

ENHANCED ENCAMPMENT AND UNSHELTERED HOMELESSNESS RESPONSE PLAN

RECOMMENDATION

That the April 11, 2023, Community Services report CS01637, be received for information.

| | | | |
|---|--|---|---------------------------------|
| Requested Council Action | Information Only | | |
| ConnectEdmonton's Guiding Principle | ConnectEdmonton Strategic Goals | | |
| CONNECTED This unifies our work to achieve our strategic goals. | Healthy City | | |
| City Plan Values | LIVE | | |
| City Plan Big City Move(s) | Inclusive and compassionate | Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities | Community safety and well-being |
| Corporate Business Plan | Serving Edmontonians | | |
| Council Policy, Program or Project Relationships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bylaw 14614 - Public Places and Bylaw 2202 - Parkland Bylaw • Community Safety and Wellbeing Strategy • Encampment Response Improvement Project • Downtown Core and Transit System Safety Plan | | |
| Related Council Discussions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CS01225 Homelessness and Encampment Response Strategy (April 25, 2022, Community and Public Services Committee and May 9, 2022, City Council) • CS00939 Indigenous-led Shelters, Housing and Programming (June 27, 2022 Community and Public Services Committee) • CS01347 Small-scale Sanctioned Encampments (July 4, 2022, City Council) • CS01278 Homelessness and Encampment Response Strategy - Update (October 11, 2022, Community and Public Services Committee) | | |

Executive Summary

- Encampments are largely the result of a shortage of safe, adequate and affordable housing and ongoing capacity challenges and barriers in the mental health, addictions and emergency shelter systems.
- The issues associated with encampments have been further deepened by the simultaneous impacts of the economic downturn, the COVID-19 pandemic and the drug poisoning crisis.

ENHANCED ENCAMPMENT AND UNSHELTERED HOMELESSNESS RESPONSE PLAN

- The City of Edmonton's response to encampments has evolved to adapt to continually changing conditions and increased demand for response.
- Administration has developed an enhanced encampment response plan that builds upon past successes and improves efficiency and effectiveness through prototypes and permanent process changes. The outcomes of this plan are:
 - People experiencing unsheltered homelessness have clear, consistent and rapid connections to supports and housing; and
 - Encampments do not diminish individual and/or public safety.
- The plan will guide the City and partners over the next two years and lessons learned will shape design process changes and influence solutions. An evaluation framework, including targets, will measure the ongoing progress of the encampment response.
- Administration will reallocate funding towards Council priorities as part of OP12. Pending the amounts reallocated to this initiative, Administration will develop a service package for the Fall 2023 Supplemental Operating Budget Adjustment (SOBA) to request any necessary funding for the enhanced approach if directed by Council.
- To address systemic issues and barriers to housing outcomes, the City is partnering with Homeward Trust to update Edmonton's Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness.

REPORT

Since 2020, the number of people experiencing homelessness in Edmonton has more than doubled and the number of encampments in Edmonton has continued to rise dramatically. According to Homeward Trust's By Names List¹, as of March 13, 2023, of the 2,843 people experiencing homelessness, 757 people are unsheltered, meaning they frequently sleep outside. Between 2016 and 2022, encampment-related requests for service to 311 increased by 1,075 per cent, from 790 inquiries in 2016 to 9,300 in 2022.

The City of Edmonton's response to encampments has evolved during this period. In 2018, City Council asked Administration to explore a new approach to managing encampments, including looking at the root causes of encampments, engaging encampment occupants and making recommendations for improving Edmonton's response. Attachment 1 of the May 8, 2019, Citizen Services report CR_6674, Interim Housing provided recommendations that included:

- establishing a risk matrix for assessing and responding to encampments,
- improving the emergency shelter experience,
- expanding accommodation options beyond emergency shelters, such as bridge housing, and
- continuing to invest in more affordable and supportive housing for people with very low incomes.

Administration implemented a risk assessment process, created the Northlands Bridge Housing project in the former jockey dorms, established minimum shelter standards and continued investments in affordable housing for the 2023 to 2026 budget cycle.

¹https://public.tableau.com/views/Edmontonhomelessness/EdmontonHomelessness_1?:language=en-US&:display_count=n&:origin=viz_share_link

ENHANCED ENCAMPMENT AND UNSHELTERED HOMELESSNESS RESPONSE PLAN

Current Status

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic increased the number of people experiencing homelessness while significantly impacting access to services. During the pandemic, Edmonton experienced large-scale, entrenched encampments, which created numerous challenges to individual and public health and safety. The largest encampment, Camp Pekiwewin, existed in the Rosedale neighbourhood for 109 days and eventually closed due to violent and criminal activity, serious and unmanageable concerns for occupant safety, deteriorating site conditions and the opening of the Tipinawaw emergency shelter. From November 12 to 26, 2020, City staff reclaimed the site and removed 163,708 kilograms of material, including 108 propane tanks, 190 shopping carts, 1,050 needles and 6,500 kilograms of scrap metal.

The City of Edmonton's response to encampments on public lands has continued to evolve but has not kept pace with the rapid growth of the number of people underserved by multiple systems who end up unsheltered and living in encampments. The current response, with the limited resource complement available, prioritized the prevention of entrenched large-scale encampments in the interest of fire and occupant safety.

In the current encampment response process:

- A risk assessment tool (the risk matrix) is used to help triage the closure of encampments. Risk factors consider occupant injury or death due to fire, disease, extreme weather, drug poisoning, violence, carbon monoxide poisoning, observed or investigated presence of weapons or criminal activity.
- A risk level is assigned to a site through inspection and one of the three response streams determines support needs and closure timelines.
 - Low-risk sites are diverted to outreach for a housing-focused response (up to four weeks).
 - High-risk sites that pose high fire, injury, health and safety risk to occupants and communities are prioritized for an accelerated closure within 24 to 72 hours.
 - Large-scale encampments are addressed by a coordinated approach between the Edmonton Police Service and the City of Edmonton.
- Weekly tactical meetings between Administration, Edmonton Police Service, Street Outreach (contracted staff with Boyle Street Community Services) and Homeward Trust provide opportunities for partners to align their workflows.
 - Administration refers active low-risk encampments to Street Outreach and discusses timelines for site closures.
 - Homeward Trust is able to confirm whether an encampment occupant is on the By Name List, housing history and categorization and liaise with housing teams.
 - Administration and Edmonton Police Service provide insight into high-risk encampments and sites that are being monitored for risk that may need additional social support.

In 2022, it took an average of 68 days to transition one person from sleeping outside into permanent housing and significantly longer for people with more complex needs such as

ENHANCED ENCAMPMENT AND UNSHELTERED HOMELESSNESS RESPONSE PLAN

addiction, mental health issues or trauma recovery. Also in 2022, an average of 27 people were housed from encampments each month.

Process Review

Following the 2023-2026 budget deliberations, Administration developed an enhanced encampment response plan to better address Council and stakeholder expectations. The approach builds upon the successes of the current model and continues to prioritize public safety. The approach also enhances the health and safety of encampment occupants and accelerates the sustainable resolution of encampments through housing.

Administration reviewed the current encampment response process and analyzed areas for improvement. The review considered the information gathered from various sources, including:

- Most recent research and best practices (Attachment 1),
- Results of recent engagement with people with lived and living experiences, and
- Key internal and external partners and subject matter experts involved in delivering the encampment response.

The findings of this review are summarized in Attachment 2, which outlines both the strengths and opportunities for improvement. Tactics outlined in the enhanced encampment response plan focus on data integration, increased accountability, more holistic encampment assessment, greater coordination amongst partners, better communication and aligning resources with demand.

Enhanced Encampment Response Plan

Administration's Enhanced Encampment Response Plan will guide encampment response efforts for the next two years (Attachment 3) and right-size resources to the implementation plan. Current resource levels can be found in Attachment 4.

The plan focuses on two key outcomes:

1. People experiencing unsheltered homelessness have clear, consistent and rapid connections to housing; and
2. Encampments do not diminish individual and/or public safety.

To achieve these outcomes, five short-term goals are to:

1. Increase the number of people housed from encampments.
2. Reduce the time it takes for unsheltered people to be housed.
3. Increase the number of strategies for mitigating encampment safety risks and improving the well-being of encampment occupants.
4. Improve coordination, communication and reporting on outcomes and progress.
5. Maximize the efficiency of all encampment response processes.

These goals require learning, experimentation and careful consideration to build upon the successes of the current model. Any new tactics must be introduced in a way that is mindful of

ENHANCED ENCAMPMENT AND UNSHELTERED HOMELESSNESS RESPONSE PLAN

possible trade-offs and unintended consequences. The spirit and intent of the plan is sustained continuous improvement rather than sudden transformation.

Next Steps

1. Implement Response Plan - Administration will implement the actions and prototypes identified in the response plan while developing a data improvement and evaluation framework to enable ongoing encampment response improvements.
2. Request Resourcing - Administration will return to Council in fall 2023 to report back on progress and key learnings from this summer. During this time, a Fall 2023 Supplemental Operating Budget Adjustment request for the resources needed to implement recommended changes to the encampment response model in 2024 may be submitted.
3. Update the Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness - Administration is partnering with Homeward Trust to lead the update and will be returning to Council on November 1, 2023, to present the Community Services report CS01661- Edmonton's Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness.
 - o The Community Plan has a greater ability to address systemic issues and barriers to housing outcomes. The encampment response work will integrate into the corporate homelessness plan and connect to the affordable housing strategy, both of which have greater potential to influence systemic issues and barriers than the encampment response process alone. Both the strategy and corporate plan will be presented to City Council in Q4 2023.

Budget/Financial Implications

During the 2023-2026 budget deliberations Administration recommended that the Encampment and Unsheltered Homelessness Response integrated service package be fully funded for a total of \$4.89 million, from Community and Safety Well-being funds, to include:

- A new interdisciplinary outreach team, skilled in complex case management and assertive outreach to focus on people with complex needs and experiencing chronic homelessness (ongoing);
- Twenty new peace officer full-time equivalents to accelerate encampment investigations and risk assessments to reduce backlogs, and to return the Park Rangers assigned to the current encampment response back to dedicated work in the river valley (ongoing);
- Fifteen new positions in City Operations to expedite the clean-up of closed encampments (ongoing); and;
- A prototype development program focused on improvements related to safety, respect, cleanliness, communication and coordinated data (one-time).

As part of the 2023-2026 budget, the service package was partially funded, with Council passing an amendment removing all funding with the exception of \$1.17 million ongoing for encampment clean-up starting in 2024, and one-time prototype funding of \$250,000 planned for 2023 funded with the Community Safety and Wellbeing funds.

ENHANCED ENCAMPMENT AND UNSHELTERED HOMELESSNESS RESPONSE PLAN

Funding will be required to implement the response plan described in this report. Administration will reallocate funding towards Council priorities as part of OP12. Pending the amounts reallocated to this initiative, Administration will develop a service package for the Fall 2023 Supplemental Operating Budget Adjustment (SOBA) to request any necessary funding for the enhanced approach if directed by Council.

Legal Implications

Courts in some Canadian jurisdictions have issued decisions restricting municipalities from closing encampments unless sufficient, appropriate housing resources are available. Decisions to close encampments on municipal land will need to consider the evolving case law. Administration will incorporate learnings from the Court decisions and responses from other Canadian cities into the next steps identified in this report.

COMMUNITY INSIGHT

Over the spring and summer of 2022, engagement was conducted to better understand the unique perspectives and concerns of those impacted by encampments. Sessions were held with people with lived experience, communities, community leagues, business owners and mutual aid organizations, outreach teams, internal Administrative teams who provide support to encampment responses, and the Edmonton Insight Community.

Key learnings from these sessions included a clear understanding that living outside is not a preference.

- Over 86 people with lived experience indicated that they do want to be housed but while they wait for a unit or work towards housing, they feel safer outside than they do in shelters.
- 78 individuals from communities and community leagues, business owners and representatives from Business Improvement Areas as well as one mutual aid group reported that the presence of encampments makes people feel more unsafe, noting higher safety concerns for young children, women and seniors in particular.
- Front-line staff found that the presence of enforcement officers during inspection and cleanup made them feel safer.

To establish a baseline prior to prototype development, a survey was conducted in July 2022 via the Insight Community where over 4,500 residents provided feedback on their experiences with encampments where they either live or work. Most respondents (46 per cent) reported that they perceived the number of encampments had increased near where they live or work since 2020. Just over half (55 per cent) of respondents indicated that they perceived that social disorder had increased in their neighbourhood since 2020. Only 18 per cent of respondents reported that they felt satisfied with the City's increased response to encampments in their neighbourhood, and most (41 per cent) reported that they were unsure about the City's response. A follow-up survey will be conducted annually.

GBA+

While there may be common experiences of structural barriers and social and economic factors that lead to homelessness, the way people experience, navigate, cope and thrive is unique. The overall population is diverse in terms of age, gender, ethno-racial background and educational attainment. Indigenous people disproportionately experience homelessness in Edmonton due to the impacts of trauma caused by colonialism, the residential school system and the Sixties Scoop.

In Edmonton, the number of people experiencing homelessness has dramatically increased recently, nearly doubling from 2019 to 2022.² When it comes to public safety, people experiencing homelessness are generally at an increased risk for victimization.

Historically, 2SLGBTQ+ Canadians, as well as other at-risk groups, including youth, seniors, Indigenous People, newcomers and/or people with mental health or addiction issues have accounted for a large percentage of Canadians who are homeless, at risk of being homeless, or in core housing need.³ In Edmonton, consistent with national research, Indigenous adults and youth experience a higher rate of unsheltered homelessness, compared to non-Indigenous adults and youth. Indigenous women experiencing homelessness face significant risks of both physical violence and sexual assault⁴.

People living in encampments have high rates of complex health needs but low rates of preventative and/or non-emergent health care use. The average life expectancy of a homeless person in Canada is estimated to be 39 years, while the average life expectancy of an Albertan is about 81.5 years⁵. While there is limited local data on the mortality rate from homelessness, research shows that people experiencing homelessness are at increased risk of opioid poisoning and contracting communicable diseases such as COVID-19 and most recently, shigella. In the colder months of the year, people experiencing unsheltered homelessness are at increased risk of fire injury, amputation due to exposure or death.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Best Practices on Ending Unsheltered Homelessness
2. Process Review Summary - Strengths of the Current Encampment Response Model
3. Enhanced Encampment Response Plan
4. Current Encampment Response Staffing Resource Levels

² "Data, Analytics & Reporting". [website]. Homeward Trust. [cited March 6, 2023].

³ "2SLGBTQIA+ Housing Needs and Challenges." [website]. Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation. [cited March 7, 2023].

⁴ Heidinger, Loanna. *Violent victimization and perceptions of safety: Experiences of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit women in Canada*. Statistics Canada. April 26, 2022.

⁵ Community Services CS01627 - *Effects of Homelessness on the Health Care Ecosystem Verbal Report*. February 7, 2023.