

MUTUAL AID ORGANIZATIONS

(K. Tang)

RECOMMENDATION

That the August 22, 2022, Community Services report CS01174, be received for information.

Requested Council Action	Information only		
ConnectEdmonton's Guiding Principle	ConnectEdmonton Strategic Goals		
CONNECTED This unifies our work as we work to achieve our strategic goals.	Healthy City		
City Plan Values	CREATE		
City Plan Big City Move(s)	Catalyze and converge	Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities	Community safety and well-being
Corporate Business Plan	Serving Edmontonians		
Council Policy, Program or Project Relationships	Not applicable		
Related Council Discussions	Not applicable		

Previous Council/Committee Action

At the March 21, 2022, Community and Public Services Committee meeting, the following inquiry was submitted: That Administration provide information on:

Mutual Aid Organizations

- Which mutual aid organizations has the City of Edmonton been working with since Spring 2021 and what are the mandates of each of these organizations?
- How many mutual aid organizations are funded by the City either through grants programs or through funds from specific programs?
- What opportunities exist in the short term to bring in the value of the work done by mutual aid organizations? Including:
 - What City data is shared with mutual aid organizations and what data is provided from mutual aid organizations to inform City work?
 - What collaboration tables or joint initiatives led by the City include mutual aid organizations?
- How can the reallocated police budget be used to support the work of the mutual aid organizations?

Executive Summary

- Administration's work with mutual aid groups is ongoing and evolving.
- Administration is currently engaged with five mutual aid groups. They include: Bear Clan Beaver Hills House, Harm Reduction Support (HARES) Outreach, NÉkem, Prairie Sage Protectors and Water Warriors YEG.
- Mutual aid groups vary in their degree of structure and formalization.
- The City is exploring options to partner with such groups. One option is to support mutual aid groups through third party funding options.

REPORT

Mutual aid groups have long played a role in Edmonton but have risen in profile since the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, there is no universal definition around what constitutes a mutual aid group. Mutual aid groups are generally understood to be grassroots, volunteer-led groups engaged in collective action to address community needs. They often form in response to the group's perception of various systemic barriers and gaps in existing services and/or programs offered by both the City and broader social-servicing organizations.

For the purpose of this inquiry, most of the mutual-aid groups referenced in this report respond to people experiencing homelessness and vulnerable individuals accessing the transit system. However, mutual aid groups also exist in all other spheres of the social safety-net (e.g. newcomers/refugees, family violence, food insecurity, accessibility community, two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning plus communities, etc.).

Mutual aid groups are not homogeneous but generally adopt a non-hierarchical and consensus based decision-making process. Characteristics shared by mutual aid groups include:

- Working to meet community needs and build a shared understanding about why people do not have what they need;
- Mobilizing people, expanding solidarity and building movements; and
- Participatory problem solving through collective action.

Mutual Aid Organizations

Engagement with Mutual Aid Groups

There are many mutual aid groups with diverse portfolios working in Edmonton. To date, Administration is aware of and has engaged with the following: Bear Clan Beaver Hills House, Harm Reduction Support (HARES) Outreach, Nékem, Prairie Sage Protectors and Water Warriors YEG. These groups have assumed various roles in supporting some of the city's most vulnerable community members and engage in street-based outreach to support the ability of community members' experiencing homelessness and poverty in meeting their basic needs. A summary of their mandates can be found in Attachment 1.

Administration's work with mutual aid groups is relatively new and has primarily taken the form of convening quarterly outreach meetings. The meeting includes mutual aid groups as well as not-for-profits also engaged in street outreach in order to share information and explore opportunities for collaboration. This work is evolving and there have been preliminary efforts to engage mutual aid groups in key initiatives like the Drug Poisoning Dashboard, Community Safety and Well Being, Indigenous-led shelters outreach and encampment work. Specifically, with respect to the Drug Poisoning Dashboard, Administration extended invitations to mutual aid groups to share information about the dashboard and access the data contained therein; however, there are currently no mutual aid groups accessing the data contained in the Drug Poisoning Dashboard. Similarly, Administration invited mutual aid groups to participate in the engagement undertaken to inform the City's approach to Indigenous-led encampment outreach and Indigenous-led shelter and programming. The insights received are informing the development of the request for proposal to procure Indigenous entities to support Indigenous-led encampment outreach and the creation of Indigenous-led shelters and programming in Edmonton. To date, Administration has not requested specific data from mutual aid groups.

Administration recognizes that mutual aid groups are an important part of the social support ecosystem. In the short term, the City can add value to their work through continued engagement at the quarterly outreach meetings and by consulting with groups on specific topics, such as the Anti-Racism Strategy and Community Safety and Well Being work. These venues can provide a platform to share information, build relationships and leverage the insights of mutual aid groups to raise awareness and mobilize solutions to Edmonton's social problems. As this work progresses, it will be important to balance consultation requests with the capacity realities of these largely volunteer-based groups and explore how to support their work without attaching onerous administrative demands.

Funding Mutual Aid Groups

Administrative Policy A1476 - Municipal Funding Arrangements outlines guiding principles that ensure the City's financial and reputational risks are well-managed and that taxpayers receive value for municipal funding invested in the community. These principles include ensuring the terms of the funding agreement are clear and unambiguous, allowing the City to access relevant financial information of the recipient to determine compliance with the funding agreement and requiring the recipient to report to the City on the use of funds and how it achieved intended objectives.

Mutual Aid Organizations

The November 2020 Office of the City Auditor Report - Social Development Branch Audit also stressed the importance of incorporating performance metrics into funding agreements to ensure that relevant and meaningful information is collected from recipients to facilitate a value-for-money analysis. Because mutual aid groups are often not formalized to the extent of being a legal entity, entering into a funding agreement is not always possible as the City would be unable to apply the principles of Policy A1476 or the recommendations outlined in the City Auditor report. In-kind support through the provision of items such as bus tickets and gift cards is an alternate avenue for support.

There are some differences between mutual aid groups and non-profit organizations that may influence a mutual aid group's position on formal incorporation. Based on the literature, some delineating characteristics between mutual aid groups and non-profit organizations include the nature of their membership (largely volunteer based versus professional staff), decision making (consensus based versus hierarchical) and service user criteria (support given without expectation versus conditions/eligibility criteria often associated with accessing help).

There are mutual aid groups that choose to formalize, but upon incorporation, the designation for these groups is determined pursuant to the statute or legislation they have established under. Incorporation would enable these groups to access City of Edmonton resources associated with their designation but may result in shifting them away from a purely mutual aid model.

Because of the restrictions described above, funding mutual aid organizations (including funding from the Community Safety and Well Being funds held within Financial Strategies (the reallocation of the police budget)) is not recommended. One option for the City to mitigate this and utilize the reallocated Community Safety and Well Being funds to support mutual aid groups who decide not to incorporate, is to explore third party funding with an incorporated third party organization that works collaboratively alongside the organization. This option would enable a mutual aid group to access funding without having to incorporate but, it is not without limitations.

Conclusion

Administration recognizes the important contributions of mutual aid groups in the social support network and is committed to building relationships with them through bilateral information sharing and consultation and collaboration on relevant City initiatives. Through these ongoing engagements, the City hopes to be able to continue to explore additional opportunities to support the work of mutual aid groups and integrate their valuable insights in the development of City strategies and processes.

Budget/Financial Implications

The City administers funds to other organizations in a manner that includes enforceable oversight and accountability. Existing policy provides that grants, subsidies and other funding agreements are made with other legal entities where financial stipulations and accountability are enforced through contract or agreement. While in certain circumstances the City makes monetary donations to groups, the amounts donated should be small and a one-time gift. Mutual aid group support would not fit appropriately within the category of monetary donations. There is some budget capacity to provide mutual aid groups in-kind support such as bus tickets, water, personal items and first aid supplies.

Mutual Aid Organizations

COMMUNITY INSIGHT

This report responds to an inquiry about Administration's work with mutual aid groups. Accordingly, community input was not sought at this time.

GBA+

The scope of this information only report will not impact the current work of mutual aid groups as their work is occurring with minimal, if any, Administration support. However, any next steps that stem from this report, particularly regarding resourcing, should weigh Administration's fiscal and outcome reporting responsibilities, while maximizing the autonomy of mutual aid groups. Some considerations and challenges in achieving this balance are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Mutual aid groups and their work is as diverse as the communities they serve. The mutual aid groups mentioned in this report are largely Indigenous-focused and involved in core community work such as providing basic needs, harm reduction and advocacy. Mutual aid work can vary from childcare to recreation, immigration, or justice focused reform and support. They also work with diverse demographics like newcomers/refugees, accessibility communities, and 2SLGBTQ+ communities.

Mutual aid groups often develop in response to the gaps, barriers, and challenges perceived to exist within systems to support people in the ways they need. Accordingly, mutual aid work is often positioned outside the system as systems are seen as replicating inequities by creating categories around who can and cannot receive support. In this approach, mutual aid groups can be accountable to their members and the people they serve as opposed to the system/funders. It also allows them to be nimble and responsive to emerging community needs with greater flexibility.

As mutual aid work operates at the periphery of the formal social support system, Administration is challenged with how best to support their work with minimal impact to their practice model. Presently, to access government funding, mutual aid groups have to formalize through incorporation or work with an incorporated third party organization whose structure and approach may be inherently different from their own. This is not ideal as it may impact the autonomy of mutual aid groups. One way Administration can minimize this impact is by ensuring options exist for mutual aid groups to have a fiscal agent with whom they align. A promising model for this exists in the Ethnocultural Community Capacity Building Coalition. Under this model, community agencies are coming together to coordinate support to unincorporated groups by working in a community development model that tries to understand if the needs can be met through simple program partnership. However, if the long term goal is developing into an organization, incubating the development of the group towards sustainable incorporation will be the work of the collaborative.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Mutual Aid Organizations Engaged with the City of Edmonton