

# Evaluating a co-developed palliative approach to care training package to enable social care workers to better support the palliative needs of people experiencing homelessness

Access to palliative and end-of-life care is especially difficult for people who are experiencing homelessness, due to 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 and confidence in assisting people experiencing homelessness to gain access to supportive palliative and end-of-life care.

“After completing the training package, social care workers reported positive changes to their knowledge and confidence. They reported the training was useful and relevant to their work due to its principled approach, structure, content, and flexibility. The package is freely available for others who work with people experiencing homelessness.”

- Dr. Paul Holyoke, VP, Research & Innovation, SE Health



## Project Overview

Many people experiencing homelessness have chronic, life-limiting conditions. However, due to social stigma and discrimination, people experiencing homelessness are often unable or unwilling to access health care— including palliative care.<sup>1,2</sup>

Social care workers (e.g., shelter workers, addiction workers, social workers) work with people experiencing homelessness in a variety of settings, including emergency shelters, transitional housing, and wellness centres. In these roles, workers frequently build trusting relationships that are a crucial foundation for supporting improved access to palliative care. However, previous research has identified that social care workers lack necessary supports and resources to support delivering a palliative approach to care for clients.<sup>3,4</sup>

In 2018, as part of our research portfolio investigating Dying, Death and Grief our research team facilitated co-design workshops to co-develop a **Palliative Approach to Care (PA2Care)** training package with social care workers to help them better address the palliative care needs of people experiencing

homelessness.<sup>5</sup> The 3-part training package includes: **1)** an online e-learning module introducing the main concepts of a palliative approach to care and the connections with a harm reduction approach frequently used by social care workers; **2)** materials and facilitator guide for a one-day, in-person workshop to apply the learned concepts; and **3)** an online repository of resources that continue to be available for learners after completing the training.

## What have we done?

After developing the training package,<sup>6</sup> in 2019 we evaluated **a)** changes in self-reported knowledge and confidence, **b)** alignment of the final PA2Care training package with social care workers' values as well as their expectations and information needs, and **c)** whether the materials supported facilitators to deliver the training. Local facilitators delivered the PA2Care training in 22 workshops across Toronto, Calgary, and Thunder Bay with over 200 learners.

Social care workers who participated in the training were surveyed about self-reported knowledge and confidence at 4 time points (i.e., before, part-way

through, immediately after, and three months after). 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 (n=243) 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 both the e-learning module and the in-person workshop, social care workers reported significant increases in their knowledge and confidence across all topics.

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) a grief and grieving activity, which focused on helping social care workers handle their own emotions and loss when their clients die.

Social care workers reported these strategies helped them to feel better prepared to discuss clients' 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. One participant said,

*"I liked the rock exercise best for describing grief - because it gives a concrete metaphor to a very abstract feeling."*

Sharing experiences in a positive, interactive, and non-judgmental way during the in-person workshops 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. The

incorporation of guest speakers from local palliative outreach programs was also reported as a useful part of the training that provided valuable information on locally available resources.

Feedback from course facilitators was largely positive and 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 are the next steps?

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>.<sup>6</sup> The package and other resources are freely accessible to interested individuals, social care workers, and organizations working with people who are experiencing homelessness.

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

### To learn more about this work

Palliative Approach to Care for Workers who Support People who are Homeless in Canada



### To cite this work

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### References