

Jurisdiction Scan of Best Practices for Sleeping Area Considerations

Administration reviewed eight shelter design or best practices documents that were available online from different Canadian jurisdictions to better understand how other locations guide the development of sleeping areas in shelters. Cities such as Calgary, Vancouver, Victoria or Winnipeg either do not provide guidelines or standards for shelters or were not available online. A summary of key findings from each document is provided below.

Alberta Health Services - Guide for Outbreak Prevention & Control in Shelter Sites (2024)

This document provides guidance mainly on preventing spread of infection in shelter sites. It recommends that private rooms be provided where possible, but where this is not possible, it recommends that beds be provided a minimum of one metre apart, but preferably two metres apart. The size of congregate sleeping areas is not considered.

National Standards for Emergency Shelters Across Canada (2024)

This document is a collaboration between multiple advocacy groups in order to develop a “National Human Rights-Based, Gender-Sensitive Shelter Standard.” This document generally provides policy guidance on how to provide safe, dignified and culturally appropriate shelter operations.

It recommends avoiding “large shelters” such as those accommodating 100 people or more and to establish more shelters with more limited capacities (e.g. 25 people). This document did not provide specifications on congregate sleeping areas, but the general approach of this document would discourage this type of practice.

BC Housing Shelter Design Guidelines (2017)

The BC Housing guidelines provide specifications for rooms with one bed up to rooms with four beds. It does not recommend the use of bunk beds to accommodate people with mobility challenges, reduce potential for conflict, reduce perception of “warehousing” people, and provide greater privacy. While it provides technical specifications for rooms with one bed and up to rooms with four beds, its preference for shelters is to provide people with individual rooms with one bed each. It does not consider large congregate sleeping areas at all except as a flexible space for extreme weather conditions or as a temporary overflow area.

Newfoundland and Labrador Standards for Serving People Experiencing Homelessness in Shelters Throughout Newfoundland and Labrador (2024)

This provincial document does recognize the use of congregate sleeping areas in Newfoundland and Labrador shelters but does not prescribe requirements around congregate sleeping area sizes. It provides detailed specifications for spacing between beds, such as a requirement for a minimum of 3.5 sq. m per person, a minimum of 0.75 m to 2 m separation between each bed and a vertical separation of 1.1 m if bunk beds are used. It also recommends the use of privacy features such as temporary walls and partitions.

County of Simcoe Emergency Shelter Standards (2023)

The County of Simcoe provides similar requirements as other jurisdictions. Sleeping areas should be separated from other gathering areas (except in temporary situations due to emergencies). Beds should be a minimum of 0.75 m apart (with a preference of 2.0 m separation) with a vertical separation of 1.1 m between the bed and any overhead object.

Toronto Shelter Standards (2022)

This document provides minimum standards for all City of Toronto-funded shelters to meet. While the standards discourage the use of large sleeping areas, it recognizes that some shelters provide these types of sleeping spaces. It requires that these sleeping areas be separated from other areas where people gather, such as for dining or socializing, but may accept them on a temporary basis in cases of emergency. It also recommends a minimum of 3.5 sq. m of personal space for each bed (or more) and a lateral separation of a minimum of 0.75 m to reduce chances of disease transmission, provide greater privacy to each person and to reduce chances of conflict. Finally, it requires that privacy be provided to each person through the use of features such as screens, half walls and furniture arrangement.

City of Toronto Shelter Design and Technical Guidelines (2023)

The City of Toronto Shelter Design and Technical Guidelines is a best practices document for Toronto shelter operators to consider when designing new shelters. This document does not recommend large congregate sleeping areas for sleeping because they lack privacy, do not provide dignity to users, and do not have the ability to limit disease transmission.

It recommends that dedicated sleeping areas be located within enclosed rooms. It also recommends that sleeping areas be organized into groupings of 20 to 25 beds per area to form a “neighbourhood”. This allows staff to be regularly

assigned to the same area and for the same people to get to know each other. Sleeping areas should contain fewer beds per “room” where opportunity or need for privacy is greater.

The document suggests that there be rooms with different numbers of beds in order to accommodate specific types of people, such as youths, families, women, etc. However, it also recommends that each room should not have more than eight beds.

City of Hamilton Emergency Shelter Standards (2023)

The City of Hamilton standards are intended to ensure that consistent shelter services are provided in the city. The standards acknowledge that shelter requirements will change based on need but must also be balanced with requirements within the building code and other health and safety requirements. The standards rely on the Ontario Building Code to direct the minimum amount of space to provide per person and any relevant occupancy limits. It also recognizes that shelter capacity limits may be exceeded in times of emergency but must be done where safety for all clients, staff, etc. are not compromised.

City of Ottawa Emergency Shelter Standards (2022)

The City of Ottawa’s standards do not appear to distinguish requirements between private rooms, semi-private rooms or congregate sleeping areas. Like the Newfoundland and Labrador guiding document, it provides specifications such as a minimum of 3.5 sq. m per person, a minimum of 0.75 m to 2 m separation between each bed and a vertical separation of 1.1 m where bunk beds are used (though these are discouraged). Shelter capacity limits are regulated through the Fire Code and any service agreement between the shelter provider and the City of Ottawa.