

ADMINISTRATION'S RESPONSE TO THE CITY'S RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS AUDIT REPORT

RECOMMENDATION

That the June 17, 2022 Community Services report, CS01280, be received for information.

Report Purpose

Information only.

Council is being informed of Administration's Response to the City's Response to Homelessness Audit Report.

Executive Summary

- In 2022, the Office of the City Auditor undertook its audit with the goal of determining if the City of Edmonton coordinates its internal homelessness activities to achieve its intended outcomes.
- The Auditor identified a number of key findings and three recommendations:
 1. Develop a corporate-wide homelessness plan that defines the strategy and integrates and coordinates the City of Edmonton's organizational response to homelessness.
 2. Assign accountability for the delivery of the corporate-wide plan and its activities.
 3. Develop performance measures and undertake an evaluation into whether the corporate-wide plan is achieving the desired results.
- Administration accepts all of the recommendations and has plans in place to address the recommendations raised by the Office of the City Auditor by the end of 2023.

REPORT

Background

Although there has long been people experiencing poverty or precarious housing in Canada, homelessness as a large-scale social problem is a relatively recent phenomenon, starting in

Administration's Response to the City's Response to Homelessness Audit Report

the 1980s. According to the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness,¹ homelessness is caused by the interplay or cumulative impact of a number of different factors, including:

- Structural factors, like economic conditions, the experience of discrimination, lack of access to affordable housing and health supports. For example, while Indigenous people make up 5 per cent of the overall population in Edmonton, they represent 62 per cent of the population experiencing homelessness. This is due in large part to the intergenerational trauma of colonial history and discrimination against Indigenous people;
- System failures, such as inadequate discharge planning for people leaving hospitals, corrections, mental health and addictions facilities, difficult transitions out of the child welfare system, as well as a lack of support for immigrants and refugees; and/or
- Individual factors, including the experience of personal crises (job loss, family break-up) or traumatic events (including adverse childhood events), as well as mental and physical health conditions, including the presence of a disability.

In Canada, provincial and federal governments control the most significant housing-related policy levers. Historically, municipalities have tended to play a limited role, due largely to the boundaries of their authority and resources. However, cities are impacted by homelessness and are uniquely positioned to describe local needs.

In 1999, the federal government established the first national funding stream directed to cities, designed to foster partnerships and investment that contribute to the alleviation of homelessness. In 2008, Alberta became the first province to adopt a provincial Plan to End Homelessness, which also demonstrated a commitment to local leadership and support for local expertise and efforts. Since then, both governments' funding streams associated with homelessness have required the appointment of a designated local entity to receive the funds and lead efforts to align homeless-serving systems and implement solutions at the municipal level.

In Edmonton, all three orders of government have assigned this system coordination role to Homeward Trust Edmonton. Administration funds Homeward Trust in support of their role as a system planner and steward of the plan to end homelessness. Administration frequently liaises with Homeward Trust to help coordinate and convene partners in the sector for enhanced and improved service delivery. Homeward Trust serves as an aggregator of public funds and stewards implementation of A Place to Call Home: Edmonton's Updated Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness. The Updated Plan was endorsed by Edmonton City Council in 2017 (CR_4523). A Place to Call Home identified 11 actions necessary for achieving its three goals of:

1. Ending chronic and episodic homelessness;
2. Preventing future homelessness; and
3. Providing an integrated systems response.

¹ <https://www.homelesshub.ca/about-homelessness/homelessness-101/causes-homelessness>

Administration's Response to the City's Response to Homelessness Audit Report

The City of Edmonton's role in homelessness has been relatively narrowly focused on the following activities, which are designed to respond to the impact of homelessness on City operations and support the goals of the Updated Plan:

- **Leadership on supportive housing** - One of the 11 key actions from A Place to Call Home centered on the need to address a significant gap of 916 units in the supply of supportive housing, required to address the complex needs of those experiencing chronic homelessness in our city. Edmonton City Council directed Administration in 2018 to prioritize the creation of more supportive housing as its top affordable housing investment priority.
- **Funder** - In support of Homeward Trust Edmonton as the steward of the Plan (and previous plans), an annual subsidy of \$1.2 million has been provided to Homeward Trust by the City of Edmonton since the early 2000s.
- **Encampment response** - In its role as steward of public lands, the City has also worked to evolve its operational responses to unsheltered homelessness and encampments on public lands to align with A Place to Call Home principles, goals and outcomes, including the establishment of a multidisciplinary Encampment Response Team, which provides connections to housing and services for people who are unsheltered or living in encampments.
- **Extreme weather response** - In response to the critical safety and health hazards posed by extreme weather conditions for those who are unsheltered or living in encampments, the City developed and implemented a new City Policy (C620, adopted in 2019) to support the existing homeless-serving system with additional resources for crisis response during extreme weather, such as providing temporary shelter and transportation options to vulnerable Edmontonians.

COVID-19 and the City's Shifting Response

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased the number of people falling into homelessness, and as of May 16, 2022, there were 2,800 individuals experiencing homelessness in Edmonton, approximately double the number from December 2019.

The programs and services that support people experiencing homelessness have faced overwhelming demand. Service providers have experienced significant pressure, have been strained to be able to meet the increased need during a period of turmoil and adapting to changing public health restrictions. At the same time, Edmonton has also been experiencing an unprecedented and deadly drug poisoning crisis, which has also seriously impacted vulnerable populations and front-line service providers.

Since March 2020, all levels of government have supported an expansion of services to vulnerable Edmontonians as part of a pandemic crisis response.

Administration's Response to the City's Response to Homelessness Audit Report

The provincial government temporarily funded expanded emergency shelter spaces, including 1,135 shelter beds this past winter in response to a number of Public Health Orders, such as the requirement for physical distancing.

Federal funding was provided to Homeward Trust for the purpose of further supporting the homeless-serving sector's response. Some of this funding was used to create bridge housing, which at its peak included 350 hotel rooms used for the purpose of helping folks isolate and connecting them to housing.

During the pandemic, the City of Edmonton also adopted a more active and direct role in the homelessness crisis response. This included:

- Standing up the Edmonton Expo Centre as a day shelter and isolation facility serving hundreds of vulnerable Edmontonians every day.
- Allowing the use of City-owned buildings for use as temporary emergency shelters or day service centres. Facilities that have been used since March 2020 include the Central Lions Seniors Centre, the Kinsmen Recreation Centre, Commonwealth Stadium, the Spectrum building at Exhibition Lands and the Edmonton Convention Centre.
- Providing funding for programs and services that have not typically been funded by the City, in order to respond to emerging and pressing needs, such as:
 - 24/7 temporary shelters, the largest of which was Tipinawaw at Edmonton Convention Centre, which offered 300 spaces from November 2020 until April 2021 — created in response to service gaps and the emergence of a large-scale encampment in Rosssdale.
 - Expanded day shelter services and hours of operation at Boyle Street Community Services, Bissell Centre, The Mustard Seed, and Hope Mission.
 - Mobile drug poisoning response teams in Downtown and Chinatown, through Boyle Street Community Services and Boyle McCauley Health Centre.
 - Increased access to public washrooms throughout Edmonton.
 - Multidisciplinary teams to improve safety and access to services for vulnerable people, such as the Community Outreach Transit Team, a collaboration between the City and Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society.
 - Temporary funding to sustain additional bridge housing units through 2022.

While all levels of government and service providers provided increased levels of service in response to the crises during the pandemic, many of the responses were temporary due to limited emergency funds and the shifting expectations around an imminent end to the pandemic. Although much of the resources available to aid the crisis response have come to an end with the emergency response to COVID-19 pandemic, the social challenges created by the pandemic and other structural forces persist. Edmonton's homeless-serving system of care continues to

Administration's Response to the City's Response to Homelessness Audit Report

experience a shortage of critical services for meeting the needs of Edmontonians experiencing homelessness.

Audit Overview

In 2022, the Office of the City Auditor undertook an audit of the City's response to homelessness with the goal of determining if the City coordinates its internal homelessness activities to achieve its intended outcomes.

The Auditor identified a number of key findings:

- The City has an overall target for homelessness in The City Plan - no chronic or episodic homelessness in Edmonton. However, the City does not have a corporate-wide plan that defines the strategy and integrates and coordinates the activities that support its internal response to homelessness.
- The City does not have a single dedicated position or body that is accountable and has the proper authorities to coordinate this work.
- The City does not have an evaluation process to assess whether its internal response to homelessness activities are achieving the desired results.

The Auditor acknowledged that ending homelessness falls under the jurisdiction of the provincial and federal governments. The Auditor also acknowledged the respective role of Homeward Trust Edmonton as the designated lead organization for implementing the plan to end homelessness, *A Place to Call Home: Edmonton's Updated Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*. The City's activities related to homelessness response are best understood in relation to the collective response of the homeless serving system of care, which involves numerous organizations and service providers, funded by all orders of government, and led primarily by Homeward Trust Edmonton.

Overview of Recommendations and Management Response

The Office of the City Auditor presented three recommendations in its report. Administration accepts all of the recommendations.

The Management Responses will seek to align with, build upon and integrate with all relevant strategies and plans that relate to homelessness, including but not limited to:

- The Community Safety and Well-Being Strategy, recently approved by City Council in May 2022.
- The recommendations and Minister's response to the Government of Alberta's Coordinated Community Response to Homelessness Task Force, expected to be released in June 2022.
- Canada's National Housing Strategy (released in 2017), which includes the goal of halving chronic homelessness by 2030.
- Edmonton's Community Plan to End Homelessness - the current plan, *A Place to Call Home: Edmonton's Updated Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, will be replaced

Administration's Response to the City's Response to Homelessness Audit Report

by a new strategy that accounts for post-pandemic realities. Homeward Trust is expected to initiate work on that later this year.

Recommendation One

Develop a corporate-wide homelessness plan that defines the strategy and integrates and coordinates the City's internal response to homelessness.

Administration recognizes the value of a single, coordinated, and integrated corporate plan that aligns and coordinates operational areas with the organization as they work together to address homelessness. This plan must also acknowledge and define the City's role in the broader community effort to address homelessness. This plan can be used to confirm Council's expectations for the City of Edmonton's role in addressing homelessness by defining service levels and enabling Administration to plan more proactively to deliver the results City Council and Edmontonians expect.

This plan can also serve as a key mechanism for ensuring alignment around the acute, time sensitive, intervention work underway to support the increased number of Edmontonians experiencing homelessness. For example, work that could fall within the scope of this plan may include:

- Encampment response
- Downtown safety
- Transit safety, including the Community Outreach Transit Team
- Drug poisoning response
- Public washrooms
- Extreme weather response
- COVID-19 crisis response
- RECOVER: Edmonton's Urban Wellness Plan
- Other City-funded sector outreach initiatives, like 24/7 Crisis Diversion and the Human-centered Engagement and Liaison Partnership Unit.

The development of this plan will be completed by December 31, 2023.

Recommendation Two

Assign accountability for the delivery of the corporate-wide homelessness plan and its activities.

The corporate-wide response to homelessness crosses multiple business areas whose respective mandates are not necessarily focused on homelessness. Administration recognizes the benefits of a dedicated team that is accountable for the homelessness response, which may include additional role clarity and centralized monitoring and evaluation of the plans, activities and outcomes.

Currently, there are some examples of small teams, parts of teams, or individuals across the Corporation who have become focused on homelessness work in order to respond to the increasing demands for service. The Affordable Housing and Homelessness section is the only City team with staff that are dedicated exclusively to homelessness response as part of its regular

Administration's Response to the City's Response to Homelessness Audit Report

duties. Two full time staff are responsible for homelessness coordination and response, including encampments, extreme weather, coordinating and connecting with external homeless serving agencies funded by the City, and responding to numerous inquiries related to homelessness from residents, stakeholders, and City Council. However, the majority of work related to homelessness response is now undertaken by business areas across the Corporation responsible for other important priorities as well. The resources available no longer match the size and scale of the challenge or of Council's expectations for the City's response to it.

Administration will consider multiple options for how to implement this work within the broader Corporation, informed by best practices evidenced from other municipalities. Before any decisions are made about the most appropriate model to deploy, Administration will investigate the most effective approaches for accountability of municipal responses to homelessness and adopt the model that best suits the City of Edmonton context.

The development of this approach will be completed by December 31, 2023.

Recommendation Three

Develop performance measures and evaluate whether the corporate-wide homelessness plan is achieving the desired results.

Administration values ongoing performance measurement and evaluation of its own efforts as well as the efforts of the agencies it funds as part of its homelessness response. Agencies funded by the City of Edmonton are expected to adhere to the City's Minimum Emergency Shelter Guidelines, when applicable and all are expected to provide a thorough reporting of the results achieved with funding provided. These reports are reviewed on an ongoing basis by program staff.

Administration prioritizes its existing limited evaluation resources towards bodies of work where comprehensive, in-depth review is likely to result in improvements that lead to substantially better outcomes. For example, Administration recently completed a fulsome review of the City of Edmonton's ongoing response to encampments.

Administration will develop an evaluation plan that includes the appropriate level of review to match the scale of the activity under consideration and will ensure all of the City of Edmonton's homelessness response activities are included in this effort. Where possible, the performance measurement and evaluation plan will integrate the perspectives of people with lived experience of homelessness as well as data from external parties in order to better understand the broader outcomes of the whole homeless serving system of care, and how the City's efforts contribute to the collective efforts of partner organizations.

The performance measurement and evaluation plan will be developed by December 31, 2023.

COMMUNITY INSIGHT

As a result of extensive engagement completed for both ConnectEdmonton, The City Plan and the Community Safety and Well-being Strategy, Administration heard that Edmontonians desired a community that was inclusive and compassionate. By focusing on building a city that emphasizes

Administration's Response to the City's Response to Homelessness Audit Report

compassion and inclusivity, the City and its partners must be intentional in their efforts to reduce poverty, provide attainable and affordable housing and eliminate homelessness. Through various engagements and other conversations, the City has heard that the efforts to address homelessness must be delivered in a respectful, human-centred approach that considers the vast array of societal considerations that lead people to homelessness.

GBA+

The scope of this audit focused on the City's overall response to emergent homelessness prevention activities. As of May 16, 2022, over 2,800 individuals in Edmonton are experiencing homelessness. Despite making up only five per cent of Edmonton's overall population, over 60 per cent of these individuals are Indigenous. Of the more than 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 also 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.