

## CITY OF EDMONTON MINIMUM EMERGENCY SHELTER STANDARDS - EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION UPDATE

### RECOMMENDATION

That the June 13, 2022, Community Services report CS00796, be received for information.

#### Report Purpose

#### Information Only

Committee is being provided an update on the progress of the education and communications strategy to assist emergency shelter providers in moving towards adopting the City of Edmonton Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards.

### Previous Council/Committee Action

At the August 30, 2021, City Council meeting, the following motion passed:

That Administration prepare an education and communications strategy to assist emergency shelter providers move towards adopting the City of Edmonton Minimum Emergency Shelter Standard and return to Committee with an update in 2022.

### Executive Summary

- Emergency shelter conditions have been identified as a barrier by people experiencing homelessness when attempting to access shelter spaces and additional supports; shelter conditions have also been identified as a factor that contributes to encampments and unsheltered homelessness.
- In response, Edmonton City Council approved the City of Edmonton Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards (August 25, 2021 Community and Public Services report CS00506).
- Shelter operators have implemented the majority of the low- and no-cost elements of the Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards.
- Shelter operators have indicated they are unable to implement additional Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards elements without additional resources.

## REPORT

The number of people experiencing homelessness in Edmonton has more than doubled since December 2019, which has widened gaps in services (such as housing supports, mental health and addictions services) required to support them. Emergency shelter access has been high this

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past year, with average daily shelter occupancies of 801 this past winter (1,140 at the peak) and a daily average of 484 (605 at the peak) in summer 2021. The Government of Alberta funds 634 permanent emergency shelter spaces in Edmonton. These shelter spaces are operated by three agencies: Hope Mission (530 shelter spaces), The Mustard Seed (40 shelter spaces), and E4C (64 spaces). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Alberta also funded additional temporary shelter spaces during the winter months.

### **Emergency Shelter Roles and Responsibilities**

The Government of Alberta administers funding agreements to shelter operators across the province. The focus of provincial funding is on providing core services to clients, such as sleeping spaces, while additional elements such as programming are generally funded through donations or grants. In the most recent provincial budget, funding for homelessness and outreach support services (including emergency shelter services) is forecasted to remain the same through 2025.

Prior to COVID-19, the City's role in the homelessness response was limited to a few key areas:

- Providing limited operating funding to Homeward Trust to support its efforts in implementing the Plan to End Homelessness;
- Responding to encampments, which includes identifying encampments, funding outreach workers to provide supports and connections to housing for residents, closing encampments, and encampment clean-up; and
- Activating the City's extreme weather policy, which was approved July 16, 2019 (CR\_6899) and focuses on providing overflow shelter space and transportation to shelters during periods of extreme weather.

Across Canada, many emergency shelter operators are examining their role within the homeless-serving system and how to best improve services for their clients. Many shelters originated out of community-based organizations, like churches or civil-society groups, which identified needs in their communities and attempted to address those needs through charitable means. Although these efforts are invaluable, the charitable model alone is not capable of ending homelessness or addressing increasingly complex community needs. As a result, many shelters are evolving and professionalizing their practices to deliver appropriate social and health support.

### **Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards Development**

The prevalence of encampments in Edmonton has been growing over the past several years. In 2019, at the request of City Council, Administration partnered with Homeward Trust to engage a consultant to research homeless encampments in Edmonton, identify the root causes behind their growth and identify options for reducing them. The consultant, OrgCode Inc, collaborated with Homeward Trust, Boyle Street Community Services, and Bissell Centre to conduct research with individuals who were actively sleeping outside instead of accessing available shelter services (May 8, 2019 Community and Public Services report CR6674). The researchers found that there was a relationship between the conditions of available emergency shelter and the incidence of

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unsheltered homelessness, and the way in which shelter was provided can create barriers to access for people experiencing homelessness and undermine efforts to connect them to housing. This work, along with jurisdictional best-practices research, contributed to a set of recommendations for addressing unsheltered homelessness, which included the creation of a set of Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards.

## Overview of Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards

The Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards outlines operational practices to better ensure emergency shelters are accessible and housing-focused (Attachment 1). In addition, the Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards aspires to standardize operations and service delivery across emergency shelters in Edmonton to ensure operators are working together towards collective goals to improve housing and social outcomes for individuals experiencing homelessness. The Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards are a voluntary tool meant to supplement, not displace, any applicable laws, statutes, regulations, policies, or other equivalents imposed by the Government of Alberta. The Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards also recognizes that there are system responsibilities, especially as it relates to health services and affordable housing that must be concurrently addressed.

Edmonton's Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards contains four main elements:

1. Guiding Principles
2. Operational Standards
3. Service Delivery Standards
4. Infrastructure Standards

The development of these four main elements builds on consultation Administration conducted with sector stakeholders (such as Homeward Trust, Edmonton Police Service, Indigenous service providers, and emergency shelter providers) and first-person interviews and surveys of people with lived experience.

The Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards are informed by a set of guiding principles that directly tie into operational, service-delivery, and infrastructure best practices for emergency shelter operators. They are designed to ensure that essential services, as well as connections to appropriate social support systems, are client-centered, trauma-informed, and that these services are delivered in a way that reduces harm for both individuals experiencing homelessness and the surrounding community.

Operational standards reflect the day-to-day operations of emergency shelters and include elements like hours of operations, storage, and laundry services. Service delivery standards outline expectations for service delivery and programming and cover shelter expectations and restriction to access (also known as banning or barring). It also outlines the four programming areas: Diversion and Housing First, Mental Health and Addictions, Indigenous Supports, and

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LGBTQ2S+ and Youth Support. Finally, the infrastructure standards outline standards for shelter operators pursuing modifications of existing buildings or the creation of a new facility.

The Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards were approved by City Council on August 30, 2021 (CS00506). City Council directed Administration to prepare an education and communications strategy to assist emergency shelter providers as they move towards adopting the Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards, that the Mayor, on behalf of City Council send a letter to the Government of Alberta inviting adoption of the standards and operating requirements for Emergency Shelters, and to return to Committee with an update in 2022. The advocacy letter was sent to the Community and Social Services Minister on October 15, 2021.

## Engagement approach

All emergency shelter operators in Edmonton were engaged by Administration between January and March 2022. An initial information and education group session was held in January with operators, providing an overview of the Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards, benefits for adoption, discussing potential “quick wins” and outlining next steps.

Individual sessions were also held with each operator to discuss current alignment to the Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards and to examine opportunities for further improvements.

Administration collaborated with the Government of Alberta and better aligned the Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards with the provincial government’s Shelter Expectations, a document which is part of provincial grant funding agreements. This collaborative effort has led to some elements from the Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards being incorporated into the Shelter Expectations document this past March.

Administration has continued to educate the sector about the Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards, such as a presentation to the Coordinated Community Response to Homelessness Task Force on February 9, 2022. Administration will continue to work with provincial partners on increasing the alignment between the provincial shelter expectations and the Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards.

## Engagement summary

The result of the engagement sessions demonstrated that the majority of shelter operators were in alignment to the Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards for elements that were low- or no-cost, such as having the appropriate policies in place. Attachment 2 provides a high-level overview of the current state of operator alignment to the Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards.

Operators emphasized that additional resources are required to fully implement the Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards. Feedback received on where additional resources would be best used focused on two areas:

1. Additional resources for daily operations.

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### 2. Additional resources for shelter programming.

Operators noted that additional operational resources would allow them to focus more time and resources to supporting shelter clients. They noted that considerable staff time is spent just “keeping the lights on,” providing a warm space to sleep, meals, cots, and other core services. This focus on immediate concerns leaves few resources to connect clients to supports, including housing supports, physical or mental healthcare, and cultural supports.

Operators also noted that dedicated resources for shelter programming would be helpful. This could include centralized programming which could be rolled out to all shelter operators or the provision of funding for dedicated program staff such as Indigenous support workers. One potential example explored with shelter operators was a dedicated Indigenous Supports program, with programming materials, staff funding, and language translation services. This program option could be linked to the current work to explore Indigenous-led shelter options.

Shelter operators were hopeful that the investment of additional resources by all orders of government could improve outcomes for shelter clients and achieve two key goals of the Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards:

1. People experiencing homelessness would be more inclined to access shelters than residing in encampments.
2. People experiencing homelessness would be able to access needed supports and be better able to transition to more permanent housing solutions.

### Next Steps

Administration will continue to promote the standards to additional audiences beyond shelter operators and to other key stakeholders in the homeless-serving sector. The Government of Alberta led Coordinated Community Response to Homelessness Task Force has shown interest in the City’s Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards, having discussed them on multiple instances. The final report of the Task Force is expected in June 2022 and Administration will review the report for references or recommendations that are linked to the Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards.

Work will also continue to engage the provincial government to incorporate more Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards elements into their grant agreements.

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

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In addition, the work completed in 2019 by OrgCode Consulting included direct engagement with people actively sleeping outside to understand the barriers that they experienced to accessing emergency shelter. These barriers included lack of storage space, accommodations for couples, pets, lack of cultural services, confusion about banning rules, and fear of physical safety and theft.

### **GBA+**

The number of Edmontonians experiencing homelessness has almost doubled since the beginning of the pandemic. Homeward Trust's By Name List serves as a real-time record of all known people currently experiencing homelessness across Edmonton. As of May 2022, there are more than 2,800 people on this list. Of those 2,800+ people, over 1,150 are either currently staying in a shelter or sleeping outdoors, with the remainder provisionally accommodated (couch-surfing, short-term housing, etc.). Despite making up only five percent of Edmonton's overall population, over 60 percent 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 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. City of Edmonton Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards
2. Shelter Standard Elements - Shelter Alignment