses can take to navigate challenging situations. The following information is summarized from **OBIAA's Homeless Response Toolkit**. The 32 page OBIAA Toolkit has been summarized into 6 pages for key notes and quick tips specifically for Toronto BIAs.

Please see the OBIAA toolkit for more in depth information and for glossary of terms, and terms to avoid when addressing vulnerable community members.



“Why can’t people that are homeless in the BIA just be taken to a place that can help them?”

Customers, patrons and BIA members can be upset, bothered, concerned, or worried about people experiencing homelessness in the BIA.

Here is some key facts to note:

- Services for people experiencing homelessness **are voluntary**.
- There is **no legal mechanism** to force people to go to a service, use a service, or stay inside a homelessness-serving facility.
- Being homeless is **not illegal**.
- Some of the behaviours exhibited by people experiencing homelessness or activities required for day-to-day survival **may be subject to other laws or by-laws**, but simply being without a permanent place to live **does not render a person without rights, nor does it nullify the Canadian Charter**.
- If the person experiencing homelessness is a clear danger to themselves or others. **The Mental Health Act** sets out the powers and obligations of psychiatric facilities in Ontario. The Act also outlines the powers of police officers and Justices of the Peace to make orders for an individual - who has to meet certain criteria - to undergo psychiatric examination by an appropriate mental health professional.

4 Tips on How to Get Up-to-Speed on Homelessness In Your Community

1. **Talk** to non-profits that deliver homelessness and/or Housing Stability Services
2. **Read** Municipal Council Reports
3. **Talk** to your local Municipal Councillor
4. **Talk** to your NCO’s or Community Response Unit (if available)



What can my BIA do?

1. Be informed

2. Create a Local “Who To Call” List (see OBIAA Toolkit for more details)

- Street Outreach or Crisis Team (211)
- Needles & Sharps (311)
- Human Waste (311)
- Harm Reduction Team (local service provider)
- Neighbourhood Community Office or Community Response Unit (if available)
- Any other important contacts

3. Create or get copies of A Local Services Resources Guide

A map of availability in and near the BIA can be helpful. Some of the services may change hours of operation or even the location of services during the year. Focus on sharing the information and being able to update it regularly rather than a glossy product that may become outdated not long after printing.

Services to include are:

- Location of shelters and how to access the shelters (*ex: do people just show up or do they need to go through a centralized intake point?*)
- Location of meal programs by day(s) of the week and/or other resources that make food available
- Location of drop-in centres and hours of operation
- Location of housing help resources and/or Coordinated Access points
- How to contact street outreach providers
- Location of public washrooms
- Location of public showers and hours of availability
- Location and operating hours of warming/cooling centres
- How to access harm reduction supplies and/or where a safer injection site is located

4. Other Tips

- **Community Collaboration** - Homelessness impacts entire communities, so a collaborative approach is most effective
- **Participate in local business associations or task forces** addressing homelessness
- **Support or advocate for affordable housing** and homelessness initiatives.
- **Consider hiring or training homeless individuals** ready for employment
- **Post "No Trespassing"** signs clearly
- **Secure** trash enclosures and reduce concealment areas
- **Install lighting** in dark areas
- **Consider landscaping** to control access and ensure avoiding concealment spaces
- **Implement security patrols** or cameras if needed
- **Businesses can navigate homelessness compassionately** while protecting their operations by taking proactive security measures, communicating respectfully, connecting to resources, and collaborating communitywide.



People displaying behaviours that lead you to believe they may have a mental illness (e.g. Auditory Hallucinations)

- **Contact** a local crisis intervention team or **211** (city-wide)
- **If the person is in extreme distress**, and you are worried they may harm themselves or others - **call 911**.
- **Educate yourself and fellow BIA members on the Mental Health Act** to better understand when, and under which conditions, the Act can be used, and what happens when it is used.
- **For future prevention explore if a partnership with the non-profit sector and/or the municipality**

If you feel safe, and a crisis response is not necessary, but you are still concerned, consider the following:

- Ask the person if they are okay or need help.
- Get the person a cup of water and perhaps a snack.
- Ask if there is anyone you can contact for them.
- Ask a bystander or coworker to stay with you

Damage to property/business and/or theft

- **If theft is directly related to procuring items for day-to-day existence**, work with local non-profits and the Service Manager to organize how those items can be made available to people that are street involved in ways that the individual does not need to interact with a business to get the item.
- **If you actively see a person damaging a property or building, or engaging in theft**, take the same measures you would take if any person did the same thing, regardless of housing status.
- **Work with your NCO's or CRU team to outline your concerns about damages and theft.**
Ask what they can do to enhance their response and help stop this from occurring.
- **If there are certain areas like back alleys being vandalized**, consider whether or not there are other security measures like cameras or lighting that can better protect the property. An audit with police or other safety professionals can often assist in this regard.

Overdoses in the BIA

- **If someone is actively overdosing**, unconscious, or it looks to be a health emergency, **call 911 immediately**.
- **Advocate to local elected officials**, and/or, Public Health for a safer consumption site where people can use while being supervised and supported.
- **Consider organizing Naloxone training for fellow BIA members** including how to administer it.
- **Prepare or request a resource guide on supports for people** that use substances, from harm reduction programming in or near the BIA, to treatment and recovery options.
- **Request overdose data** from first responder engagement in or near the BIA to understand the full extent of the issue.
- **Consider, if resources allow, and overdoses are a massive issue in the BIA**, requesting that harm reduction or addiction experts integrate with street outreach resources or do their own street outreach in the BIA.



Encampment establishing or growing in the BIA

Encampments are very diverse, as are the people that live in them. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to yield sustainable, long-term results.

- **Ask local non-profits, or other social service agency in the BIA** whether or not shelters are currently full as it may be prompting people to sleep outdoors.
- **If shelters are full, join the advocacy efforts** to increase temporary shelter space for people.
- **Distribute the resource guide or a map** outlining which services are available within or in proximity to the BIA.
- **Ask your Councillor if there are established, council-approved protocols** for responding to, assessing, and resolving encampments that encompasses all stakeholders.
- **If the encampment is on private property**, property owners can exercise their rights related to trespassing, if necessary.
- **Avoid a tendency to sweep out the encampment** and have people moved along. This doesn't resolve their homelessness or the issue of encampments.
- **If you are concerned about dangerous or unlawful behaviours in the encampment**, work with street outreach, law enforcement, and municipal enforcement to develop a response strategy.
- **If there are public or physical health concerns regarding people residing in the encampment**, include public health and other health providers in your convening of a meeting to talk about response and community protocols.

Bathroom access & human waste

- **Map out the locations of every publicly accessible bathroom in and near the BIA and the hours each of the bathrooms are available.** Government offices, libraries, recreation centres, community centres - even police stations, parks, and arenas in some communities - provide access to public restrooms. Consider making this information available to everyone in the BIA - businesses, patrons, and people experiencing homelessness.
- **Convene a broader community meeting about public restroom access.** Don't do it just as a homelessness response, though that should be part of it. Involve your local Councillor, municipal staff, businesses, and other stakeholders in the discussion of "How can we increase the number of public restrooms available to all people?"
- **Establish a port-a-potty pilot project.** Provide one or more portable toilets in the BIA for a period of 60-90 days and track whether or not having one results in reductions of human waste or creates other issues.
- **Speak with non-profit service providers like shelters and drop-ins** that are near or in the BIA about bathroom access for people that dwell or recreate in the BIA.
- **Explore whether a partnership with the non-profit sector and the municipality** makes sense to offer mobile hygiene facilities.
- **Ask your local Councillor what the municipal policy and process is for removing human waste from public spaces.** Determine how to activate that response whenever needed. Track every time it is encountered so that the municipality understand the extent to which it is an issue.



How to support vulnerable people in your BIA

Street Involved Behaviour in the BIA (ex. panhandling, drug dealing & needle disposals)

- **Get copies of, or create, a resource guide** that can be distributed
- **If there are clearly illegal activities** like drug dealing, work with NCO's or CRU (if available)
- **If there are activities that seem to violate local by-laws**, work with your municipal enforcement
- **Host a forum for fellow BIA members** to engage in conversation with service providers, first responders, and people experiencing homelessness in the BIA to discuss your concerns
- **Hire BIA ambassadors** that are people with lived experience to engage with people that are participating in street involved activities to have empathetic, peer-to-peer conversations about what is happening, why, how it impacts others, and what can be done.
- **Ensure there are bio-hazard containers readily available throughout the BIA**, and in public restrooms in or near the BIA. Your local public health department, harm reduction service providers, street outreach providers, or a peer recovery program can often help with this, as can your local Councillor.
- **Map out all of the locations in or near the BIA** where there is safe needle disposal. Sometimes people just don't know where to go to put used needles.
- **If you have a clean-up crew** that involves people with lived or living experience, make sure they have the knowledge and equipment to safely pick up and dispose of needles found in the BIA.
- **Host a harm reduction seminar or workshop for your BIA members** with the help of public health or a harm reduction service provider.

Using private business to get out of the elements

- **Know where local drop-in centres, warming centres, or cooling centres are located** and share that information with people experiencing homelessness.
- **Know the locations of public buildings in or near the BIA** where people experiencing homelessness can be redirected.
- **Ensure that people have transportation to get to where they can be inside.** If an outreach van is needed, or people need a bus ticket, work with service providers to make that possible.
- **Develop a decision-matrix of the extent of the weather situation**, what constitutes an emergency, and whether there are any weather circumstances, especially those that are temporary in nature (e.g. a tornado warning) where you may allow or even encourage people experiencing homelessness in the BIA to come into one or more of the business buildings in the BIA.



How to support vulnerable people in your BIA

Trash in your BIA

- **Create a social purpose enterprise with a local non-profit.** They hire people to do trash collection and clean-up in the BIA on a daily or regular basis. People get meaningful work. You get a cleaner BIA.
- **Host regular BIA clean-up days at set intervals (e.g., every two weeks)** to do a deeper dive into cleaning up the BIA. For people experiencing homelessness or are street involved in the BIA, invite them to participate.
- **Provide equipment to take care of trash to people experiencing homelessness or are street involved in the BIA.** It is hard to take care of trash if you don't have a garbage bag, a broom, or know which dumpster or trash receptacle to put the trash in, once cleaned up.
- **Ensure there are a sufficient number of trash cans or dumpsters in the BIA** that are accessible to people that need to get rid of trash.
- **Work with your local municipal Councillor and municipal staff to discuss trash issues,** the frequency of publicly funded trash clean-up and pick-up in the BIA, and whether or not it is sufficient for the BIA.
- **Work with non-profit service providers in the BIA to collectively create a Good Neighbour policy** that includes routine examination of trash, its impacts, and what needs to collectively be done to keep the BIA cleaner.
- **Involve municipal enforcement if there is an ongoing issue with illegal dumping or trash scattered** in the BIA and determine what solutions they recommend to decrease or resolve the issue.

If personal belongings seem to be abandoned in the BIA, consider how long they have been abandoned

A couple of hours without seeing a person with their belongings may just mean the person is currently elsewhere. However, abandoning items for a day or more can be a sign that the person has moved on. Work with street outreach to determine if the person is coming back, (for example, if the person is currently hospitalized or incarcerated for a short period of time). If no one knows the whereabouts of the person and the belongings have been left behind for 48 hours or more, considering implementing a multi-stakeholder protocol.

Steps in that protocol may include:

- Street outreach or another service provider scan belongings (without touching the belongings) for personal effects and valuables like money, medication, or identification that is in plain sight.
- Often these services will store items like these for a temporary period of time. It is also possible another service organization like a drop-in centre may store items of value on a temporary basis.
- Once personal effects and valuables have been scanned for items of value in plain sight, consider having a notice posted by municipal enforcement or the service provider that the belongings are considered abandoned and if not claimed within 24 hours will be removed on or after that time.
- Then, it is up to various municipal departments and enforcement to take care of removing the belongings that have been abandoned, subject to local by-laws and policies.
- If storage can be provided for a period of time after cleaning up all remaining belongings, that is recommended.