

Homelessness 2021/2022 Winter Pandemic Response

RECOMMENDATION

That the November 16, 2021, Citizen Services report CS00811, be received for information

Report Purpose

For Information only

Executive Committee is being provided information related to Administration's plans to address the issues and gaps in capacity and service delivery for people experiencing homelessness as a result of the continuing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic during the coming winter months.

Executive Summary

- In April 2021, City Council approved \$7.585 million of COVID-specific funds to be used on a one-time basis to expand shelter and services for people experiencing homelessness to address capacity issues related to public health restrictions.
- This one-time funding was allotted to October 31, 2021, given that forecasts anticipated that shelter capacity issues would be alleviated by the combined impacts of vaccines, relaxed public health measures and the opening of the new Herb Jamieson Centre shelter.
- Due to the fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Alberta, public health restrictions were put in place, limiting shelter capacity and available indoor options for people requiring a safe place.
- Agreements for City-funded day shelter projects expired on October 31, 2021. Administration is entering into new agreements for a two-month period, ending December 31, 2021, using funding and agreement forms that are already within the City Manager's delegated authority.
- Approximately \$1.9 million remains from the COVID-specific funds initially approved by City Council. City Council will have an opportunity to address the further use of these funds as part of the discussions about strategies for funding COVID-19 expenses for 2022 as part of the fall supplementary budget deliberations.

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REPORT

The fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic has strained the systems responsible for serving those experiencing homelessness. Current public health restrictions and increased case numbers limit the ability and capacity of organizations to deliver services. Restrictions on access to public and communal spaces where people gather further limit the number of available indoor options for people to seek respite as winter approaches.

At the same time, the number of people experiencing homelessness in Edmonton has increased as those who were precariously housed continue to be impacted by job loss, illness, and related disruptions to their household income. Homeward Trust manages the By-Names List, which serves as a real-time record of people experiencing chronic homelessness across Edmonton. Currently, more than 2,800 people in Edmonton are experiencing homelessness, which has more than doubled since the beginning of the pandemic. Of those on the list, up to 1,200 are expected to require shelter this winter because they are either currently staying in shelter or are unsheltered. The remainder on the list are provisionally accommodated and therefore not expected to require emergency shelter.

Administration has been working closely with the Government of Alberta, Alberta Health Services, Homeward Trust, Edmonton Police Service and a wide range of non-profit social agencies to respond to the impacts of the pandemic. Since March 2020, the City of Edmonton has provided funding and facilities to enable people to meet their basic needs. These activations have included utilizing the Expo Centre as a large-scale, day drop-in centre, allowing the use of Commonwealth Stadium and the Spectrum building by shelter operators, and funding the Tipinawâw 24/7 shelter at the Edmonton Convention Centre during the 2020/2021 winter season. Many of these efforts have been funded through the allocation of COVID-specific funds received from other orders of government.

On April 6/9/13, 2021, City Council approved \$7.585 million in one-time COVID-specific funds for costs related to providing City buildings and supports to shelter operations until October 31, 2021 (Attachment 1). This funding was largely used to expand hours and increase the capacity and service offerings by The Boyle Street Service Society, Bissell Centre, and The Mustard Seed Society to ensure that individuals had somewhere to go for essential services and connections to housing pathways during the day. Funding was also used to activate a mobile overdose response street team after the spring 2021 closure of one of three safe consumption sites.

On September 15, 2021, the Government of Alberta declared a state of public health emergency and implemented new public health measures which impacted access to certain businesses and public spaces. Since the declaration of a public health emergency, a two-metre distancing between beds has been reinstated in the overnight shelters in Edmonton.

As a result of these changes and with impending winter weather, people experiencing homelessness once again have fewer overnight and day shelter options and limited access to existing public spaces. Increased demand for service and the inability to fully address it is leading to increased encampments and social disorder across Edmonton, particularly in the central areas. Administration has reviewed the projected gap in services anticipated over the

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winter and identified measures that will be taken to ensure the safety of vulnerable Edmontonians this winter.

Projected Gaps in Shelter Services

Relative to the 2020/2021 winter season, there are fewer available overnight shelter and daytime spaces planned for this coming winter, despite an increase in the overall number of unsheltered people experiencing homelessness (Attachment 2).

Overall, the projected day shelter spaces available during the week is approximately 300 spaces and on the weekends approximately 194 - 224 spaces. As of October 1, 2021, 713 overnight beds were available in Edmonton, a 35 per cent reduction in overall shelter capacity compared to December 2020. Over the month of September 2021, the overall shelter system occupancy rate exceeded 82 per cent, and rates have increased through October. Approximately 1,200 people are expected to require day and overnight shelter services this winter, which means that without further mitigation measures a significant gap in services will remain.

2021/2022 Winter Pandemic Response - Additional Measures

Administration continues to work with the Government of Alberta, Homeward Trust, Alberta Health Services, and social service agencies to implement solutions to the capacity and service challenges caused by COVID-19 for people experiencing homelessness.

As a result of these discussions, several measures are expected to be put in place to help address the gaps identified above, including:

- South Side Shelters - The Government of Alberta has provided funding to The Mustard Seed Society to reopen three south side shelters until the end of November 2021. The Mustard Seed Society has requested this funding from the Government of Alberta be extended to operate them until the end of March 2022 but the request has not yet been approved.
- Spectrum Building Shelter - The Government of Alberta has approved funding for Hope Mission to continue operating the 24/7 shelter in the Spectrum building until the end of November 2021. The Government of Alberta is reviewing an additional funding request to continue operations until the end of March 2022. Administration has agreed to provide a lease extension to Hope Mission to operate the building as long as its funding will allow. This decision falls within Administration's delegation of authority and will require Administration to continue to be responsible for ancillary costs, such as building maintenance, which will be managed within existing operating budgets.
- Day Service Operations Funding - Administration is entering into new subsidy funding agreements with Bissell Centre, The Boyle Street Service Society, and The Mustard Seed Society to support day services operations at several locations until December 31, 2021, using existing operating budget and agreement forms that are within the City Manager's delegated authority. This is not Administration's typical practice with respect to agreements; however, due to evolving conditions created by the pandemic and the lack of access to City Council during the election period, action was required to ensure no gaps in

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service for Edmonton's most vulnerable populations as we transition into winter. As part of the budget discussions held later this year, Administration will request additional funds to support the continued operation of these facilities through the remainder of the winter.

- Homeward Trust - Homeward Trust will make approximately \$.9 million available to provide additional support and services to agencies through the winter, with details about funded services to be announced shortly.
- Winter Services Activation - Administration continues to plan and monitor dangerous health conditions created by extreme weather in the interests of keeping vulnerable Edmontonians safe and in accordance with City Policy C620 Supporting Vulnerable People During Extreme Weather. Administration is preparing for the potential activation of overflow emergency shelter space and overnight transportation support using City resources during periods of extreme cold. Costs related to extreme weather activations are dependent on the duration of the extreme weather event and the capacity at existing facilities and are accommodated within the City's existing operating budget.

If all the measures outlined above are implemented, the availability of dedicated day shelter space will be approximately 400 spaces. That represents a 56 per cent reduction in dedicated day services capacity as compared to December 2020, but is augmented by the availability of approximately 300 day sleep spaces offered at the Herb Jamieson Centre. The number of 24/7 and overnight shelter beds available will be just over 850 beds (a 10 per cent reduction in capacity as compared to December 2020).

In the event the provided spaces are not sufficient to meet demand, Administration has also approached the Government of Alberta with the offer of making additional shelter space at the Commonwealth Stadium available to one of the Government of Alberta's shelter operators.

These measures reflect the largest components of the winter emergency plan but they do not include all of the sector's efforts to support people experiencing homelessness. Administration will work with its partners to continue to adapt to changing conditions throughout winter as required to ensure vulnerable Edmontonians are safeguarded from the impacts of dangerous weather conditions and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Budget/Financial Implications

In April 2021, City Council approved \$7.585 million on a one-time basis for costs related to providing City buildings and support to shelter operations until October 31, 2021. Approximately \$1.9 million of the approved funding is expected to remain. On November 22, 2021, Administration will present the COVID-19 2022 Financial Impacts and Funding Strategy to City Council which will outline the City's overall COVID-19 financial impacts and strategy for 2022, including these unused funds. The cost of continued services described in this plan is projected to exceed the current funds available.

To prevent service gaps, Administration is entering into three new subsidy agreements with Bissell Centre, The Boyle Street Service Society, and The Mustard Seed Society to support day services operations at several locations until December 31, 2021, using existing operating budget and agreement forms that are within the City Manager's delegated authority. Continuation of

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these day services beyond December 31, 2021, will be subject to funding decisions made during the fall 2021 budget deliberations.

COMMUNITY INSIGHT

Administration worked with community stakeholders to identify possible shelter and service gaps for individuals experiencing homelessness in light of the ongoing pandemic and preparation for winter. Stakeholders include Homeward Trust and homeless-serving organizations, including shelters, day shelter providers, and those who deliver outreach services. These groups informed the actions and decisions made by Administration, which prioritizes City efforts to augment existing services to ensure every vulnerable person has access to a safe space to meet their basic needs.

GBA+

More than 2,800 individuals in Edmonton are experiencing homelessness. Despite making up only 5 per cent of Edmonton's overall population, nearly 60 per cent of these individuals are Indigenous. Of the more than 2,800 individuals experiencing homelessness, approximately 690 individuals are children - either dependents or independent youth. Approximately 42 per cent of homeless individuals identify as female.

In addition to the ongoing barriers individuals experiencing homelessness face in accessing public services like transportation, regular and appropriate health care, food, and shelter, the identities of those individuals intersect with other equity-seeking groups. The experience of racialized and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, two-spirit, and plus (LGBTQ2S+) community members experiencing homelessness is uniquely challenging in that they face additional discrimination and lack of appropriate support when trying to access existing shelter, housing, and social services systems. People with disabilities and significant health challenges are overrepresented among those experiencing homelessness -- being homeless also worsens health issues and itself is a cause of poor health. Many services available to people experiencing homelessness are not designed to meet the needs of people with significant and complex physical and mental health challenges, including substance use disorders.

As a funder of the homeless-service sector, the City endeavours to include contractual provisions in its agreements with agencies to best ensure the removal of barriers to access for vulnerable persons experiencing homelessness. Additionally, the City's Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards address some of the challenges discussed above. Administration will continue to examine best practices and work with entities that receive funding to pursue innovative solutions that reduce barriers for those who need support.

ATTACHMENTS

1. City Funded Day Services 2021
2. Projected Shelter Services Gaps