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McNabb Respite Centre: Gotta Go! Summary Report August 2020

"It feels amazing to feel clean. People take it for granted, being able to just have a shower, but it makes a big difference." – Client of McNabb Respite Centre

This report represents a summary of the experience of the McNabb Respite Centre in opening its toilet, shower and other facilities to those in need –notably the homeless, precariously housed and those living in overcrowded rooming houses and shelters. The report is based on interviews with staff members who play a key role in the day to day delivery of services at the McNabb Respite Centre.

The report includes: the set up of the McNabb Respite Centre, data collection at the centre, snapshot of clients accessing services, snapshot of client needs being served, community response to the McNabb Respite Centre, other comments shared by the two interviewees, and quotes shared with harm reduction workers by clients accessing services at the centre (in text boxes).

Client who came for a shower on May 1st: "I am so grateful to have a shower and get clean. This is my first shower since March 17th." -- Client of McNabb Respite Centre

Due to Covid-19, public toilets around Ottawa were closed in order to protect people's health and safety. With access to toilets closed throughout the city, including at Health and Resource Centres and other key health service providers, the most vulnerable have been the most affected. Their need for access to toilet and shower facilities, as well as respite services, has been and remains urgent.



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The McNabb Respite Centre grew out of the City of Ottawa's creation of the Human Needs Task Force and the City's Emergency Management Plan, both of which have been guiding the City's response to Covid-19 and its efforts to respond to emerging community needs. The approach rests on three pillars:

1. Food security.
2. Addressing homelessness and shelter needs.
3. Outreach and Social Services, including the coordination of volunteers to support isolated residents, both short and long term.

Staff from the City of Ottawa's Parks and Recreation department were tasked with setting up a Respite Centre at McNabb Community Centre. Their remit is to create a safe space where everyone feels welcome and is treated with respect and dignity when attending to some of their most basic human needs, i.e. taking a shower, using the toilet, finding a moment to rest in a calm and safe environment.

In setting up the Respite Centre at McNabb Community Centre, the City of Ottawa partnered with the Harm Reduction teams from Somerset West Community Health Centre and Centretown Community Health Centre. These two organizations are responsible for providing the informal case management, crisis management and harm reduction that go along with meeting the needs of street involved people. So far, this unique partnership between City staff and the community health centres is functioning very well. Together, they are delivering essential services to vulnerable community members in a highly personable way, right down making every effort to greet people by name—a sincere gesture to recognizing people's dignity.

*"I feel so much more relaxed every time I come here."
—Client of McNabb Respite Centre, Aug 2020*

The McNabb Respite Centre opened April 24th. It is open Monday thru Friday, from 9 am until 5 pm. All staff at the centre wear personal protective equipment and also practice social distancing. On May 16th, in response to the growing need for its services and the positive experience to date, the Respite Centre also opened its doors to the community on Saturdays with new hours on all six



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days being 9:30 to 4:30 pm. While there is a desire to serve the community on Sundays, the Health Centres do not have the staff resources needed to properly open and operate the Respite Centre.

According to the current plan, the McNabb Respite Centre will be open until the end of August. The extent of the community's need for services is being reviewed by staff at the community health centres and other community service providers on a bi-weekly basis.

When the **McNabb Respite Centre** was in the planning phase one of the goals was to collect data that would help give a fuller picture of who was using the services. The idea was to collect simple, timely data in a manner that was easy and engaged directly with the people who are using the Centre. To this end, the following kinds of data have been collected on a daily basis:

- Hours of operation.
- Use of harm reduction services including, administering clean needles if requested.
- Number of people using the toilet and shower facilities.
- Number of people in need of food and water.
- Number of people requiring other social services/support.

Based on these ongoing observations, we know several important things. Notably, when the Respite Centre opened, it saw an average of 15 clients a day. Since then, however, the number of visitors has increased by about 30% each week. Within 5 weeks (i.e. early June) the Centre was serving 60-70 people per day—and about 300 per week—a number that has stayed stable ever since.

When the Respite Centre first opened, the idea was to serve the Centretown west area. However, as our analysis of the Centre shows, clients are increasingly coming from the Byward Market area and Vanier—suggesting that the City may want to consider expanding the availability of similar respite centres in other areas of Ottawa. The snapshot below highlights the community members who are accessing services at the McNabb Respite Centre.



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Snapshot of the clients accessing services at the McNabb Respite Centre:

- People who identify as male are the McNabb Respite Centre's overwhelmingly dominant client.
- Those who identify as female make up 5-10% of clients—an extremely low rate that leads to the question of why so few women use the facilities relative to men? Are there hidden, gender-based barriers that deter women from using these facilities? Or, do women have other alternatives that they don't have to share with men? (The Well, Cornerstone, etc.)
- Most clients range from 35-55 years of age
- Increasingly, there are clients coming from the Byward Market area and also Vanier
- Increasingly, a number of families come in to access services
- A surprising number of young people (estimated between 40-50%) in their early 20s who are newly street involved.
- There has also been a steady increase in the use of the toilets by community members who are out walking and biking.

*"It's really nice to not feel rushed and just have my own space for a little bit. I feel a lot better."
—Client of McNabb Respite Centre, Aug 2020*

In short, community members who are living in poverty, community members who are precariously housed—i.e. living in rooming houses or couch surfing—as well as people who are homeless are accessing services at the McNabb Respite Centre.

It is also important to note that day program providers, such as The Well and Centre 454, in Ottawa centre also offer limited access to toilets and showers. For example, Centre 454 requires



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clients to reserve a shower time online, which is a big barrier if one does not have access to a cellphone with a data plan (note about half of the people in the lowest income quintile do not have a mobile phone). Furthermore, there are a small number of porta-potties in Centretown open to the public. While useful, these facilities are currently unable to offer showers and toilets or the wide range of support available at the McNabb Respite Centre.

Snapshot of the client needs being served at McNabb Respite Centre:

People who are precariously housed may feel unsafe using the toilet facilities where they live due to the state of cleanliness and, for example, the number of people sharing the facilities. This is aggravated by a common tendency among people who have been homeless to experience survivor's guilt which then translates into a very liberal approach to allowing others who are experiencing homelessness to share their small space. This can lead to 7-10 people sharing a one bedroom apartment, a living arrangement that makes it much more difficult to maintain toilet/shower cleanliness.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Somerset West Community Health Centre already had a wait list for people who wanted to use its shower facilities. Now, with Covid-19, the Centre has been unable to provide either the proper supervision or personal protection equipment (PPE) that would allow community members to safely use its showers.

Several other considerations affect the needs of those who use the McNabb Respite Centre:

- Clients who are homeless may be wearing several layers of clothing and will require more time to shower.
- Clients may have mobility/accessibility issues requiring more time to use the toilet and shower facilities.
- Clients of the Centre are more prone to having chronic health issues as well as having more immediate injuries that need to be tended to—all of which requires more time.



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McNabb Respite Centre: Beyond Toilets and Showers

Beyond just providing accessible, clean and safe access to toilets, showers and personal respite space, the McNabb Respite Centre has also been providing clothing to those in need. To do so, it has relied on the “clothing cupboards” maintained by the Somerset West and Centretown Community Health Centres. However, there have also been a significant number of donations of clothing and toiletry items from the surrounding community. In one instance, a young doctor who recently left the city raised \$4,200 to buy staples such as knapsacks, sleeping bags, t-shirts, underwear and socks which they then donated to the McNabb Respite Centre.

"Knowing there's food here every day and I can shower helps a lot. I don't have to struggle just to eat or whatever and I can get on with my day."

–Client of McNabb Respite Centre, Aug 2020

Due to the very hot/humid summer we have been experiencing, the Respite Centre is also providing space in the hockey arena area as a cooling centre. Meals have also been donated by restaurants and are available at specified times, although the staff is not promoting this service. That said, Centre staff are building partnerships with other meal providers. Currently, lunches are provided at the Respite Centre by the St. Lukes Table (a service of nearby St. Lukes Church) and the Well. The Centre also offers clients drinking water.

Community Response:

When the doors of the McNabb Respite Centre first opened there were some initial difficulties in balancing the needs/concerns of residents living in the surrounding area and the needs of community members accessing services at the facilities. Resident concerns evolved around issues of community safety and also cleanliness in the areas surrounding the McNabb Respite Centre. To address these concerns, measures were put in place immediately requiring staff to check daily to ensure that the grounds around the Centre are clean and safe.

Generally, residents living in close proximity to the Respite Centre understand and support the need to provide these vital services during the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, it appears that the



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Covid-19 pandemic has really brought the need for access to safe, clean and accessible toilets to the attention of the greater public. It has also laid bare the inequalities in access to facilities to meet our basic human needs—toilets and showers. In short, Covid-19 has helped to bring together City of Ottawa parks and recreation staff, health care providers and the surrounding community to respond to the needs of some of our community's most vulnerable members.

Other comments shared by interviewees:

There are not enough drinking fountains in the City as well as a lack of toilet and shower facilities:

- In the summer Community Health Centre staff are often dealing with people who are severely dehydrated. It is very difficult for people who are not adequately housed to access cool spaces.
- Harm reduction workers report a decrease in the need to step in and deescalate violence when people have access to water, food and a space to cool down.
- Having access to toilets is a basic human need, but it means so much more to those coming to McNabb Respite Centre . We need to think how to provide more safe, clean and accessible toilets to fully meet the needs of all community members.
- Once coffee shops and other businesses open to the public, access to toilets will be more available, but only to customers. These toilets will not be available, for the most part, to the clients who are currently accessing the toilets at the Respite Centre.
- Covid-19 has exposed cracks in the system: we need to invest in humans. This lack of basic resources around meeting the hygiene and health needs of all of Ottawa's citizens is exposing fundamental gaps in our City's social and health infrastructure.
- The City of Ottawa needs to provide safe, clean, and accessible toilets to serve the needs of people who are homeless or in precarious housing arrangements. Relying on local businesses and coffee shops to fill the gaps arising from such conditions is not a realistic expectation and, furthermore, it is not working.



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Some quotes shared by clients of the McNabb Respite Centre:

"It feels amazing to feel clean. People take it for granted, being able to just have a shower, but it makes a big difference."

"Being able to rest and have a nap where I know I won't be robbed ...you have no idea. Most nights I just get high and walk around because I don't feel safe sleeping anywhere."

"I feel so much more relaxed every time I come here."

"It's really nice to not feel rushed and just have my own space for a little bit. I feel a lot better"

"Knowing there's food here every day and I can shower helps a lot. I don't have to struggle just to eat or whatever and I can get on with my day"

Client who came for a shower on May 1st: "I am so grateful to have a shower and get clean. This is my first shower since March 17th"