



# 2022 National Public Administration Case Competition

## **A Wicked Problem?: Rough Sleeping in Cities** Robert P. Shepherd and Nick Falvo



## A WICKED PROBLEM?: ROUGH SLEEPING IN CITIES

### FINALLY ON THE RADAR

Micheline Frenette-Salvador is Director General of Housing Policy within the Ontario Cabinet Office. The office supports policy research for the Premier’s Office, including issues related to homelessness. She assumed the role during the COVID-19 pandemic in November 2019 when at the time most of the unit’s 20 officers and staff were occupied with another crisis facing many Canadians – overdosing due to Fentanyl-laced street drugs causing a major spike in deaths among those experiencing homelessness in Ontario, especially in Toronto and Ottawa. Her responsibilities included coordinating policy responses to assist municipalities with emergency planning, creating partnerships with not-for-profit organizations, improving relationships with the police, and finding funding options that pulled together resources from existing provincial programs including crafting bilateral arrangements with cities and towns. It was a big job, and the branch was quickly overwhelmed. Since there were a main hub within the Cabinet Office, all eyes were often on her unit’s work and performance to pull together the relevant units across various ministries.

With the host of challenges that came with the pandemic, the Premier’s priority was on emergency planning and responses for persons displaced by layoffs, reduced work hours, or assisting with childcare given the many school closures. Public and private institutions were also being assisted with emergency funding for various purposes. This left limited attention to the issues affecting persons experiencing homelessness. In particular, the unit was being forced to shift its attention to what was quickly becoming a major problem across the province: the rise of “rough sleeping” and homeless encampments popping up in city parks and other public spaces.

Ms. Salvador was asked by her Assistant Deputy Minister, Selma Palatin, in January 2022 to look into the erecting of encampments, challenged by the fact that in much of 2020, several of them across the province were being disbanded by local law enforcement, sometimes harshly, on the directives of city councils. Clearly, this problem was not going away.

Presently, mayors are complaining to provincial ministers and the Premier’s Office that their parks and other public spaces are being occupied by more and more rough sleepers (or outdoor sleepers) and that these encampments are inherently dangerous for various reasons. In essence, officials in Queen’s Park are taking notice of a growing problem without clear short

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*“When I was a talk show host, people would come on and say, well, you can’t have these people sleeping on the street, it’s unsightly. And I’d say, well, OK, what would you have us do with them?” “Would you take them to jail? Some people would say yes, and I’d say, well, come on get serious. Charged with what?”*

*John Tory, Mayor of Toronto, Toronto Star, March 2019*

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to medium term solutions, challenged by the fact that the encampments comprise individuals with various needs and demands (many linked to both physical and mental health challenges). It was Ms. Salvador’s job to gather as much intelligence as possible and as quickly as possible on the nature of the encampments and the people who are living within them.

It is also Ms. Salvador's job to determine why current programmatic tools were not always effective to address the needs of rough sleepers and persons experiencing homelessness. Comparatively, this is a problem being experienced across the country, and Ms. Salvador was very interested in learning about strategies being used elsewhere.

## **GATHERING INFORMATION**

Ms. Salvador's first task was to gather background information for her ADM on the issue of rough sleeping, and the rise of encampments across the province and indeed the country especially during the pandemic. She was under a great deal of pressure to provide Ms. Palatin and the deputy minister with some guidance on how to inform decisions that might help to orchestrate a response to what was already a national problem. Getting an initial briefing into the hands of Ms. Palatin was a necessary first step on the various issues involved, especially information that provided insight into how other ministries were working on various aspects of encampments whether these were health and safety related, security-based, or coordinative.

Ms. Palatin's general approach so far was that the province would be willing to discuss a more coordinated province-wide, or indeed a national response to the encampments problem, but the nature of that response would have to meet the particular needs of municipalities and the actors within them. As with the issue of housing for the homeless, Ms. Palatin understood that the provincial government is not on the front lines of this file. That said, the provincial government needed a sense of how best it can help cities – and this is where Ms. Salvador's unit was being asked for its expertise given its involvement with the overdose crisis, and the ongoing housing issue that was addressed in part by the province's housing strategy.

Ms. Salvador asked her top policy analysts in the branch to pull together as much information as they could about the issue of rough sleeping itself, and then to highlight how encampments were being monitored, managed and ultimately dealt with in major centres across the province and the country. As she saw it, there were at least two issues she needed to research: first, who are these rough sleepers, and why are they sleeping outside?; and second, why and how are the encampments being managed, if at all, in Ontario and elsewhere? Were there no other solutions beyond disbanding them? The second set of questions, in many ways, is the most urgent of the two (although they are deeply connected) as there do not appear to be any apparent solutions to addressing the challenges experienced by rough sleepers. Her analysts provided the following basic information to get her situated with the various considerations for the management of encampments.

### ***The Basics on Encampments***

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, officials in many Canadian cities have reported growth in visible outdoor sleeping (also known as 'rough sleeping'). Rough sleepers are persons who either have no choice but to sleep outside sometimes due to a loss of a home or isolation, or individuals who have made a conscious choice to sleep outdoors for various reasons of mental health, isolation, or substance abuse. Such persons should not be confused entirely with those who are considered homeless, although clearly there is overlap in reasons and circumstances. Many rough sleepers may not suffer from any mental or physical impairment, but for their own reasons have decided to sleep outdoors. Although there is limited information on rough sleepers, it is

reasonable to suggest that when compared with persons with permanent housing, they often have limited labour market attachment; very low incomes (many with no income from any government source); serious health challenges (both psychological and physical); problems with substance use or some other addiction; have decided to isolate due to the pandemic; and, may have a history of trauma due to factors including domestic violence. It has also been suggested that those sleeping outside are often more resistant to rules and have made a choice to avoid emergency shelters and programs (Public Health England, 2018).

Encampments are defined as being semi-structured or organized arrangements of at least 20 persons sleeping outside in one area of a city, typically a park or other public space, at the same time (Farha and Schwan, 2020). One reason for the growth of encampments stems from legitimate concern on the part of unhoused persons about disease transmission in congregate settings (e.g., COVID-19, etc.), including in both emergency facilities and crowded housing arrangements. Many individuals without suitable housing are making the decision that it is now safer to sleep outside than to sleep inside (Farha and Schwan, 2020, 8). This has raised concerns in cities about overcrowding in publicly-funded shelters and other temporary or long-term dwellings.

Encampments pose many challenges for local governments. For example, they come with fire-related risks, and there is a much higher risk for physical harm to the campers. For example, many encampments use open flame fire pits for cooking and heating needs. There is also unsafe wiring, and high exposure to risks associated with gasoline and propane usage. In 2020, Toronto Fire Services responded to 253 encampment fires, and this is a story that has played out elsewhere with increasing frequency. Most encampments lack formal staffing and security, meaning that all encampment residents are at increased risk of both physical and sexual assault. Further, during cold or wet weather, residents are at increased risk of illness (or even death).

Local homelessness officials and various not-for-profit groups across Ontario and Canada have worked hard to persuade outdoor sleepers to come inside, typically to an emergency facility of some type of public dwelling such as converted hotels, while not wanting to create the impression that *any* person who suddenly shows up at an encampment will be ‘fast tracked’ into permanent housing. It is a fine balance. City officials wish to respect the choices of individuals (i.e., those who have decided to live outdoors) while at the same time protecting individuals from harm.

An additional challenge for many Ontario municipalities has been a dramatic increase in complaints from community members who have often garnered significant media attention. Complaints have ranged from not having access to public spaces taken over by encampments, increased emergency service responses at all hours of the day, noise and disturbance complaints, damage to private property, and various calls and complaints about the lack of municipal action to address the problems associated with the encampments and the people who occupy them.

Most municipalities lack a rigorous approach to tracking rough sleeping. Generally, local officials working in the homeless sector lack sound methods for tracking numbers of people or assessing the needs of those who sleep outside. Most large Canadian cities have instituted “point in time” counts (PiT Counts) that are conducted every few years, but they lack methodological rigour. For example, PiT counts do not include unique identifiers, their methodologies change from one year to the next and from one city to the next, and they typically survey a convenience sample rather than a random sample (i.e., representative sample). This has meant that municipalities have not

had the information they need to understand the various issues, concerns and needs of rough sleepers, and without unique identifiers, cities do not know ‘who is who’ among those they have surveyed. As a result, any attempts at service provision to these encampments have often been misaligned to the needs of various individuals. For example, rough sleepers are often treated in the same way as the homeless (which may be appropriate in some circumstances) when it comes to providing emergency services. However, these generically applied services may not fit with everyone.

### ***The Basics on Responsibility Centres for Homelessness, Rough Sleepers and Encampments***

From a jurisdictional standpoint, the issue of homelessness and encampments tends to get lost in federal and provincial/territorial responsibilities. Although housing is a provincial matter under s.92 of the *Constitution Act 1982*, the responsibility for homeless citizens tends to be a shared matter with the federal government. Most governmental responses to homelessness as a catch-all for matters related to displacement have been related to the provision of housing options. At any given moment, subsidized housing is one option in responding to larger housing issues, but may not be appropriate for the more specific issue of rough sleeping. For example, many rough sleepers may need ongoing social work support after receiving subsidized housing.

In essence, there is very little that any level of government *must* do about either homelessness generally or encampments and rough sleepers specifically. By convention, however, all levels of government have shared the costs associated with homelessness with a great deal of the load falling on municipalities for planning, including for outreach, triage/prioritization for housing and other services, and emergency shelter.

At the federal level, housing rights were recognized under the *National Housing Strategy Act 2019*. Under section 4 of the legislation, the federal government recognizes the right to housing together with other fundamental rights such as the right to life and basic standards of medical care and socio-economic well-being. It states that the Housing Policy of the Government of Canada is to:

- a. recognize that the right to adequate housing is a fundamental human right affirmed in international law;
- b. recognize that housing is essential to the inherent dignity and well-being of the person and to building sustainable and inclusive communities;
- c. support improved housing outcomes for the people of Canada; and
- d. further the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing as recognized in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

At a basic level of understanding, the federal government has a commitment to the improvement of housing needs beyond the obvious jurisdiction of provinces/territories. Specifically, the *National Housing Strategy* announced in 2019 committed \$2.2 billion to supporting the most vulnerable Canadians in maintaining safe, stable and affordable housing and to reduce chronic homelessness nationally by 50 percent by fiscal year 2027 to 2028. Certainly, this is one important piece of the [national government’s contribution](#) to addressing homelessness in general, and for providing options for residents of encampments in particular. Although not perfect, the Strategy is one funding tool to support provinces/territories and municipalities.

The federal government also re-designed the federal Homelessness Program, managed by Employment and Social Development Canada (soon to transition to Infrastructure Canada). In 2020, a national consultation was instituted to gather perspectives on optimizing place-based approaches in line with other jurisdictions and their efforts. In particular, it follows on the United Kingdom's *Homelessness Act 2002*, which affords local authorities the ability to carry out reviews of homelessness in their areas, and to monitor the incidence of homelessness – something Canada has yet to do (Wilson and Barton, 2021, 11-13). The new program now replacing the federal Homelessness Program is [\*Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy\*](#), introduced in 2020, contributing \$203 million in its first fiscal year.

In particular, the strategy addresses “chronic homelessness,” which includes:

1. Staying in unsheltered locations, that is public or private spaces without consent or contract, or places not intended for permanent human habitation (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) Typology: 1.1 and 1.2).
2. Staying in emergency shelters, including overnight shelters for people experiencing homelessness (including those for specific populations, such as youth, families, and newcomers), shelters for people impacted by family violence, and emergency shelters for people fleeing a natural disaster or destruction of accommodation (COH Typology: 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3).
3. Staying temporarily with others without guarantee of continued residency or the immediate prospects for accessing permanent housing, or short-term rental accommodations (for example, motels) without security of tenure (COH typology: 3.2 and 3.3) (Canada: Reaching Home, 2020).

The legislation does not include situations where individuals have access to secure, permanent housing, whether subsidized or not. This is where the federal program can run into conflict with the needs of individuals who have elected by choice to reside in homeless encampments. That said, for those individuals who do qualify, two one-time funding enhancements to the program were made in each of March 2020 for \$157.5 million, and in September 2020 for \$236.7 million. These one-time enhancements were made to offset in part the challenges experienced by provinces/territories and municipalities for addressing chronic housing needs for those residing in encampments and shelters.

Also announced at the federal level in October 2020 was a new program, the Rapid Housing Initiative, to be managed by the Canada Mortgage & Housing Corporation (CMHC) to supplement funds for provinces/territories and selected municipalities for the most vulnerable of Canadians, including those who are resident in homeless encampments. Funds were disbursed in two rounds. The first covered the period October 27, 2020 to March 31, 2021, which saw funding of \$1 billion to support the rapid construction of 3,000 new affordable housing units for the most vulnerable Canadians during the pandemic. The second round covers the period June 30, 2021 to March 31, 2022. An investment of \$1.5 billion in new funding was made to add 4,500 units, with 25 percent of these units to be applied to women-focused housing projects (CMHC, 2020).

Taken as a whole, the contribution of federal monies to Ontario's programs is significant but not entirely directed to resolving the issue of encampments. For Ms. Palatin and the Premier, the issue at hand is how best to understand the needs of rough sleepers in encampments, and in some ways

those of the larger homeless population that is resident in them. Having information on what other provinces, territories and municipalities are doing might provide some clues about the range of options available. The answer could not be simply to disband them without any short to medium term solutions in sight.

## **THE CRISIS OF ENCAMPMENTS: LIMITED SOLUTIONS?**

Over much of 2019 through 2021, encampments arose in various cities across the country including Victoria, Abbotsford, Maple Ridge, Vancouver, Nanaimo, Yellowknife, Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Regina, Winnipeg, Hamilton, Toronto, Peterborough, Oshawa, Ottawa, Gatineau, Montreal, Fredericton, Moncton, Halifax, and St. John's. Ms. Salvador's brief to Ms. Palatin was taking shape with some real examples, including the following events that occurred in selected cities. The first city Ms. Salvador's staff investigated was Toronto, and they learned quickly that the situations there could have been dealt with far more effectively relative to other cities in the country, although there was much room for improvement in several locations.

### **Toronto**

During the summer and into the fall of 2021, the City of Toronto spent nearly [\\$2 million](#) to clear three encampments and repair the parks. The camps were located in [Trinity Bellwoods Park](#), [Alexandra Park](#), and [Lampport Stadium Park](#). The costs to enforce trespass notices amounted to approximately \$840,000, while landscaping amounted to almost \$800,000. These included costs for paramedics, security, fire, waste management, transportation, and police services. City officials also erected fencing around the parks to prevent rough sleepers and others from re-entering the parks – a similar process used in Vancouver and Montreal as well as other major cities to curb such encampments from re-appearing. Clearing the parks was often violent with many clashes recorded and posted on news and social media outlets. More than 800 people were relocated to indoor spaces, with many more forced to find alternative solutions. Toronto officials indicated that more than 6,600 people experiencing homelessness were moved from shelters to permanent housing situations between April 2020 and August 2021, costing the City more than \$660 million. This is double the costs experienced in 2019. The Toronto incidents of violence were of particular concern to Ms. Salvador. It was clear that other cities had addressed the problems associated with encampments in much more effective ways than Toronto. These were the stories on the desk of the Premier, and he was feeling the pressure to act.

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*"The income is not there for people to find housing so, until those solutions are given, you leave people alone," said Gaetan Heroux, an advocate for homeless communities.*

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## Vancouver

Various homeless encampments have popped up in various parts of the city. In April 2021, a tent encampment was disbanded in [Strathcona Park](#), and several people were directed by the courts to leave. This order was on the heels of a previous camp in Oppenheimer Park that was disbanded. BC Housing moved 184 people

into indoor accommodations, including some shelter spaces. Some of the residents wished to be relocated while others did not. In October 2021, approximately 45 to 50 encampment residents in [CRAB Park](#) were removed by police, and handed taxi chits to move elsewhere. BC Housing had limited spaces available to accommodate everyone.

In all, Vancouver saw up to 300 persons in a single encampment during the pandemic. In response, BC Housing funded warming tents and showers, which have been operated by a local not-for-profit agency. A major goal has been to find other options for residents (a mixture of permanent and temporary options). Officials in Vancouver have used a staggered process, whereby certain parts of a park are closed in increments. Attempts have been made to move groups of residents to the same facilities. However, like other cities, the residents comprise those who want affordable housing, as well as rough sleepers who do not wish to have access to any government programming.

## Edmonton

Large encampments were created in Edmonton, with a very large one visible in the city centre with at least 200 residents at its peak. Encampments began appearing as early as 2019, and some were broken up in 2020. [Camp Pekiwewin](#) in Rosedale was closed by the city on November 12, 2020. Another camp was set up in [Wilbert McIntyre Park](#) in Old Strathcona and closed on November 5, 2020. The strategy taken by the city has been to relocate individuals to housing or short-term shelter options. It created an Encampment Response Team to work with residents to find solutions in encampments that represent low risk (i.e., size, location, and proximity to schools and parks). If encampments are found to be high risk, the city's response is to elevate the issue to an accelerated response process led by city police services. A committee of administrative executives, co-chaired by the city manager and the Encampment Response Team

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*"I'll be staying here as long as everyone else stays here, because not everybody wants to live in supportive housing or an SRO."*

Athena Pranteau, Resident

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*"They added more fencing, put a fence around the perimeter of the entire park, put fencing tightly around the tented area so it's closed on all sides with checkpoints on two sides. It's become a prison-like maze. Emergency vehicles have to go through two locked gates, it's preventing access... They should be able to stay in a public space. A safe, legal space, not a cattle pen."* Fiona York, Advocate

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*"Balancing compassion for those living rough with the effects on the community will be the first priority for the city."* Rob Smyth, Deputy City Manager

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chief considers the various responses. The challenge for the response team has been to balance the needs of individuals wanting protection from COVID with the wishes of neighbourhoods wanting to protect their public spaces. What makes the Edmonton experience different from others is the question of how to work with local Indigenous populations and organizations, given the large population of Indigenous homeless and rough sleepers who occupy them. Edmonton officials have been befuddled as how best to work with specific communities of people, let alone the challenge presented by the issues of homelessness and rough sleeping themselves.

## Regina

As of May 2021, Regina had no major encampments in the city. However, well-placed officials report an increase in scattered outdoor sleeping during the pandemic. A 24/7 ‘warm up space’ was developed during the pandemic through a partnership with [All Nations Hope Network](#) and the YWCA, operating throughout the winter months. Operated by a local Indigenous organization, the network has aimed to offer outreach and access to culturally-appropriate spaces, including for persons who have been reluctant to access shelter space or cannot meet behavioural requirements for hotel placements. The City of Regina provided initial funding which has since been supplemented by provincial and federal funding.

[Camp Marjorie](#) was one of the camps pitched in the city’s core community park (also known as Pepsi Park), and saw 30 to 40 tents appear over a number of months in 2021. The camp was named after a Regina woman who died in October 2021 due to her struggles with homelessness, isolation and addiction. Several agencies and not-for-profits, including the Hope Network have attempted to provide services, meals and other supplies to the encampment. Many residents of the tent city claimed that programs such as the new [Saskatchewan Income Support Program](#) were ineffective in meeting the needs of users who apply program funds to support a “whole income” approach instead of a direct payments approach for rent, for example. The result has been a revolving door of residents between camps and housing as individuals fall into arrears on their payments due to spreading payments too thinly to various needs. The camp was ultimately forced by the city to close in late 2021 with no workable solutions in sight.

## Hamilton

During the pandemic, Hamilton has seen an increase in visible outdoor sleeping in prominent public spaces. The City of Hamilton coordinates an Encampment Response Team, similar to that of Edmonton, that meets weekly. This team coordinates a multi-pronged response from the following entities: Housing Services Division, the [Social Navigator Program](#), Municipal Law Enforcement, Parks and Waste Management, and other street outreach programs. The Social Navigator program works with city police services to work with residents and other not-for-profit organizations to find appropriate supplies and services for residents. These include counselling support as well as gathering information on rough sleepers to address various fears or anxieties they might have related to the pandemic and other triggering factors. Based on these

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*“I was embarrassed, my pride stopped me from asking for help,” he said. “I didn’t want people to know the situation I was in.”*

*Ray Perrier, Resident of J.C. Beemer Park Encampment*

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efforts, the city developed a new [protocol](#) in 2021 to work alongside residents of the various encampments, including the largest in [J.C. Beemer Park](#). This camp was subject to a major fire in November 2021 that displaced more than two dozen tents. However, some residents were forced by police services to leave without their belongings, raising concerns that the City was reverting to its old ways instead of addressing the situation more compassionately.

## Ottawa

Ottawa has seen major increases in outdoor sleeping since the start of the pandemic, including in very visible parts of the downtown, such as [Gil-O-Julien Park](#) in Overbrook (south end of city). In 2020, City of Ottawa Housing Services convened a multi-departmental Unsheltered Task Force to develop a coordinated response to the rise in outdoor sleeping. The task force includes representation from: various city departments, Ottawa Police, outreach service providers, the National Capital Commission, Ontario Ministry of Transportation, VIA Rail Police Service, and the Coalition of Business Improvement Areas and Crime Prevention Ottawa. Detailed procedures have been developed on how exactly each encampment is to be addressed. The City of Ottawa does not set up physical infrastructure at encampments (e.g., hand washing stations and porta-potties), but they do fund outreach staff who provide some supports to the encampment (e.g., bottled water, sleeping bags, socks). Among Task Force accomplishments has been a GIS mapping system for identifying encampments and keeping case notes on their residents. Like other cities, several encampments have been dismantled, sometimes with several arrests.

## Montreal

Several encampments appeared throughout the city during the pandemic. Initially, the City took a reasoned and compassionate stance to work with residents and to coordinate responses with not-for-profits and other public sector organizations. However, as the summer of 2021 approached, many residents were expressing great concern about the use of public spaces and the damage being caused. The City began to express safety concerns with residents, who refused to amend the ways in which the camps operated. Some encampments have appeared in parks, while others have been erected in vacant lots or alongside highways or parking structures. One park in an abandoned lot at the intersection of [Notre-Dame and D'Iberville](#) streets (near the Cartier Bridge) owned by the Quebec Ministry of Transportation, was dismantled by city workers in July 2021. The argument used by the city was that the encampment was not safe. Residents were given short notice to clear out of the camp, and belongings were packed and taken to city dumps.

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*"They can't be tolerated because the risks are known, notably when it comes to fire hazards," said Mélanie Gagné, a communications officer.*

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Other camps were erected in [Mercier-Hochelaga-Maisonneuve](#), Ville-Marie and the Plateau-Mont-Royal. City officials have argued that many shelter beds are available, but camp residents have argued that some are in the camps by choice, and ought to be given the choice of housing solutions. Many residents were given eviction notices, with [advocates](#) for the homeless arguing that more permanent solutions such as affordable housing are needed in order to respect previous election promises to build 15,000 social housing units.

## Halifax

Halifax contained several encampments over the duration of the pandemic. In August 2021, the city decided to clear several major encampments throughout the city without any announcement or warning, arguing that the safety of city workers was paramount. It was clear from media reports that little collaboration was encouraged with not-for-profits trying to find alternative housing arrangements for encampment residents. For example, an advocate for [ADSUM](#) for Women and Children, a

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*"I think the strategy has certainly damaged the sense of trust that may have existed between the community, the wider community, citizens and the city, and of course, those of us who do this work every day. Sheri Lecker, ADSUM*

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Halifax-based organization responsible for working with persons experiencing homelessness, was caught off guard when police moved into a number of camps simultaneously. The City made the decision on August 18, 2021 to remove camps at Horseshoe Island, Peace and Friendship Park, and the Common. It also removed shelters erected by a group called the Halifax Mutual Aid at the old Central Library grounds on Spring Garden Road. The shelters were used to house medical and security staff and to store supplies. City officials argued that shelter space was offered to residents, but that such offers had been refused. Since the summer of 2021, the city has taken an increasingly hard stand against encampments, maintaining that shelter space is available, despite such options being out of alignment with rough sleepers.

## GETTING SITUATED

Ms. Salvador's brief was thorough, and it provides several important insights into the challenge of homeless encampments and the issues associated with rough sleepers in particular. Although there were several programs and services dedicated to those who need housing solutions, there are few options available when it comes to dealing with the many issues associated with rough sleeping. Quite simply, individuals who choose to sleep outside, especially during the pandemic, have their own reasons for doing so, and may be experiencing personal problems that overlap with those of persons experiencing homelessness. Many encampments were being disbanded without fully understanding why some people were there, and the services being provided, although extensive in some cases, were not always aligned to some people's needs. She also realized that many rough sleepers simply wished to be left alone, despite the obvious challenges of being outside all year round.

Among the insights emerging from experience to date, police involvement in what is ultimately a set of social problems may not be the best way to handle encampments, as demonstrated by the many cases where police action turned violent, aside from the fact that such action is costly. Public opinion has further turned against the police in addition to a myriad of other issues police forces are experiencing. City Councils are also receiving negative attention – instead of being seen as defenders of the homeless, they are being regarded as heavy-handed.

To date, most provincial and territorial governments, including Ontario, have taken a hands-off approach when it comes to encampments. They have left the issue largely for municipalities to sort out the best they can with relevant not-for-profit organizations and other public actors, often in a disjointed way. More importantly, some cities have worked hard to develop strong relationships

with civil society organizations whereas others have excluded them from decisions – which certainly describes the situation in Ontario and Quebec. In addition, some provinces and territories have invested a great deal in social housing as one part of the solution, whereas others have elected to fund shorter-term solutions such as shelters and rooming houses. Municipal supports for encampment residents have sometimes been provided by public programs, but these have not always been well-aligned with resident needs.

Federal direction regarding how to address encampments has been limited despite homelessness being a national problem. The issue of rough sleepers, while complicating the policy matter of homelessness, has not been specifically addressed. The 2020 Speech from the Throne called attention to chronic homelessness expressed in the Minister of Housing mandate letter in December 2021, but it is unclear as to how this relates to rough sleeping. To date, the federal government has elected to keep its distance.

As of January 2022, the issue of homeless encampments has not gone away. Camps continue to pop up across the country, especially with the virulent Omicron variant of COVID-19 spreading quickly. Encampments will continue to pose a policy and implementation challenge for many provinces, territories and municipalities. Ultimately, Ms. Salvador indicated to senior decision-makers, the issue of rough sleeping combined with the already complex challenge of homelessness is a wicked problem that will take many hands to address.

## **YOUR TASK**

The discussions that are taking place between the Ontario Cabinet Office and senior ministry officials responsible for homelessness and rough sleepers is playing out in much the same ways across the country. As indicated, the issue of encampments has been dealt with in many different ways but one point common to each is that no workable solutions have been found to address the issues affecting rough sleepers, let alone the larger issue of homelessness.

You are members of a tiger team appointed by your provincial/territorial cabinet office or equivalent body that supports policy-making for the Premier.

Your mandate is to take what you know about the issue of rough sleeping to develop advice to the Premier and senior officials in your provincial/territorial Cabinet Office on how best to balance the needs and demands of rough sleepers (and to some extent the homeless – although more programs are available for this subset of residents) so as to protect the dignity, health, safety and security of all persons who reside in and interact with the camps.

Rough sleepers are a difficult group of people to describe in terms of their reasons for erecting and residing in camps. Some certainly have no choice in being there, while others have isolated themselves in camps by choice, some for reasons related to the pandemic and others not. Regardless, your tiger team has come to a basic realization that current approaches to supporting rough sleepers have shown very limited success, as can be seen in the immediate courses of action taken by cities to disband the encampments. Although some provinces/territories and municipalities have attempted to support residents and rough sleepers through the provision of health and other programs, supplies, and physical supports, these have not led to longer term solutions.

Your Premier has requested that a brief of no more than 20 slides is needed from your team at the end of February, because Cabinet will be meeting to discuss the treatment of current encampments now that winter has fully set in. In particular, ministers will want the following questions to be addressed:

1. What are the particular encampment challenges facing your jurisdiction today? Although several camps have been disbanded across the country, the problem of rough sleeping may be presenting itself in other ways.
2. What other players are involved with the issue of rough sleeping in your jurisdiction? How are they involved? What is their relationship to municipal governments or the province/territory? Are these relationships supportive or obstructive?
3. What supports are currently being provided by the province/territory to municipalities? Are these helpful? Getting in the way?
4. What support, if any, is being provided by the federal government to support your provincial/territorial efforts? What can the federal government do to assist your province and the municipalities?
5. What can your province/territory do right now to better help its municipal governments?

Your brief will be presented to senior officials from various ministries across your provincial or territorial government including ministries of health (physical and mental health programs), housing, employment services, families, justice, security, and intergovernmental relations. The brief should be clear not only about a set of policy options, but it should also provide advice on how best to implement an approach to the encampments in the immediate, medium and longer terms.

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