

EDMONTON'S PLAN TO PREVENT AND END HOMELESSNESS

Lessons Learned

Recommendation			
That the October 30, 2023, Community Services report CS01661, be received for information.			
Requested 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 =	BELONG. LIVE.		
City Plan Big City Move(s)	Inclusive and compassionate	Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities	Community safety and well-being
Corporate Business Plan	Transforming for the future		
Council Policy, Program or Project Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Safety and Wellbeing • Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness Update • Updated Affordable Housing Strategy 		
Related Council Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • June 27, 2022, CS01089, Update on Housing Needs Assessment • June 27, 2022, CS00939, Indigenous-led Shelters, Housing and Programming • June 27, 2022, CS00433, Indigenous Affordable Housing Strategy • April 11, 2023, CS01637, Enhanced Encampment and Unsheltered Homelessness Response Plan • May 1, 2023, CS01762, Edmonton's Approach (2023/24) - Supporting Those Experiencing Homelessness • June 19, 2023, CS01453, Multi - Disciplinary and Outreach Ecosystem • October 30, 2023, CS01673, Updated Affordable Housing Strategy • December 4, 2023, CS01853, Updated Community Plan to End Homelessness 		

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Previous Council/Committee Action

At the January 18, 2023, Executive Committee meeting, the following motion was passed:

That Administration, in collaboration with Homeward Trust Edmonton, report upon the implementation of "Edmonton's Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness".

Executive Summary

- Edmonton's Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness (2017) provides strategic goals, actions and targets to advance collective efforts to respond to the needs of Edmontonians experiencing homelessness. This Plan was intended to serve as a living document, identifying high-level strategies and targets up until 2027.
- Significant progress has been made, including successfully housing over 8,500 people since 2017 and committing funding to 644 additional permanent supportive housing units; however, unpredicted events, including the COVID-19 pandemic, forced the homeless-serving system to pause some Plan actions in order to prioritize delivery of emergency services to support those experiencing homelessness.
- "Learnings from Implementation of the 2017 Plan to Prevent & End Homelessness" (Attachment 1) provides a preliminary assessment of progress, opportunities and lessons learned based on relevant data sets and the experience of Homeward Trust and partners.
- An update of the Plan led by Homeward Trust and the City of Edmonton is underway and will include extensive engagement with individuals with lived experience, homeless-serving agencies and orders of government, to validate and augment these findings, gather input and inform the development of the updated Plan.

REPORT

Background

The City of Edmonton has worked with community organizations to end homelessness since the 1980s when homelessness first emerged as a modern wide-scale social problem¹.

Multiple studies have found that the causes of homelessness result from both individual factors and structural or systemic factors. Individual factors include a lack of job skills, low education and mental health issues. Individual factors also include significant negative life events, such as a job loss or family instability. Structural or systemic conditions that may lead to homelessness include a lack of access to social or affordable and adequate housing, racism in the housing market and other sectors and when public benefits are not meeting the needs of marginalized populations (for example, newcomers and refugees or individuals aging out of foster care).²

In 1999, the Edmonton Housing Trust Fund, which later became Homeward Trust Edmonton (Homeward Trust), became the lead coordinator and system planner organization for ending

¹ [Why Wasn't Homelessness a Social Problem Until the 1980s? Canadian Observatory on Homelessness/Homeless Hub: York University, January 2, 2015](#)

² www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2022001/article/00002-eng.htm

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homelessness. Since their inception, they have published two local community plans in partnership with the City of Edmonton: A Place to Call Home: Edmonton's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness (2009) and Edmonton's Updated Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness (2017).

Locally driven community plans determine strategies and actions that help a city achieve the collective goal of ending and preventing homelessness. Federal and provincial governments rely on designated community organizations to aggregate funds, determine priorities, and establish relationships with service partners that advance progress, an approach that by design seeks to empower organizations and municipalities to address homelessness based on their understanding of the unique needs of the population. As a result, unlike many other social issues in Canada, the effort to solve homelessness is organized at a local level. In Edmonton, Homeward Trust leads this effort, distributing funds on behalf of all three orders of government (as outlined in Attachment 1, 2023/24 funding for Homeward Trust included \$45.4 million from the Government of Alberta, \$15.2 million from the Government of Canada, and \$1.1 million from the City of Edmonton) to community organizations who deliver targeted programs that make up an integrated system of care. Homeward Trust provides annual updates to community, in addition to regular reporting to funders and ongoing collaboration with funded agencies through a number of committees.

In 2016, the number of people experiencing homelessness in Edmonton decreased by 43 per cent from its peak in 2008 due to investment in targeted interventions, particularly the implementation of Housing First programs.³ However, previous calls for increased investment in permanent supportive housing had not been addressed, resulting in a supply gap for those with complex health needs who require varied ongoing support to retain their housing. Using insights from improved data collection and continuous improvement practices, the 2017 Updated Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness established a roadmap to address the unique needs of people living with chronic health conditions, Indigenous peoples, youth, families and newcomers.

Recognizing the tremendous economic and social shifts that have occurred, Homeward Trust and the City of Edmonton established a project approach in November 2022 to update the 2017 Plan. The project approach includes an analysis of the progress, challenges and opportunities to inform engagement and strategy, based on the experience of the homeless serving sector and comprehensive data analysis from multiple sources. Attachment 1 - Learnings from Implementation of the 2017 Plan to Prevent & End Homelessness, provides an interim report on the implementation of the 2017 Plan with captured learnings. This report is being published concurrently to Updated Plan development and will inform the engagement process.

Progress Against the 2017 Plan

Building on the momentum of reducing homelessness by nearly half, the targeted interventions and investments established in the 2017 Plan were ambitious and driven by data. However, the plan had not considered a global event like the COVID-19 pandemic. Programs and services to help people access permanent housing were maintained during the pandemic despite the

³ endhomelessnessyeg.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Edmonton-Full-Booklet-web.pdf, pg 12

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sector-wide shift to focus on delivering emergency services for individuals experiencing homelessness with nowhere to isolate.

Notably, since 2017:

- More than 12,000 housing placements have been completed and 8,500 unique individuals were stably housed.
 - 88 per cent of those placements were for individuals experiencing chronic homelessness and 18 per cent catered to individuals who were sleeping rough or unsheltered.
 - 72 per cent of individuals remained stably housed 12 months after placement despite high chronicity rates.
- The average cost of housing each individual is \$21,600 per housing, including follow up support.
- Homeward Trust Edmonton, in partnership with the City of Edmonton, has increased the supply of supportive housing by 644 units available to people experiencing homelessness.
- The homeless serving system's caseload capacity has grown to actively support 2,366 people at any given time.
- Homeward Trust expanded the implementation of Coordinated Access, a single portal with 60 access points for those experiencing homelessness to be triaged and referred to services, and a corresponding By-Name List, which provides real-time information about the total number of people experiencing homelessness.
- There have been a number of successful coordinated housing and support responses to emerging and unpredictable circumstances, including work to re-house residents of Dwayne's Home and MacDonald Lofts, supporting evacuees from wildfires and a complete re-orientation of service delivery as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic and funding and policy changes limited the progress made on a number of actions outlined in the 2017 Plan. This includes:

- Challenges making progress on systems integration and accountability for some of the targets identified, particularly with justice and health systems.
- The impact of increasing inflow into homelessness and rising levels of complexity of need that has stretched the capacity of the existing system, challenging the assumptions about the types of interventions, and types and number of supportive housing units needed to end homelessness.
- The capacity to act fully on calls for funding as outlined in the 2017 Plan to increase housing capacity across programs.

For a full account of progress, challenges, and opportunities, please refer to Attachment 1.

Drivers of Homelessness

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities in the social safety net. A confluence of factors has increased the risk of homelessness for low-income households within Edmonton, evidenced by a growing inflow of individuals and families who are new to the homeless serving system. These factors include:

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- inflation and overall increased cost of living;
- tightening vacancy rates and increased demand for low-end of market rental units by a growing number of low-income households;
- increased demand for non-market affordable housing units that is outpacing new supply; and
- social assistance benefits that do not adequately cover cost of living expenses.

Preliminary analysis of 2021 census data demonstrates that Edmonton has seen significant population growth since 2016, increasing 8.3 per cent.⁴ Indigenous peoples now make up nearly six per cent of Edmonton's population, one of the highest rates in Canada and increasing by 15.7 per cent since 2016⁵. Nearly 49,000, or 1 out of 7, Edmonton households are living in core housing need⁶, meaning that these individuals and families are paying over 30 per cent of their income on housing.

Marginalized individuals and families, including those with disabilities, lone-parent households, and racialized or Indigenous peoples, are overrepresented in low and low-income categories (annual household income of less than \$49,000) of core housing need and are especially vulnerable to the economic shifts in the housing market. In many cases, people who fall into this category are reliant on government benefits.

Edmonton has more than 360,000 homes, but fewer than 15,000 social and affordable housing units. It is forecasted that strong population growth, higher mortgage rates and increased costs of living will drive demand for rental accommodation over the next few years. This will result in decreased apartment vacancy rates and a more expensive rental market⁷, which is already particularly challenging for low-income households who have to compete for a small number of units they can afford. Waitlists to access affordable housing continue to grow. CIVIDA, one of Edmonton's largest affordable housing providers, operates nearly 4,500 units in the community housing program while maintaining a waitlist of over 7,260 households (March 2023).⁸ Furthermore, the Edmonton Food Bank announced in August 2023 that it has been serving double the number of people served at the height of the pandemic in 2020.⁹

The homeless serving system has capacity limitations that cannot address the substantial increase of demand for housing services. There has been a 68 per cent increase in the number of

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www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/fogs-spg/Page.cfm?lang=E&topic=1&dguid=2021A00054811061

⁵ "Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population".

www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&SearchText=alberta&DGUIDlist=2021S0503835,2021A000248&GENDERlist=1,2,3&STATISTIClist=1,4&HEADERlist=0

⁶ edmonton.ca/sites/default/files/public-files/assets/PDF/Housing-Needs-Assessment-August-2022.pdf

⁷ Pg 16,

assets.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/sites/cmhc/professional/housing-markets-data-and-research/market-reports/housing-market-outlook/2023/housing-market-outlook-spring-2023-en.pdf?rev=5c29bc91-2310-435f-b2c9-b801866d0ede

⁸ Provided by CIVIDA for the Affordable Housing Needs Assessment

⁹ <https://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/hamper-distribution-up-26-per-cent-at-edmonton-food-bank-in-2023>

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people seeking housing services between 2019 and 2022.¹⁰ This challenges who and how quickly a person can be supported once they have accessed the system.

Factors Changing the State of Homelessness

There are additional factors influencing Edmonton's landscape that require a number of intersecting systems to work together more effectively. These factors include:

- the drug-poisoning crisis;
- an overall increased representation of complexity of need and chronicity;
- in-flow of people into homelessness from correctional facilities and health institutions;
- Indigenous peoples continuing to be over-represented in Edmonton's homeless population; and
- capacity and service limitations in emergency shelter and day service facilities.

In the 2022 Point In Time Count (PiT), 84 per cent of individuals experiencing homelessness who responded self-identified a substance use challenge, while 66 per cent self-identified a mental health challenge. The rising rates of substance and mental-health challenges may also be contributing to an overall rise in chronic homelessness, from 59 per cent in 2016 to 65 per cent in 2022.¹¹

Administrative data from the 2022 PiT count also reveals an increase from 12 people experiencing homelessness counted in public health and corrections systems in 2016 to 404 people in 2022. . This increase may be explained in part by improved data collection practices, but is an indicator of the health precarity of those experiencing homelessness.¹² The 2022 PiT count also introduced new data demonstrating that 185 people enumerated were accessing treatment or detox programs.¹³ It is expected that many of these individuals will not resolve their homelessness while they are staying in these facilities, and that upon discharge, many of these individuals will present with a higher degree of complexity and different needs than that of the general population.

Approximately 55 per cent of Edmonton's population experiencing homelessness is Indigenous. Indigenous people are also disproportionately represented in correctional institutions and among people fleeing domestic violence.

The combination of increased inflow into homelessness and the factors highlighted above can offer some explanation for increased shelter use and decreased capacity, even in the summer months. In July 2023, emergency shelters in Edmonton reported full utilization.¹⁴ Historically, Edmonton has had shelter capacity even when the weather is cold. Over the course of winter 2022/23, there were approximately 1,202 emergency shelter spaces (including temporary beds)

¹⁰ [By Name List Analysis, pg 12, Attachment 1](#)

¹¹ [Point in Time Count Analysis, pg 16, Attachment 1](#)

¹² [Point In Time Count Analysis, pg 16, Attachment 1](#)

¹³ [Point In Time Count Analysis, pg 15-16, Attachment 1](#)

¹⁴ [Shelter Occupancy Rates, pg 14, Attachment 1](#)

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made available by the Government of Alberta.¹⁵ Occupancy of these shelter spaces were routinely around 70 per cent capacity and over 75 per cent capacity during extreme weather events.¹⁶

Lessons Learned

A complete list of lessons learned based on progress against the 2017 Plan is available in Attachment 1. The following paragraphs provide a brief summary.

The increasing complexity of need in Edmonton's homeless population requires increased supportive housing and other supportive living options. Higher rates of recidivism in scattered-site Housing First models, which involves renting units in independent private rental markets, is observed among individuals with complex health needs. The longer a person experiences homelessness, the higher their risk of worsening physical and mental health issues. An increased supply of supportive and/or supported living options with 24/7 supports is needed, including integrated services for mental health, physical health, addictions treatment and culturally appropriate care.

The increasing inflow into homelessness exceeds the current system's capacity, which highlights the need to increase affordable housing supply and develop or enhance policies and programs that prevent people from becoming homeless. There exists a large, and growing, body of evidence which proves that Housing First continues to be best practice for ending homelessness for a large number of people in a wide variety of settings¹⁷. The evidence of both the success of Housing First programs and increased demand for services indicates a need to increase the capacity of the housing system while also working with systems that control other resources to decrease the flow into homelessness. Some possible avenues to address this challenge include:

- considering implementation of extended intervention and support periods for those in Housing First programs who may need it;
- identifying opportunities to work with other systems, like income support services and health, to ensure sustainable financial and medical support for newly housed individuals; and
- continuing to increase a range of affordable housing options, including supportive housing, across Edmonton and strengthening homelessness prevention programs.

A renewed commitment to enhance accountability and reorient the homeless serving system of care from emergency decision making is needed. The 2017 Plan called for support services across multiple sectors to be integrated into the homeless-serving system of care through the development of an accountability framework. As the sector shifted to provide emergency response services at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, decision making also shifted into an emergency response model driven by immediate needs present in the community. This shift in work is a testimony to the adaptability and responsiveness of the 2017 Plan and sector as a whole. This resulted in the introduction of varied bridge housing options like the Coliseum Inn and the Jockey Dorms, activating emergency responses like the Expo Centre and Tipinawâw, and working with housing and shelter service providers to reduce the risk of illness and death from COVID-19. However, there is a need to realign efforts across the sector to enhance integration

¹⁵ open.alberta.ca/opendata/funded-emergency-shelters-daily-occupancy-ab

¹⁶ open.alberta.ca/opendata/funded-emergency-shelters-daily-occupancy-ab

¹⁷ Housing First, Homeless Hub

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that focuses on proactive planning and alignment to make sense of existing services and evaluate their effectiveness in achieving system-level outcomes.

Community Plan Project Update

Homeward Trust and Administration are working with pipikwan pēhtâkwan and Y Station Ltd., who are working as a single team, to execute data analysis, public engagement and communications to develop an Updated Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness. There is consideration of alignment between this work, related community initiatives, and the City Plan Goals and Targets, Community Safety and Well-being Framework and Corporate Homelessness Plan (under development). Focus groups and outreach to individuals and tables with lived/living experience of homelessness began in July. Additional sessions with homeless serving agencies, public services including health and justice, housing providers, and others are underway and will continue through the Fall. Homeward Trust and Administration are also leveraging the recently completed 2023 Housing Needs Assessment (to be released October 30, 2023) and upcoming updated Affordable Housing Strategy (Community Services report CS01673, December 4, 2023) alongside client-level data forecasting to determine housing types needed by those experiencing homelessness.

Budget/Financial Implications

The Updated Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness will provide targets for different types of operational and capital investments necessary to ensure every Edmontonian experiencing homelessness has housing options. This report is expected to be complete in 2024 and will inform costs associated with the Corporate Homelessness Plan (due 2024) and investment priorities in the Updated Affordable Housing Strategy (CS01673).

Community Insight

Learnings from Implementation of the 2017 Plan to Prevent & End Homelessness (Attachment 1) is a preliminary assessment based on available data. The Plan Update will leverage this work through significant engagement with Indigenous peoples, Nations and Indigenous serving organizations, service providers, housing providers, neighbourhood and community groups, government and systems (community and social services, health, justice, and education), people with lived experience of homelessness and housing insecurity, and targeted individuals who play an important role in ending homelessness in the community. The methodology for data collection includes interviews, small and large group sessions, and large engagement events with targeted audiences. Virtual options and custom digital surveys will be offered to individuals or groups that may not be able to engage in person.

GBA+

Housing precarity and homelessness disproportionately impacts marginalized communities, including but not limited to Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, lone-parent households, 2SLGBTQI+ persons, and racialized communities. The data provided in this report notes the overrepresentation of some groups in client-level data from Homeward Trust and census data. The data is a critical component of the lessons learned analysis as it speaks to the need for individualized programs and services that consider the intersectional identities and unique

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barriers faced by individuals. The data prompts the homelessness serving sector, including the City of Edmonton, to identify equity seeking measures that can be implemented. While this report is interim, it informs how engagement will need to seek out the voices of those who are disproportionately impacted and have valuable lived expertise to share. The consultants who are leading engagement for the Plan Update are committed to Indigenous methodologies and guiding principles and values including keeoukaywin “The Visiting Way”, relationality, collective accountability and empowerment, centering lived experiences, and the Two Eyed Seeing Approach.¹⁸

Attachments

1. Learnings from Implementation of the 2017 Plan to Prevent & End Homelessness

¹⁸ <https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/aps/index.php/aps/article/view/29336/pdf>