

## HOMELESSNESS AND ENCAMPMENT RESPONSE STRATEGY

### RECOMMENDATION

1. That the April 25, 2022, Community Services report CS01225, be received for information.
2. That Attachment 3 of the April 25, 2022, Community Services report CS01225 remain private pursuant to sections 24 (advice from officials) and 27 (privileged information) of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*.

### Report Purpose

#### Information only

Council is being informed of the current homelessness and encampment situation in Edmonton and Administration's planned response.

### Executive Summary

- The number of Edmontonians experiencing homelessness doubled during the pandemic, and funding for pandemic-related temporary shelter spaces and other supports is concluding.
- In partnership with other organizations in the homeless-serving sector, the City of Edmonton has developed a robust encampment approach for summer 2022 which builds on the approach from 2021 and prioritizes outreach and support as pathways to permanent housing.
- As addressing encampments effectively over the long-term requires persistence, consistency and increased access to housing affordable to those experiencing homelessness and/or at risk of experiencing homelessness, Administration will continue to work with its partners to improve and enhance Edmonton's overall response to unsheltered homelessness.
- The Homelessness and Encampment Response Strategy supports the City's efforts to enhance community safety as part of the City's public safety service outcome of ensuring that Edmontonians are safe and secure in our community, as well as the City's social support outcome of ensuring Edmontonians have what they need to succeed.
- Affordable housing and homelessness are identified as corporate priorities for 2022 within the priority area of community safety and well-being.

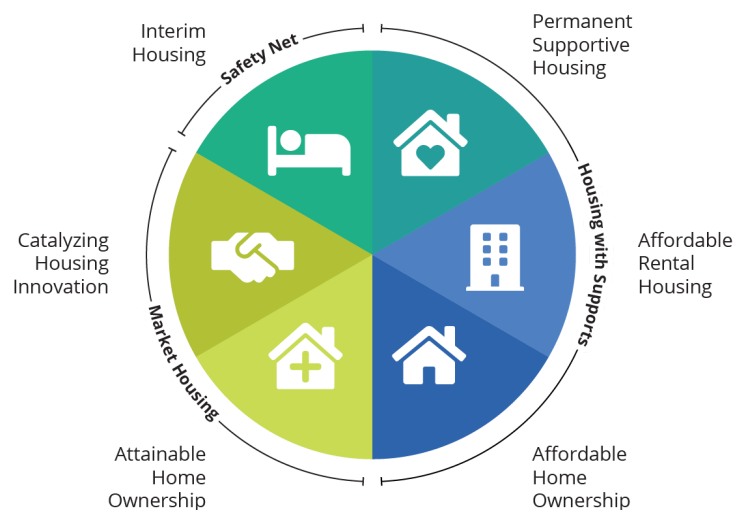
# Homelessness and Encampment Response Strategy

- Different approaches to encampments and homelessness involve different legal considerations as outlined in Attachment 3 in-private legal advice.

## REPORT

The City Plan’s Big City Move ‘Inclusive and Compassionate’ emphasizes the importance of “city-making that supports human-centred design where people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities can not only survive, but thrive.” Affordable housing and homelessness are identified as corporate priorities for 2022 within the focus area of community safety and well-being.

To support all Edmontonians in accessing safe housing, the City can set policy and intervene in all types of housing as shown below:



This report describes how the City, in collaboration with community partners and other orders of government, responds to and supports individuals living in encampments as they transition to more permanent housing options (market housing or housing with supports).

### Background to current encampment challenges

The number of people sleeping outside - often in temporary shelters or encampments - has grown significantly in recent years. In 2021, there were over 6,200 encampment-related requests for service to 311, which represents a substantial increase from the 790 encampment-related inquiries in 2016. Based on recent inquiry volumes, this trend is expected to continue in 2022.

While a number of factors contribute to the increase in reported encampments, a major underlying cause of the current rise in encampments is significant growth in the number of people experiencing homelessness. The number of people falling into homelessness doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic — this increase has widened gaps in accessing housing supports, mental health and addictions services. Another factor contributing to increased levels of unsheltered homelessness include the need for shelter resources that address increasingly complex needs of individuals accessing services. Emergency shelters are more challenged to meet the needs of people experiencing concurrent or severe mental health, physical health

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and/or substance use disorders (the May 8, 2019, Interim Housing report CR\_6674 provides more information).

The City responds to encampments on public land with its Encampment Response Team, which partners with agencies including Homeward Trust, Boyle Street Community Services, Bissell Centre, and Edmonton Police Service (EPS). Throughout the year, the team is notified of encampment sites through 311 complaints as well as scouting by street outreach teams, who assist individuals sleeping unsheltered to find supports and to connect them to housing. For all encampments, City clean-up crews are assigned to clean up encampments once they are closed to reduce any further impacts including risks to public safety.

As encampments have increased in size and number, the City's encampment response has also evolved. Once a complaint is made, enforcement officers investigate the location as quickly as possible. The officers use a standardized risk assessment tool to assign a risk level to the site, either low or high, which determines the nature of the ensuing response.

In 2021, in response to increased demands and growth of encampments outside the river valley, the City of Edmonton and EPS entered into a formal partnership to create the High Risk Encampment Team. Through the Team, EPS members and City Peace Officers work together to conduct initial investigations and risk assessments of encampments, addressing sites with high health and safety risks. The High Risk Encampment Team works to prevent the establishment of hazardous large-scale encampments and addresses elevated stakeholder concerns.

Encampments assessed as high risk to individuals or the surrounding community are closed in a timely manner and individuals are provided clear and consistent connections to shelter options.

Low-risk sites are addressed by the Encampment Response Team, which is a second team that prioritizes housing-focused outreach efforts. They connect encampment residents to bridge housing or other housing options prior to the camp closure date. Administration responds to the site of all closed encampments for cleaning and any required remediation.

### Summer 2022 Encampment Response

Administration and community partners expect to see continued growth in the number of encampments and unsheltered homeless in Edmonton this summer. In addition to the contributing factors listed above, emergency shelter capacity is expected to be constrained as the temporary emergency shelter space funded by the Government of Alberta to accommodate public health orders comes to an end.

Administration is expecting there will be 634 available emergency shelter beds by June, a 44 per cent decrease from the 1,135 beds in place earlier this year as part of pandemic-related temporary shelter space funded by the Government of Alberta. According to emergency shelter occupancy statistics released by the Government of Alberta, during the months of April to October 2021, the average number of people accessing emergency shelter each night was 715, ranging from 595 to 867 on any given night. The number of funded shelter beds from Summer 2021 to Summer 2022 remains consistent overall. However, the By Name List shows a 29 per cent increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness during the same period (630 person increase between June 2021 to March 2022). As a result of these changes, Administration

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believes it is possible to see a rise in the overall number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness this summer due to shelters being at capacity.

### Encampment Response Team

Administration is working to augment its encampment response in response to this potential increase in projected demand. In 2022, the staffing resources dedicated to support individuals in encampments will include:

- Nine street outreach workers from Boyle Street Community Services funded by the City;
- Nine housing workers from Boyle Street and Bissell Centre funded by Homeward Trust;
- Six City Park Rangers;
- Six Edmonton Police Service members; and
- A dedicated encampment clean-up team of 14 employees (this reduces to six during the winter) to support clean-up throughout the city.
- A special Downtown Waste Collection Team (14 employees) is also available to support encampment clean-up in the downtown area as needed.

Administration is also working with the partner outreach teams to confirm plans to fund additional housing and outreach staff. A comprehensive engagement process is also underway to determine the scope and focus of a new Indigenous-led outreach team, which is expected to begin services later this year. City Parks Rangers will be redeployed from other duties to ensure there is sufficient staff coverage throughout the summer.

The Government of Alberta's Coordinated Community Response to Homelessness (CCRH) Task Force was established to find innovative ways to end recurring homelessness in Alberta and find long-term solutions. The CCRH Task Force has established multiple working groups to plan pilot projects to trial new approaches to addressing homelessness. Administration is involved in a work group focused on encampments in Chinatown along with representatives from EPS, Edmonton Fire Rescue Services, Homeward Trust, Boyle McCauley Health Centre, Boyle Street Community Services and Bissell Centre. New strategies are being discussed as potential pilots to prevent the establishment of encampments, provide those living in encampments with connection to shelter or housing, and provide support to the surrounding community.

### Day services and other basic need supports

To help people experiencing unsheltered homelessness meet their basic needs for food and hygiene, safety, and access connections to housing, the City of Edmonton is making investments in the following additional services:

- Expanded day shelter services and hours of operation at Bissell Centre (The \$1.8 million required for this was approved at the April 4, 2022, City Council meeting, report CS01182);
- Additional mobile drug poisoning response teams in Downtown and Chinatown, through Boyle Street Community Services and Boyle McCauley Health Centre; and
- Increased access to public washrooms throughout Edmonton.

The City's efforts in supporting people experiencing homelessness are in tandem with work being done by the Government of Alberta, Homeward Trust and a wide range of non-profit social

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agencies. There are a dozen agencies across the City that run day service programs for individuals and families, ensuring connection to critical resources such as housing, and food, as well as supporting the development of skills in order for people to have sustainable livelihoods.

Since the pandemic, shelters have changed from being open for only overnights to operating 24/7, which creates additional spaces for people to access during the day. There has also been a growth in the range of outreach teams that support vulnerable Edmontonians. Mutual aid groups play a role in ensuring access to water, food, harm reduction supplies, and drug poisoning response (Please refer to Attachment 1- Homelessness Supports in Edmonton for a high-level picture of all the services available to meet the needs of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness).

### Extreme Weather Response

Unsheltered Edmontonians face additional risks to their health and safety during periods of extreme weather.

The City of Edmonton's primary role during extreme weather events is to support existing agencies and community-wide responses as needs exceed available capacity. A primary focus during summer months is ensuring that vulnerable Edmontonians are hydrated and can use City facilities to get out of direct heat. Peace Officers carry water bottles, and bottled water is available at major City facilities and public libraries. Administration is also building on its 2021 pilot program that transformed five fire hydrants into water bottle-filling stations. This summer, an additional ten water bottle-filling stations will be available, meaning there will be 15 total stations. The water stations will be placed to fill identified gaps in water supply, where vulnerable residents congregate, or where a lengthy commute is required to find potable water. This program will consult with the City's Summer mobile washroom program to align free public services where possible.

### Bridge Housing

Sustainable encampment resolution requires providing access to housing options, including the timely availability of bridge housing spaces. At the February 22/24, 2022, City Council meeting, Council approved \$4.8 million in funding to extend a number of the bridge housing sites to December 31, 2022 (Agenda Item 8.2). These sites were relying on temporary federal pandemic-related funding. The additional funding does not cover the Northlands bridge housing (at the former jockey dorms), which receives ongoing provincial funding and will also be operating through the summer.

Bridge housing is a short-term, continuous stay accommodation that provides a stable experience that helps transition people from homelessness into permanent housing. Currently there are 197 bridge housing units available across four sites. The number of bridge housing spaces will reduce as some sites transition to supportive housing units, however the majority will be available to help ease the transition period until the 210 new permanent supportive housing units are expected to be ready for residents in June 2022. Transitions from bridge housing into these permanent supportive housing units will depend on the best fit for clients and in alignment

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with their individual housing plans. In addition, these units will continue to provide the encampment outreach team with supportive options as they work with unsheltered individuals.

### Managed or Sanctioned Encampments

An additional tactic that has been previously considered is the use of managed or sanctioned encampments, which are a range of endorsements of otherwise illegal encampments. These encampments are best understood as an intentional attempt to provide an interim solution to address the immediate conditions of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Scenarios could include:

- Encampments legally permitted in a single or multiple designated locations through bylaw change or temporary permit on public land or privately owned property;
- Established rules that govern the size, location, and duration of encampments;
- A public agency or non-profit organization contracted to manage the encampment(s);
- Infrastructure and public services—which may include laundry and potable water, common spaces for eating and meeting, lockers for storing belongings (including on a longer-term basis), meal services and food donations, job training programs, access to mail and voice mail services—provided by the municipality and/or non-profit organizations and volunteers; and/or
- Additional on-site case management, including assistance applying for transitional or permanent housing and other benefits, appealing denials, and managing funds.

In 2019, Administration and Homeward Trust retained OrgCode Consulting Inc. to make recommendations around encampments and the ensuing report strongly advised against tent-based sanctioned encampment areas. Additionally, Administration conducted a jurisdictional review that confirmed that there is little evidence to suggest sanctioning homeless encampments would keep people from camping in other areas, significantly improve service delivery to individuals who are sleeping unsheltered, or provide sustainable and safe options for groups of vulnerable people with complex needs. The City of Vancouver, which has considerable experience providing both emergency shelter and dealing with large encampments, advised their Council against pursuing a sanctioned encampment, noting that “it is not possible for us to manage an uncontrolled outdoor site safely and effectively...The costs are significant, they are equal to or greater than indoor shelters on per square foot basis.”<sup>1</sup> In cities that have tried to minimize costs while managing unsheltered sleeping through sanctioned encampments, generally run into difficulty managing: safety risks (including inclement weather, conflict and predatory behaviour), sanitation (garbage removal, portable toilets, and litter cleanup), food provision, and challenges with neighbours due to spillover effects from the encampment. As a result of these experiences and others, Administration does not recommend pursuing a sanctioned encampment at this time.

### **Future Improvements to the Unsheltered Homelessness/Encampment Response**

Based on experience and data gathering, there is widespread understanding in the homeless-serving sector that an encampment approach and the delivery of emergency shelter

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<sup>1</sup> <https://biv.com/article/2020/09/vancouver-city-staff-reject-sanctioned-homeless-camps>

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needs to continually evolve to become more effective and address unmet needs to ensure housing outcomes can be met. Administration is also developing a number of key improvements to enhance its response over the short, medium and long-term.

Administration recently completed a comprehensive evaluation of the 2021 encampment response with the results as follows:

- The approach utilized in 2021 succeeded in enhancing collaboration between all parties and in preventing encampments from becoming large-scale;
- Nonetheless, the efforts of the High Risk Encampment Team often simply displaced encampment occupants. The displacement from the large sites led to the creation of more small-scale encampments and higher clean-up costs;
- Encampment closures that frequently displace individuals could impede the goal of providing services and housing by reducing trust and making people less likely to engage with services;
- Encampment response teams are not adequately resourced to address the volume of encampments or the complexity of health and security challenges encampment residents face; and
- There are challenges with data management and coordination that impact assessment of whether outcomes are being met.

In alignment with the evaluation findings, as well as a Community Safety and Well-being Strategy that will be presented to Council in May 2022, the following actions for continuous improvement are already being undertaken by Administration using existing resources:

- Human-centred engagement with encampment residents that will result in data and journey maps on the experience of living unsheltered;
- Human-centred engagement with residents of neighbourhoods and businesses in order to design additional service improvement prototypes;
- Identification of improvements to the matrix used to assess risk at the encampment site. In addition to site risk, a revised matrix could reflect risks to the individuals in encampments, which can include variables such as age, prior use of emergency services, and housing planning status; and
- Developing data sharing and standardization processes which could include a data-sharing memorandum of understanding with partner organizations.

In addition to these actions, Administration will be advancing further recommended changes to enhance the City's response to unsheltered homelessness for City Council's consideration next month (through the Community Safety and Wellbeing strategy report) and through the 2023-2026 budget process. These actions require further investment but in return will have transformational impacts on the overall response to unsheltered homelessness in our city.

- Improving coordination of multi-disciplinary efforts; which if funded could include an improved dispatch model and additional supports for neighbourhoods, street outreach, as well as the incorporation of physical and mental health professionals to support engagement and transitions to housing; and

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- Funding for an Indigenous-led shelter that would provide additional shelter capacity in a manner that aligns with the City of Edmonton's Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards, and deliver culturally appropriate services for the sixty percent of people experiencing homelessness in Edmonton, who identify as Indigenous;
- Continuing to encourage the adoption of minimum shelter standards to better equip shelters with the tools they need to better meet the needs of people who are currently unsheltered; and
- A more comprehensive and timely approach to planning for Winter Emergency shelter this winter and as long as the number of people experiencing homelessness in Edmonton stays high. The City's Extreme Weather Policy requires additional emergency shelter space during extreme weather conditions when shelter occupancy exceeds 90 per cent, however, it is challenging to arrange on short notice, as shelter operators have limited abilities to increase capacity in existing facilities and it is difficult to activate a temporary overnight shelter to respond to changing weather patterns.

### Additional City Housing Activities

#### Supportive Housing

Supportive housing assists people with high needs related to physical or mental health, developmental disabilities or substance use, through the provision of onsite support services. People in supportive housing pay rent and have a lease.

The City of Edmonton's Affordable Housing Investment Plan (AHIP, 2019-2022) highlights the creation of 600 units of supportive housing and 2,500 affordable housing units by the end of 2022, with the total of supportive housing units reaching 900 by the end of 2024. Administration looks to leverage federal and provincial funding by partnering with the city's non-market housing sector organizations to develop more supportive housing.

As of April 2022, 507 units of supportive housing have been supported by the City and are expected to be completed by the end of 2022. The City has been able to achieve this with support from and leveraging programs like the Government of Alberta's Block Funding (\$7.5 million) and Municipal Stimulus Program (\$8.2 million) and Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation's Rapid Housing Initiative program in 2020 (\$32.3 million) and 2021 (\$25.8 million). The Government of Canada's Budget 2022 announced \$1.5 billion to extend the Rapid Housing Initiative program for another two years to create at least 6,000 new affordable housing units starting 2022/2023, which Administration seeks to apply for and leverage to meet Edmonton's needs.

Administration continues to search for and acquire land assets to produce shovel-ready projects and is currently offering real estate listings at below-market costs (under Council Policy C437A - City Land Assets for Non-Profit Affordable Housing) through a competitive process for the purpose of the development of affordable and supportive housing that will further meet the unit goals listed above.



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## Indigenous-led Affordable Housing

Administration is currently working with an advisory committee formed of representatives from key Indigenous organizations to draft an Indigenous-led Affordable Housing Strategy. A dedicated funding stream will be required to help Indigenous organizations that want to become more involved in affordable housing overcome barriers to participation. The City has initiated conversations with the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation to understand how the strategy can align with the recent budget announcement of \$300 million over five years, starting in 2022-23 of the Federal Urban, Rural, and Northern Indigenous Housing Strategy.

## Affordable Housing

Emergency shelters, day services and encampment response strategies referred to in the above housing diagram as “safety net” housing, are crucial short-term tools for addressing social disorder related to homelessness. A longer-term strategy involves increasing safe, adequate and affordable housing with appropriate supports in all areas of the city (referred to as “affordable rental housing” in the diagram). This work is crucial for preventing housing insecurity and transitioning people out of homelessness.

The City recently completed a fourth round of Affordable Housing Investment Plan grant program intake on April 13, 2022, and Administration will complete its evaluation in the next few weeks with funding recommendations set for fall 2022. A fifth round of applications is set to open in summer 2022 subject to budget availability. To date the City has approved or committed to a total of 2,304 units towards its goal of 2,500 units of affordable housing.

The City is currently on track to meet its five-year goal of creating 2,500 new units of affordable housing by this year, including 600 supportive housing units. To ensure the City and its partners are able to continue to work collectively to end poverty and homelessness in Edmonton, Administration is also preparing a new four-year Affordable Housing Investment Plan to create and reach new targets over the 2023-2026 budget cycle. This new investment plan will be before Council in June. For more information on additional initiatives supporting the achievement of these goals, please refer to Attachment 2.

## **Legal Implications**

Different approaches on homelessness and encampments raise different legal issues and considerations. Depending on the approach taken, legal considerations will need to be understood. The Legal Services Branch has reviewed this report and has included Attachment 3, discussing the applicable legal considerations. This Attachment is recommended to be considered in-private as it provides privileged legal advice.

## **COMMUNITY INSIGHT**

Administration works with community stakeholders to identify possible shelter and service gaps for individuals experiencing homelessness. Stakeholders include Homeward Trust and homeless-serving organizations, including shelters, day shelter providers, and those who deliver outreach services. These groups inform the actions and decisions made by Administration, which

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prioritizes City efforts to augment existing services to ensure every Edmontonian has access to a safe space to meet their basic needs.

### GBA+

More than 2,800 individuals in Edmonton are currently experiencing homelessness. Despite making up only 5 per cent of Edmonton's overall population, over 60 per cent of these individuals are Indigenous. Of the 2,800+ individuals experiencing homelessness, approximately 45 per cent 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 two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and plus (2SLGBTQ+) 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 service 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 and an elevated risk of death. 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-serving 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.

### ATTACHMENTS

1. Homelessness Supports in Edmonton
2. Edmonton's Housing Spectrum - Ongoing Work
3. Confidential Legal Advice (Private)