

SUPPORT FOR WOMEN'S SHELTERS

RECOMMENDATION

That the April 11, 2022, Community Services report CS00947, be received for information.

Report Purpose

Information only

Community and Public Services Committee is being provided information on the needs of women's shelters in Edmonton.

Previous Council/Committee Action

At the November 30/December 1/8/10/14/15/17 2021, City Council meeting, the following motion passed:

That Administration provide a report to Community and Public Services Committee on opportunities to provide direct support to Women's Shelters based in Edmonton through the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters to enable them to prioritize one-on-one support, safety planning, risk assessment and to reduce isolation created by the global pandemic.

Executive Summary

- Administration met with representatives from the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters and several shelters, who identified their priority program requirements related to COVID-19 and highlighted the need for ongoing support.
- Administration heard that the areas of programming needed to improve support for women and families accessing shelters include mental health supports, cultural supports, supports for those who are precariously housed due to immigration status and nursing resources. The representatives are asking for one-time City funding to support these efforts.
- The representatives identified opportunities that the City could take to strengthen its support of women's shelters in Edmonton. These opportunities include increasing awareness of capital funding opportunities, providing one time funding for the priority program needs, providing ongoing operational funding, supporting advocacy to other orders of government to support the work of women's shelters, writing letters of support, and ensuring appropriate connections and support are maintained.

SUPPORT FOR WOMEN'S SHELTERS

REPORT

City of Edmonton programming

Aligned with the Big City Move of Inclusive and Compassionate, the City of Edmonton is committed to preventing and alleviating the impacts of family violence. The City has a Gender-based Violence and Sexual Assault Prevention Council Initiative and is a member of the UN Women Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls Initiative. The City's work also includes the Seniors Protection Partnership, participation in the Community Initiatives Against Family Violence partnership, and providing staffing resources such as community social workers. Another example of this work is the City's Domestic Abuse High-risk Team, a specialized team of social workers who work with the Edmonton Police Service to support survivors who have reported domestic violence with risk assessments, safety planning, court support and other immediate and long-term needs. Funding is also provided to preventive programs that support families at risk of family violence through the Family and Community Support Services, such as parenting programs, the distress line, youth public education and counseling services.

Community-based programming

In Edmonton, five organizations offer sheltering services to women and their children and seniors seeking escape from family violence. These organizations are SAGE, Edmonton Women's Shelter, Catholic Social Services, WINGS of Providence and the Zakat Foundation.

Combined, the organizations offer a total of 55 bedrooms for short-term emergency shelter, 35 apartments for longer-term stays and seven beds for victims of elder abuse. There is not sufficient capacity to meet the needs of those fleeing violence and shelters reported an increased demand as pandemic restrictions are lifted.

Listening and learning from community providers

In February, Administration met with the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters and leaders from the five organizations offering sheltering services to discuss areas where the City might support the important work they are doing. During these conversations, Administration heard that the COVID-19 pandemic affected the shelters' services in many critical ways including:

- in-person programming constraints due to public health measures
- reduced shelter capacity due to physical distancing requirements and outbreaks
- financial shortfalls due to reduced fundraising ability
- increased staff turnover

Current funding model

The Government of Alberta provided COVID-19 funding to many shelters but the pandemic negatively impacted the fundraising ability of many organizations to provide supplementary programs and services. This further impacted an already strained system.

SUPPORT FOR WOMEN'S SHELTERS

The province's funding model for women's shelters is based on the number of beds/apartments per shelter. The operators of the women's shelters indicate that this is not sufficient to cover the costs. Shelters rely heavily on grants, fundraising and donations to make up the difference between what they receive from the government and the actual costs associated with running the shelter and offering the services. The shelter representatives explained that client programs and services deemed necessary, such as nursing services, mental health support, cultural supports, transportation, and food services are not provided through the provincial funding but are funded through fundraising efforts.

Requests to the City of Edmonton

Shelters provide risk assessment and safety planning as part of their regular support, which gives clients increased knowledge and connections to reach out to when they need help. This enables those experiencing ongoing violence to have confidence to get the help they need when they need it, which includes calling the police. Due to a confluence of major stressors (examples include the pandemic, geopolitical conflict and further identification of unmarked graves), shelter representatives anticipate an increased need for service.

The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters recommended that the needs of women fleeing violence be prioritized within current and future plans to end homelessness. That would include more opportunities for women's shelters to be part of the conversation to identify the needs and priorities, the ability to access funding to increase the number of shelter spaces for women and children and/or upgrade current facilities.

Discussions with the shelter representatives went beyond the needs as a result of the pandemic and identified opportunities for the City of Edmonton to strengthen the support to women's shelters, including:

- ensuring City grant program information for rehabilitation and building shelter space and other funding opportunities is shared
- advocating to other orders of government to support identified needs of women's shelters and those fleeing abuse in the context of the City's work on housing and homelessness
- providing letters of support to other orders of government when funding opportunities are available
- consideration of ongoing operational funding
- enhancing the relationship between the Women's Shelters and the City of Edmonton is maintained and appropriate connections and support are provided

The shelter representatives spoke of many challenges they face in ensuring programs and services are available to the people they serve. With the uncertainty of the ongoing effects of COVID-19 and the economic climate, raising funds will be unpredictable. The shelter representatives indicated that one-time funding would be best used to alleviate financial pressures for their current priority program areas.

SUPPORT FOR WOMEN'S SHELTERS

The shelter representatives will continue to work collaboratively with the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters to deal with the issues identified. Their plan is to expand the use of community partners to provide the extra support and expertise needed, for example the YWCA, to address the areas of concern.

Budget/Financial Implications

Currently, there is no City funding provided to the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters or the shelters themselves. The shelter representatives have requested a total of \$880,000 one-time funding that will support them for 12 months, for the following:

Mental health supports (services from community partners)	\$120,000
Cultural support (services from community partners)	\$200,000
Support for those who are precariously housed due to immigration status	\$150,000
Nursing resources	\$410,000
Total	\$880,000

City Council could consider providing the requested one-time funding from the:

- Edmonton Police Service funding held within Financial Strategies
- COVID-19 funds held within the appropriated Financial Stabilization Reserve
- Financial Stabilization Reserve

The distribution of the funding, accountability and reporting requirements would need to be determined and would be included in a funding agreement if funding is approved by City Council.

COMMUNITY INSIGHT

Administration worked with the Alberta Council of Women's Shelter and the local women's shelters to understand the resource needs and potential opportunities where the City of Edmonton can support the sector.

GBA+

A survey completed in 2019 by the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services found 66 per cent of Indigenous people, 77 per cent of 2SLGBTQ+ (two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and plus other identities) people and 49 per cent of people with disabilities in Alberta have experienced some form of sexual abuse or assault. Statistics Canada also found that, in Canada, a woman is killed by a current or former intimate partner violence every six days and that Alberta has the third highest rate of intimate partner violence and elder abuse in Canada.

SUPPORT FOR WOMEN'S SHELTERS

Anecdotal evidence provided by the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters suggests that when COVID-19 restrictions and isolation orders were in effect, women were often home with their abusers. Stay-at-home rules allowed abusive partners to control their actions, isolating them from family, friends and social support, which is also a common abuse tactic.

There are various reasons that prevent women from reaching out to shelters for support, including limited knowledge of the supports available, limited understanding of personal freedom, language barriers, and various forms of trauma. At present, shelter spaces are prioritized for women with children; this means that a single woman or those who identify as a single transgender woman have limited shelter options when leaving an abusive relationship. For women who have recently arrived in Edmonton and those with precarious status, they may not be aware of resources or are unable to access them due to language barriers. For similar reasons, some women do not report incidents for fear of retaliation, unaware of how to manage and/deal with systems and their rights. Some have experienced oppression with systems, intergenerational trauma experience and additional levels of marginalization.

Support for women and their families with precarious status is a high need in the shelter system. The City of Edmonton, through Policy C606 Access to Municipal Services Without Fear, has recognized the need to ensure that all people have the ability to access services, regardless of their documentation, immigration or citizen status.