

Training about palliative care to help those experiencing homelessness

Access to palliative and end-of-life care is especially difficult for persons who are experiencing homelessness, given the discrimination they face and the stigma they encounter in usual health care settings. A Palliative Approach to Care (PA2Care) training package was developed for social care workers to build their knowledge, skill, and confidence in assisting people experiencing homelessness to gain access to appropriate palliative and end-of-life care.

In our evaluation of the training package, social care workers reported positive changes to their knowledge, attitudes, skills and confidence. They reported that the training package was useful and relevant to their work due to its principled approach, structure, content and flexibility. The training package is freely available for others who work with people who are experiencing homelessness.

Project Overview

Many people who are experiencing homelessness have chronic, life-limiting conditions. However, because of social stigma and discrimination, people experiencing homelessness are often unable or unwilling to access care— including palliative care.

Social care workers— including peer support workers— work with people experiencing homelessness to build trusting relationships, that are a crucial foundation for supporting improved access to palliative care. However, it was identified that social care workers lack necessary supports and resources to support detailed knowledge about palliative care.

A 3-part **Palliative Approach to Care (PA2Care)** training package was co-developed in 2018 with social care workers to help them to better address the palliative care needs of people experiencing homelessness.

Building on activities to develop the training package,¹ in 2019 we evaluated the acceptability and relevancy of the final PA2Care training package, which was delivered at 22 workshops across 9 sites in Toronto, Calgary, and Thunder Bay.

What did we do?

Surveys were collected at 3 time points from the social care workers who participated in the training.

The surveys collected self-reported data on knowledge, attitudes, skills, and confidence before, immediately after, and three months after participating in the training course. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with course facilitators to obtain feedback on the aspects of the training package that worked well and areas for improvement.

What did we find?

Social care workers reported a high level of general knowledge about palliative care prior to participating in the training. However, they reported lacking specific knowledge and practices, including the difference between a palliative approach and what they know as a harm reduction approach in their work. After the eLearning module, social care workers generally reported an increase in their knowledge, attitudes, and skills across all topics. After the in-person workshop, which provided opportunities for discussion and sharing

among peers, positive changes in knowledge, skills and attitudes were reported.

Elements of the training package reported as most helpful include:

- 1) ways to identify available legal and financial resources for the clients as they are dying;
- 2) strategies for talking about end-of-life with their clients; and
- 3) the activity itself, which focused on helping social care workers handle their own grief when their clients die.

Social care workers reported these strategies helped them to feel better prepared to discuss with clients their wishes and priorities for their end-of-life care. The participants also felt that the activity focused on managing grief was helpful for their personal well-being.

Sharing experiences in a positive, interactive, and non-judgmental way as part of the in-person workshop was highly valued by social care workers. The opportunity to learn strategies and hear stories from colleagues was reported as especially valuable both in learning new techniques and fostering a sense of connection to the wider community. Guest speakers from local palliative outreach programs were also reported as a useful part of the training as they provided valuable information on locally available resources.

Feedback from course facilitators was similarly largely positive. However, they made some suggestions for changes to the training package's format. Specifically, facilitators wanted flexibility to tailor some activities based on their sense of how participants were responding. For example, some groups preferred discussion over role play, and facilitators wanted the opportunity to accommodate these preferences.

What is the impact?

Based on the feedback from the participants and facilitators, the PA2Care training package was revised, and is available online, free of charge, at <https://pa2care.ca>.² The package and other resources are freely accessible to interested individuals, social care workers, and organizations working with people who are experiencing homelessness.

How was the research funded and supported?

This research was funded and supported by SE Health, one of Canada's largest social enterprises.

Who were our collaborators?

Partnerships with local organizations included Hospice Toronto, Hospice Northwest and Calgary Allied Mobile Palliative Program (CAMPP) advocates who work closely with people experiencing homelessness and their social care providers.

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