

City of Edmonton's Expanded Response to Homelessness

A rise in unsheltered homelessness and encampments since 2016 has resulted in increased vulnerability for a growing percentage of Edmonton's homeless population. In 2018, City Council directed Administration to explore a new approach to managing homeless encampments (CR_6674, May 8, 2019, Community and Public Services Committee) and to define the City's response to vulnerable people during extreme weather events in collaboration with Homeward Trust and service partners (CR_6899, July 10, 2019, Community and Public Services Committee, Policy C620, July 16, 2019, City Council). In January 2020, as a part of the City's extreme weather response, City staff operated a temporary overnight emergency shelter in the Commonwealth Recreation Centre fieldhouse and provided ETS shuttle services to transport shelter users to and from day services. In the years following, this approach evolved to include predictable overnight ETS shuttles to transport people to shelter services and to coordinate temporary overnight shelter through funding contracts with shelter service providers. A significant finding from this work is that unsheltered individuals would not (personal preference) and/or could not access available shelter services due to a number of concerns about their safety and well-being.

In March 2020, the onset of the pandemic increased the systemic challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity in Edmonton. At roughly the same time, fatalities due to drug poisoning increased.¹ Throughout the pandemic, nearly all departments across the corporation contributed to homelessness response activities and worked with service partners and other orders of government to activate a number of emergency health and shelter services for those experiencing homelessness. This includes:

- The use of the EXPO Centre as a 24/7 medical recovery unit for people experiencing homelessness and day services for vulnerable people from March - July 2020.
- The activation of the Central Lions Seniors Centre, Commonwealth Stadium, and Northlands Spectrum as temporary overnight accommodation between 2020 - 2022.
- Funding to day service providers to expand their hours of operation and provide more places for people to go, filling a gap created by physical distancing requirements in 2022.

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<https://edmontonjournal.com/news/politics/more-than-1600-albertans-died-due-to-drug-poisoning-in-2022-government-data>

Attachment 1

- Funding expanded overdose prevention services delivery by service partners.

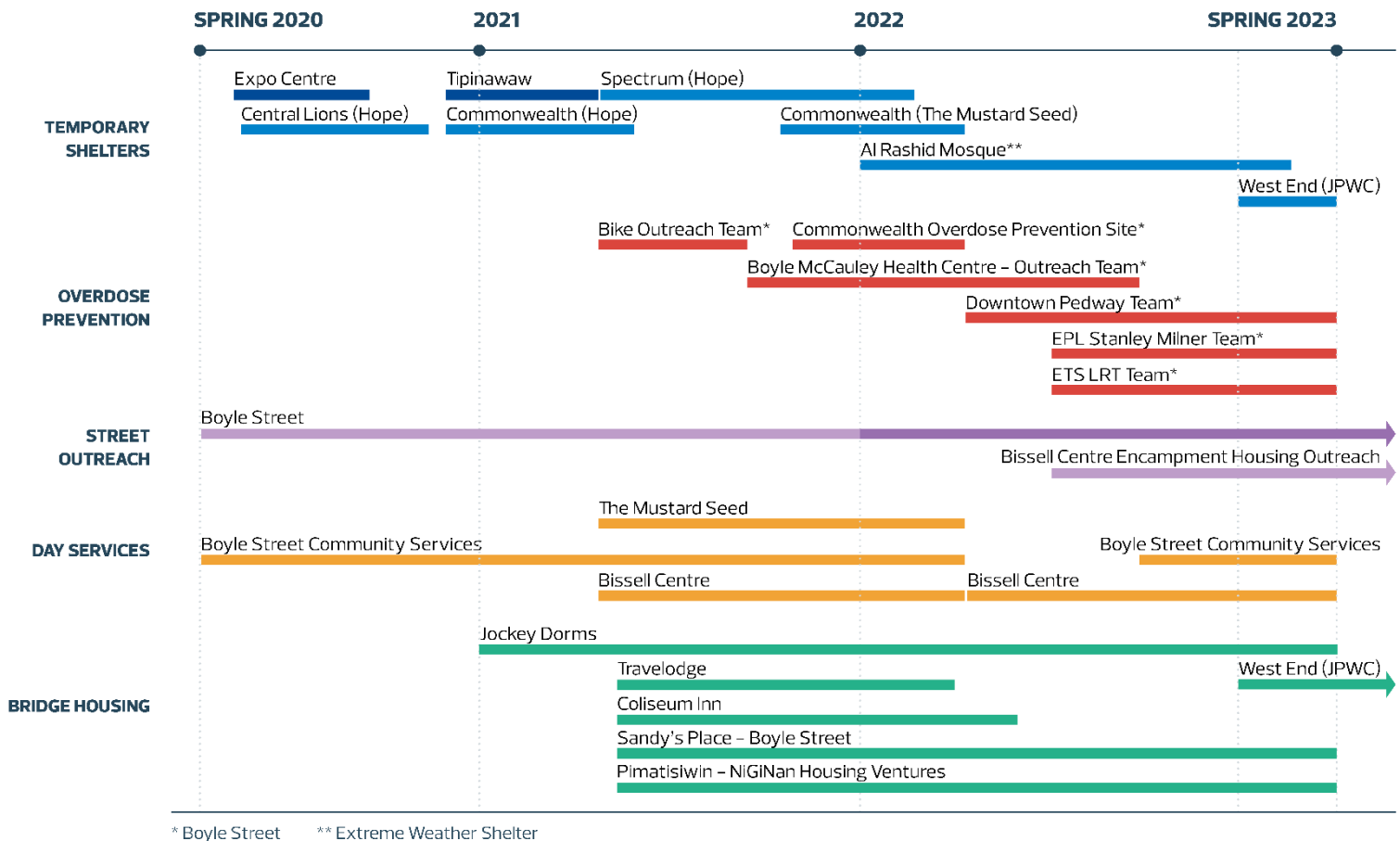


Table 2. City of Edmonton's Expanded Response to Homelessness

At the same time, Edmonton experienced large-scale, entrenched encampments, which created numerous and significant challenges to individual and public health and safety. At the end of July 2020, emergency shelters experienced COVID-19 outbreaks and were faced with capacity limitations due to social distancing requirements. A large-scale encampment for people experiencing homelessness became entrenched in the Rosedale neighbourhood (Camp Pekiwevin), which existed until November 2020. Following its closure, the City, in collaboration with Homeward Trust, the Government of Alberta, and four homeless-serving agencies

opened up *Tipinawaw*, a temporary pandemic accommodation in the Edmonton Convention Centre (CS00063, Oct 5, 2020, City Council).

Throughout the pandemic, Administration worked with service providers and other orders of government to provide emergency shelter options, day services and overdose prevention programs. Bridge housing was also introduced into the City-funded housing continuum in Edmonton at this time, a program model designed to “bridge” the gap between homelessness and permanent housing by providing temporary, continuous stay private/semi-private accommodation and daily connection with housing and other supports (CR7881, June 22, 2020, City Council).

Alongside the expanded pandemic responses to homelessness detailed above, Administration was directed by Council to develop Edmonton’s Minimum Emergency Shelter Standard, which was adopted in 2021 (CS00506, Aug 25, 2021, Community and Public Services Committee). As permanent emergency shelters in Edmonton are funded and regulated by the Government of Alberta, the ability of the City to implement these standards has been limited to City funded temporary options where possible. However, consistent efforts have been made to communicate best practices as outlined in the document to the provincial government and service providers.

Federal and provincial funding for homelessness pandemic emergency responses either ceased or were reduced beginning in late 2021. However, the need for expanded services, including interim accommodations and expanded mental health and addictions services, remained. In response, in fall 2022 Administration developed emergency shelter options for 2022 - 2024 (CE01417, September 12, 2022, City Council), which were not pursued by Council. The presentation of an alternative option was discussed and approved by City Council on November 30, 2022 during the 2023-2026 Budget Deliberations, providing \$7.5 million to Jasper Place Wellness Centre to open and operate a temporary emergency shelter and bridge housing in west Edmonton (CS01603).

The efforts outlined above do not include community safety and well-being initiatives that are a part of the City’s response to homelessness but are not directly tied to the delivery of housing, shelter or basic service needs. Examples include: the Community Outreach Transit Team (COTT), the public washroom strategy and increased supply of public washrooms in response to the shigella outbreak, and equity-seeking prevention efforts like Providing Accessible Transit Here (PATH) that works with agencies to provide free monthly transit passes to vulnerable Edmontonians who are not eligible through other programs, the Ride Transit

Attachment 1

Program and Leisure Access Program that provide access to transit and recreation services at subsidized rates from low income households. When requested, Administration also responds to frequent and ad-hoc requests from service partners to identify land and/or buildings where additional support services could be provided to address needs of vulnerable residents.