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# Toronto now counting the deaths of homeless people

Full scope of problem is not known and data will help the city to help and house the vulnerable, health officials say.



A crowd gathers at the Toronto Homeless Memorial outside the Church of the Holy Trinity in downtown Toronto on Jan. 10. (KENYON WALLACE / TORONTO STAR) | [ORDER THIS PHOTO](#)

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Toronto's top public health official says the city's new program to track all homeless deaths will provide invaluable data to better assist and house vulnerable populations.

"The full scope of this problem has been unknown," said Dr. Barbara Yaffe, Toronto's Acting Medical Officer of Health, speaking at the Church of the Holy Trinity.

"What we needed was information from the many health and social service agencies which work closely with individuals experiencing homelessness or who are marginally housed."

The initiative, which began Jan. 1, was officially launched Tuesday with a press conference at the church, the site of the Toronto Homeless Memorial where an unofficial list is kept of more than 800 GTA homeless people who died since the mid-1980s.

The tracking system will collect information such as age, gender, unofficial cause of death and the location of the death, and whether the deceased is of indigenous heritage, said Yaffe. Names will be kept confidential.

Until now, the city has only tracked the deaths of people who lived in city-administered shelters.

The initiative comes 11 months after a [Star investigation](#) found that the province and most Ontario municipalities have no mandate to track homeless deaths comprehensively.

The investigation revealed that the Office of the Chief Coroner does not record all homeless deaths, nor is there any provincial registry to which hospitals, shelters and social agencies can report deaths that these are aware of.

Spurred by the Star's investigation, Toronto Councillor Paul Ainslie [tabled a motion](#) that passed at city hall in April asking city staff to gather data on the deaths of homeless people in an effort to tackle the problem.

Speaking to reporters Tuesday, Ainslie said the information is "the tool we need to begin influencing decision-making at all levels of government to bring purposeful policies and legislation to help the homeless and sick who live on the streets of Toronto.

"The collection of data is significant in effecting how governments work cohesively to address the issues and provide the very necessary supports required to prevent the unfortunate circumstances of our homeless dying on Toronto streets," Ainslie said.

The expanded program will not require additional money as public health staff "will absorb" the data-collection duties, Yaffe added.

She noted there were 30 shelter-related deaths in 2016, "but we know this is an underestimate, for sure."

Yaffe said that Toronto Public Health will work with around 200 partners, such as hospitals, community health centres and shelters, so "we will be able to more fully measure the scope and

scale of the toll that homelessness has had on our community and help to inform solutions to improve the health of our most vulnerable residents.”

Tuesday’s announcement was a long-time coming for Toronto street nurse Cathy Crowe, who has been calling for the tracking of the deaths of homeless people for more than 30 years.

In her remarks to reporters at the city’s news conference, Crowe noted that an inquest into the 1985 death of Drina Joubert, who froze to death in a truck in downtown Toronto, resulted in a jury recommendation that the provincial coroner track homeless deaths.

That recommendation was not followed.

“Others have died of overdose. Others have been murdered,” said Crowe, who is a distinguished visiting practitioner in Ryerson University’s politics and public administration department.

“I remember a man who was run over by a car in Yorkville. There are those who died alone in Allan Gardens. So the deaths we know are traumatic, they’re violent and they’re never natural,” she added.

“I am happy to say that, after all these years, we are finally going to get hard data on these atrocities.”

In the wake of the Star’s investigation, the Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario has called a public inquest into the deaths of two homeless Toronto men: Brad Chapman and Grant Faulkner.

Chapman collapsed in an alley near a hotel and later died.

Faulkner perished when his makeshift hut caught fire on a bitter winter night in a Scarborough field.

The coroner is aiming to begin the inquest by the end of 2017 and advocates hope recommendations will be made that will help prevent deaths of homeless people.

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