

WHAT?

The Community Engagement Team (CET) is a unique, business-led outreach team that provides responsive support and DYBIA 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 support for people using drugs and struggling with homelessness, as well as a lack of adequate mental health supports. In 2018, DYBIA launched the CET 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, DYBIA 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 DYBIA brought the team in-house.

THE MODEL

Guided by the DYBIA's *Safe & Inclusive Streets Strategy, BIA* (2017) 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.

WHEN TO CALL THE CET?

Businesses are encouraged to call the CET when someone walks into the business exhibiting behaviour that staff don't know how to manage. This could include someone who looks distressed or unwell, seems disoriented or confused, exhibits delayed responses, acts in an unpredictable manner, paces continuously, exhibits body movements like wringing, contortions and shaking or clenching fists or needs access to services.

PARTNERING TO BREAK DOWN BARRIERS

Between 2020 and 2024, the CET was partially funded by the City of Toronto's Downtown East Action Plan as a best practice outreach model. One of the unique features of the CET is its commitment to partnering with a variety of different teams including harm reduction workers, housing workers, neighbourhood community police officers, street nurses and transit special constables. This partnered outreach program kicked off in 2021 and is now in its fourth year with eight different outreach partners weekly.

HOW TO MEASURE IMPACT?

The CET undertook over 4,700 actions in the period from January 2024 to January 2025, including client engagements and encounters, community member engagements, crisis calls and overdose responses. Some 44% of those actions were part of our weekly partnered outreach program, working with mental health case management teams, transit special constables and harm reduction workers among others. The team provides wellness checks, on-site counselling and overdose response. The most common type of referral is to food programs (48%), followed by clothing programs (20%) and harm reduction services (18%). A further 14% are referrals to medical services. Thanks to its local focus, the CET is able to respond to calls in less than 10 minutes 73% of the time.

