

WHAT?

The Community Engagement Team (CET) is a unique, business-led outreach team that provides rapid-response support and intervention for non-violent crisis situations, as well as traditional street outreach services.

The CET focuses on street-front businesses on Yonge Street between Grosvenor Street and Richmond Street in Downtown Toronto.

WHY?

As in many municipalities throughout North America, Downtown Toronto has been experiencing several interrelated challenges, including a drug crisis, lack of affordable housing, insufficient funding for programs to assist people using drugs and struggling with homelessness, as well as a lack of adequate mental health supports. In 2018, Downtown Yonge launched the Community Engagement Team to provide an alternative to a police response for non-violent crisis situations where business staff are seldom trained to de-escalate people with complex needs. The team also tries to connect people who are street-involved with a variety of community and social services in the area.

THE STORY

In August 2018, Downtown Yonge BIA partnered with a local social service agency to create a street outreach team in the Yonge-Dundas neighbourhood. The priority of the CET is to respond to calls from street-front businesses for people in crisis in their stores. Traditional outreach programs do not typically work with businesses, and police calls are often unnecessary when the situation is not violent. The goal of the CET is to provide an alternative that uses a client-centred, trauma-informed approach to crisis intervention – by providing on-site counselling, referrals to services or access to other resources as needed. In 2020, the Downtown Yonge BIA brought the team in-house and the team began to expand to what it is today.

THE MODEL

Guided by the Downtown Yonge's Safe & Inclusive Streets Strategy, and informed by extensive research with street-front businesses, Downtown Yonge initially secured funding from the BIA Innovation Fund at the City of Toronto to pilot the program. In May 2019, Downtown Yonge BIA took over 100% of the funding for the CET, which has also been identified in the City Council-approved Downtown East Action Plan as a best-practice model. As of 2020, the CET is partially funded by the City of Toronto. One of the unique features of the CET is also its commitment to partnering with uniformed police officers for street outreach, with a shared goal of a safe and inclusive neighbourhood.

PARTNERING TO BREAK DOWN BARRIERS

Created as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Fall 2020, weekly partnered outreach sessions facilitated by the CET were launched with a variety of stakeholders, with a goal to further expand the CET's presence in the neighbourhood and foster community relationships. Stakeholders that the CET partners with on a regular basis include outreach workers, harm reduction workers, housing workers, transit special constables, neighbourhood community police officers and street nurses.

WHEN TO CALL THE CET?

Businesses are encouraged to call the CET when someone walks into the business exhibiting behaviour that staff feel goes beyond their capabilities. This could include:

- Looks distressed or unwell
- Seems disoriented or confused
- Exhibits delayed responses
- Acts in an unpredictable manner
- Paces continuously
- Exhibits body movements like wringing, contortions, shaking or clenching fists
- Needs access to services

HOW TO MEASURE IMPACT?

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, service offerings across the city were severely strained, resulting in less access to resources for clients. For the 12 months from January to December 2023, the CET recorded nearly 3,000 interactions with clients and made more than 300 referrals to community services and resources, while providing over 2100 direct client services on the street.

Building partnerships is a foundational piece to the CET program, and in 2023, the team participated in over 200 individual partnered outreach sessions with 8 different partners and stakeholders. Of these, 30% were held with the neighbourhood community police officers or transit special constables, with the goal of bettering relationships in the community.

