

Complaint Clinic

A folding table in a lobby people already pass through — a mall, a market, a mosque or church hall, a library, a community centre, a laundromat. A crew of two to four runs it for two to three hours and turns “what’s broken around here?” into fifty written cards by closing.

Kids welcome. Food shared. Nobody pays.

Nobody hosts this but the crew that shows up. There’s no membership behind the table and no head office to report to — you run it in the venue’s name or your own, by the venue’s own rules for tables, and nothing more is asked of the venue than that.

Why a clinic works

Everyone has a complaint. Almost nobody has ever been asked to put it somewhere it becomes a public, tracked card. Most people carry the broken streetlight, the bus that never comes, the playground with no shade, for years, saying it out loud to whoever’s next to them and to no one who writes it down. Two minutes at a table is about the lowest bar civic participation has — lower than a meeting, lower than a form online, lower than a phone call to 311 that puts you on hold. And where the same problem has already been solved by some other city, poorer or smaller than this one, the card can say so on the spot — a complaint that leaves the table already carrying a receipt.

Setting it up

Pick a venue with real foot traffic and ask through its own process — whatever that process is. A mall management office, a market coordinator, an imam or a church administrator, a branch librarian, a laundromat owner who knows everyone by name. The ask is small: a folding table, two to three hours, one evening or one Saturday afternoon.

Wherever the venue already has its own community group — a tenants’ association, a mosque’s youth committee, a settlement agency’s front desk, a library’s community outreach worker — run the clinic *with* them, not *past* them. Their permission opens the door; their presence at the table makes strangers trust the crew faster than any sign can; and their own volunteer sign-up sheet sits on the same table as the cards. That routing is the point of running it together, not a courtesy tacked on.

What to bring: a folding table, two chairs, signs, a stack of complaint cards, pens (more than you think you need — they walk off), a clipboard for anyone who’d rather stand and write, tape for the signs, a box or envelope for finished cards.

Sign templates, printed large enough to read from ten feet:

WHAT’S BROKEN AROUND HERE? Tell the city’s record — 2 minutes.

Kids welcome. Food shared. Nobody pays.

The shift

Two to four crew, two to three hours. Two roles, and any crew member can trade between them through the night:

The asker stands a few feet off the table and opens with one question, to anyone who slows down: “*What’s broken around here?*” Not a pitch, not an explanation — just the question. Most people answer before they’ve decided to stop walking.

The scribe sits at the table and offers to write for anyone who talks instead of writes — “*Want me to write it down for you?*” Writing for someone in their own language is not a translation of the service; it *is* the service. A card taken in Cantonese, Tagalog, Farsi, or anything else counts exactly as much as one taken in English.

The rhythm, every time: ask, write, read it back, they approve it, it goes in the box. Reading it back matters — it’s the moment the card becomes theirs on the record, not the crew’s paraphrase of them.

The crew brief

Say these four things out loud to the crew before the table opens, every shift, even a crew that’s run it before:

- **The leak test.** Before anything goes on a card, ask yourself: could this embarrass or endanger the person who wrote it, if it leaked? If yes, it doesn’t go on the card that way — find the version that doesn’t.
- **Institutions and things, never named private individuals.** A complaint about a landlord, a slumlord building, a negligent contractor by company name — fine. A complaint that names a private person — a neighbour, an ex, someone’s landlord by their own name rather than the building’s — gets rewritten with the person’s name off it, with the complainant, right at the table, before it goes in the box.
- **Any language counts fully.** A card taken in a language the crew barely speaks between them is not a lesser card. If there’s a bilingual neighbour on the crew tonight, that’s the shift’s real superpower — it roughly doubles how much of the room you can actually reach.
- **Never argue with a complaint.** The table is not a debate stage and the scribe is not a fact-checker. Write it down as said. If it’s wrong, it’s still what someone believes is broken, and that’s the record. Kids’ complaints count exactly the same way — “the splash pad smells” goes on the card as written.

The complaint card

One card per complaint. Keep it short enough to fill in two minutes standing up.

What’s broken: _____

Where *(cross-streets optional, never a full home address):*

How long has it been like this: _____

Optional — while you're here:

Vision: "Toronto in 2030 should ____" _____

Nomination *(a neighbourhood superhero nobody's noticed yet):*

Email *(optional — only if you want a receipt: once the online record is live, one note telling you what your complaint became. Never required. Never used for a newsletter. Under 18? Check with a grown-up before adding an email.):* _____

The card belongs to the person who filled it out. They hand it in themselves, or they keep it — either is fine, and nobody at the table pushes for the box over the pocket. Nobody who fills out a card is signed up for anything by doing so.

One form holds all three lines online, if the venue's group wants to submit the batch that way:



unitetolove.ca/harvest

Print it small as a QR code on the table if you can.

If the online form isn't live yet, the paper is the record — nothing is lost.

After the shift

Count the finished cards and count the shift itself as one conversation — crew plus venue, however many that was. That's the whole measurement: one shift, one headcount, N cards. No list of who stopped by the table, ever — not names, not a sign-in sheet, nothing that turns a two-minute conversation into a record of who showed up.

Submit the batch through the link, or photograph the nameless stack of cards and send the photos through the same link. Then hand the venue's community group their own volunteer sign-up sheet back, with thanks — it was theirs on the table the whole time, and whoever signed it is theirs to follow up with, not the crew's.

Translation

Translate this kit — a one-page translation is itself a civic act. Priority languages (per the multilingual program, pending census confirmation): Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi, Urdu, Tagalog, Spanish, Tamil, Italian, Portuguese, Korean, Vietnamese, Arabic, Farsi, Bengali. Send translations through the same link.

A free, open kit. Copy it, change it, translate it, make it yours. — uniteTOlove.ca