

What We Heard Report

The City of Edmonton *Homelessness and Housing Services Plan*

Affordable Housing and Homelessness,
Social Development, Community Services

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SHAPE OUR CITY

Edmonton

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INTRODUCTION

Project Overview

Between Spring 2023 and Spring 2024, Administration completed three rounds of engagement with a variety of sample populations, including Edmontonians, funders and service providers, people with lived or living experience of homelessness, and City colleagues across the Corporation. These rounds of engagement were amongst several inputs that will form the City of Edmonton's *Homelessness and Housing Services Plan* (also known as the Corporate Homelessness Plan but for the remainder of this report will be referred to as "the Plan"). The three rounds of engagement involved the following participants:

- 641 Edmontonians through public opinion research
- 100 City of Edmonton Staff across 27 business areas and additional collaborative partners across the homeless serving system, including the Edmonton Public Library and the Edmonton Police Service
 - 67 City of Edmonton staff in the first round of engagement
 - Over 50 City of Edmonton staff in the final round of engagement for validation
 - Additional validation sessions with allied systems of care including the Government of Alberta, Homeward Trust Edmonton, and service providers
- 177 individuals from funders, agencies, and other system actors and 154 individuals with lived/living experience of homelessness through 2024 Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness project engagement, which occurred in an integrated way with the Corporate Homelessness Plan development
- 32 youth aged 16-25 with experiences sleeping outside over the last year

Administration presented CS01732 Corporate Homelessness Plan - Research and Project Update to City Council on May 31, 2023. At that time, Administration had completed public opinion research with 641 Edmontonians as well as a jurisdictional scan of Canadian municipalities'

responses to homelessness and case studies of four American municipalities. Some of this What We Heard report is a review of that public opinion research. Direction from City Council on May 31, 2023, led to additional research as well as refined and targeted engagement with City of Edmonton business areas.

For the third time since 2009, the City of Edmonton partnered with Homeward Trust Edmonton to develop a new Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness. Lived experience and sector-wide engagement efforts between the two plans were intentionally integrated. This decision was based on recognition that the two plans are influenced by shared stakeholders and that the two plans have common goals to prevent and end homelessness, so the learnings would apply to both. This offered additional benefits regarding time management to avoid engagement fatigue.

The various engagement inputs led to the development and refinement of three categories in which the City of Edmonton can organize its work, with a goal statement for each category. The categories of work have two to three objectives, with each objective having two to four possible actions, performance measurement indicators, and Corporate accountabilities for implementation. The goals, objectives, and actions were cross-referenced with the draft recommendations in the 2024 Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness to ensure alignment between the two plans. They were also continuously cross-referenced against other plans, policies, and leading practices.

What We Heard

Phase 1: Public Opinion Research Summary Themes

Participants of the public opinion survey, interview and focus groups were presented with a list of activities that the City of Edmonton has been, or is, undertaking. They were asked to rank the importance of these activities to them, with the following suggested themes emerging:

- Enhance security and outreach support in transit settings
- Construct units of affordable housing

- Coordinate homelessness response among homeless serving agencies, Alberta Health Services, and Provincial social services (including mental health and addiction services)
- Provide safe shelter spaces all year round
- Connect people in encampments to support
- Implement shelter standards to improve accessibility and appropriateness of emergency shelters

Lived Experience interviews validated what was heard in the public opinion research with some key differences:

- Greater focus on support programs, skills building and employment readiness
- Desire for accountability of programs and services
- Strong associations between high cost of living/affordability of housing and homelessness
- Critical attitude of police and/or fire as primary responders to homelessness

Phase 2: Internal Engagement Summary Themes

Administration completed engagement in July and August of 2023 with business areas identified as having a role in, or taking on work related to, responding to homelessness. A number of themes emerged from the first round of internal engagement (and second round of project engagement), most notably:

- The staff members interviewed offered many opportunities to help address homelessness, even though homelessness may not be their area of expertise. This would be echoed in the third round of engagement to validate the draft plan. Everyone wants to help.
- Most business areas interviewed did not focus their activities on ending homelessness but on addressing the symptoms or impacts of homelessness on their work.
- Sometimes there is incompatibility between the mandate or scope of responsibilities of some business areas and the prioritization of efforts to address homelessness (e.g. incompatibility between the protection of green spaces and management of River Valley encampments).

Phase 3 Summary Themes

The internal validation exercise was framed as a way to build awareness that Affordable Housing and Homelessness may be approaching business areas in the future to collaborate, as well as an education opportunity for areas that may not be directly impacted by the plan but would still benefit from knowing it is coming. Business areas were provided with a worksheet of draft objectives and actions for their area, they all expressed support for the intention of the plan and agreed with the need for it.

- All business areas indicated training or information sessions would be useful but the format and delivery of those sessions should be explored to meet a variety of positions' needs (from outreach, to front-line positions responding to homelessness, to policy makers).
- Actions centred around coordination of existing resources were received positive responses, while the need for additional resources was often flagged as a risk or serious consideration for the action's implementation potential
- Subject matter experts had important perspectives and experiences to offer during discussions around the feasibility of actions, as well as identifying gaps and barriers to services (for example, the experiences of newcomers and undocumented people, or the absence of services on weekends for vulnerable folks).
- Ultimately, there was significant support for the Plan itself, so long as it resulted in proactive planning and enhanced coordination related to service delivery, budgets, reporting, and outcomes.
- There was support for Affordable Housing and Homelessness leading the implementation of the Plan and commitments to collaborate to achieve the goals of the three categories of work.

"You know how there is upper, middle, and poverty class in Canada? Well, even below that there is a hierarchy [of] homelessness. The good homeless people and the bad homeless people. When you know they think you are the bottom of the bottom, there is no point to even try" - Lived Experience Engagement with Boyle Street Community Services, Y Station and pipikwan p̄h̄t̄kwan, 2024 Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness

Integrated Community Engagement Themes

Lived Experience Engagement for the 2024 Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness:

- Individuals feel they need greater and more appropriate supports for their concerns
- Individuals do not see the supply of affordable housing or culturally appropriate supports matching their needs

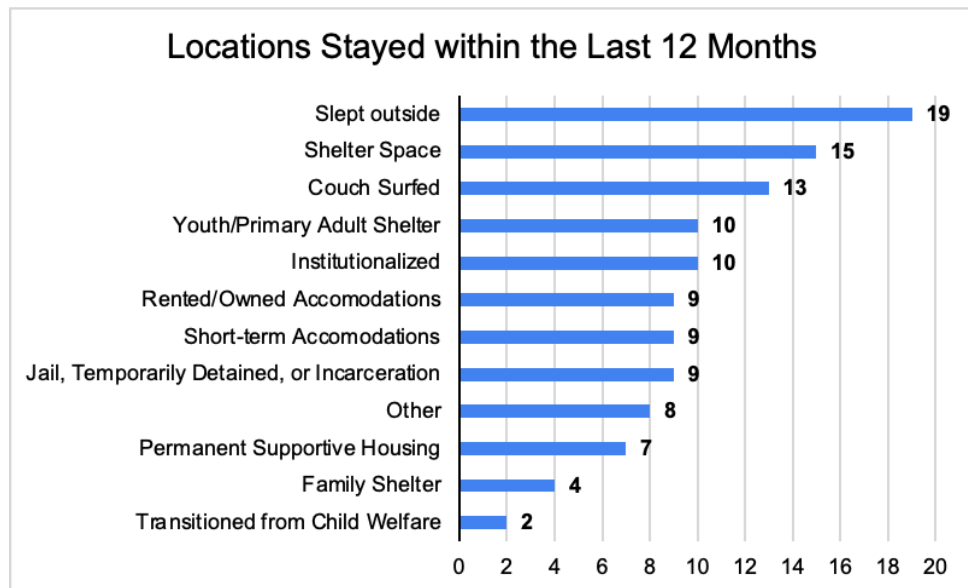
- A negative impact on individual perception of their ability to make a successful exit from their state of homelessness

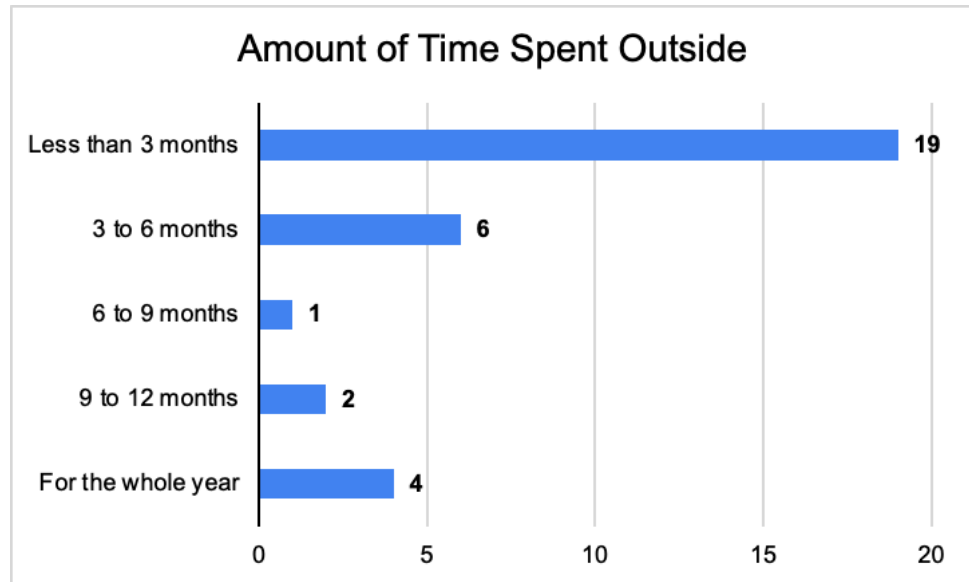
Service Provider and Funder Engagement for the 2024 Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness:

- Alignment among front line workers and administrators that individuals have more complex needs in terms of disabilities, addictions and mental health but available supports do not address that complexity, making it difficult for those experiencing homelessness to find and maintain housing.
- The homeless-serving system and intersecting systems are still operating in silos and current funding structures unintentionally enhance siloing.
- There is a desire from the sector to meet more frequently in structured settings to discuss emerging issues and opportunities.

Community-based research with youth that have experienced homelessness:

- We heard that youth experiencing unsheltered homelessness have some similarities to adults, such as high rates of self-reported health concerns and low rates of support for those health concerns.





- We heard that relationship or family breakdown is a cause for youth homelessness. We also heard it is the most reported reason for staying outside (ie. staying outside with a partner or friend, either out of loyalty to the relationship or for safety).

What We Did

Phase 1: Analysis of the Public Opinion Research

Administration included a summary of the public opinion research with CS01732 Corporate Homelessness Plan - Research and Project Update on May 31, 2023. The public opinion research revealed that Edmontonians would like the City to focus more on prevention. One clear outcome from this engagement input was further research into possible municipal prevention activities and policies.

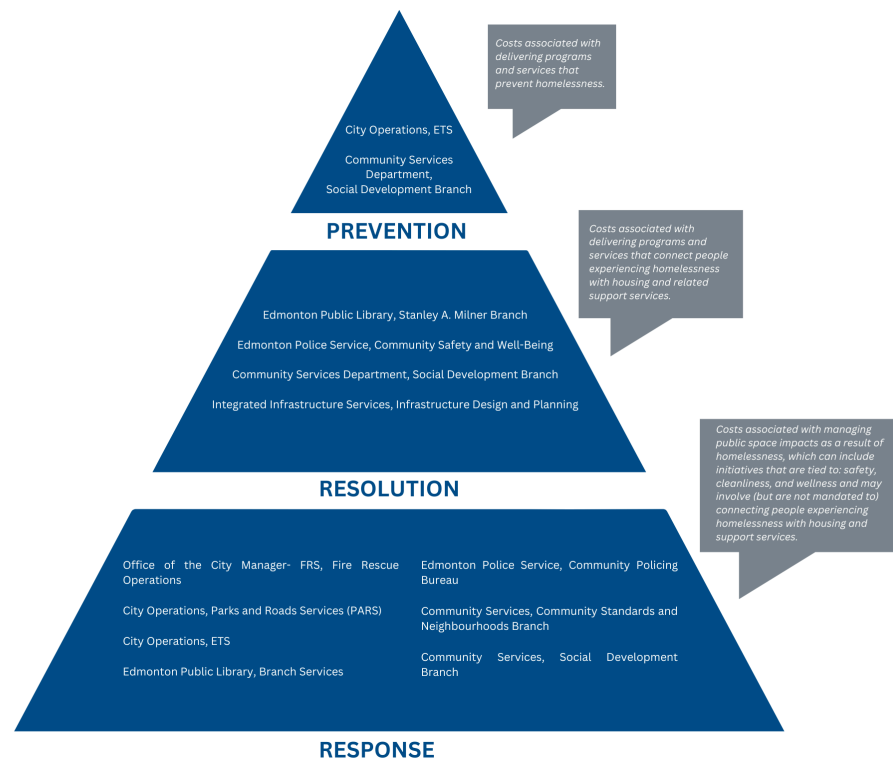
Phase 2: Analysis of the Internal Engagement

Administration analyzed the data from the internal interviews and provided a What We Heard report back to the engaged business areas. This helped the project team make some early changes to the language of the Plan and the structure of the Plan. It also helped the project team identify gaps in research and engagement and refine the questions that should be asked in the future rounds of engagement.

Phase 2 Deep Dive: Re-evaluating How to Categorize the Work

In the first round of internal engagement, City staff and representatives from the Edmonton Public Library and Edmonton Police Services were asked to

place any activities they do in their work related to homelessness in three categories. These categories were inspired by the categories used in another municipality found during jurisdictional scanning. The project team heard that while participants were able to list many activities, they were not resonating with the categories and definitions provided. As a result, the project team re-evaluated the category names and definitions and proposed new names and definitions to more accurately reflect the activities identified by the business areas. As a result, the category names being used in the Plan are: Homelessness Prevention, Homelessness Resolution, and Homelessness Response.



Phase 2 and 3: Development and Refinement of the Categories of Work

Goal statements were created for each category of work with objectives and possible actions to achieve that objective. The actions and objectives were regularly cross-referenced to existing and emerging inputs, including the public opinion research, the What We Heard report from the internal engagement, the results from the engagement for the 2024 Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness and community-based research with unsheltered youth, and finally, the draft recommendations for the 2024 Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness. Goals, objectives and

actions were also cross-referenced to other corporate plans including the Transit Safety Plan, Community Safety and Wellbeing, and other business area guiding documents and plans to ensure alignment.

"I believe it impacts the budget and finances of the city because when there is a huge problem of homelessness, the city pays more to build and fund shelters or build and fund low-income housing" - Lived Experience Interview Participant, Pivotal Public Opinion Research, Phase 1

Phase 3: Internal and Targeted Validation

Affordable Housing and Homelessness transcribed all notes and comments from in-person and virtual focus groups and discussions as well as the responses from worksheets prepared by Affordable Housing and Homelessness to validate the draft goals, objectives and actions. The responses were scanned for major risks or barriers as well as emerging innovations or suggestions to improve the objectives and actions. The project team also screened for actions that will require an increase in resources.

PUBLIC AND INTERNAL ENGAGEMENT APPROACH

How and Why We Engaged

In 2022, a report by the City Auditor found that the City of Edmonton does not have a coordinated approach to addressing homelessness. City Council approved the recommendations from the City Auditor's report, including the development of a performance measurement framework and Corporate accountabilities to the Plan's actions. It is also listed as a key action in the City of Edmonton's Affordable Housing Strategy (2023-2026). Additional direction regarding a financial analysis was given on May 31, 2023 for CS01732, Corporate Homelessness Plan - Research and Project Update. As a result, a number of actions were undertaken by Administration to respond to this direction in the development of the Plan.

Phase	Population	Method	Lead
1	Edmontonians, individuals with lived experience of homelessness, and individuals with self-reported exposure to unsheltered homelessness	Focus groups, online panel survey, and lived experience Interviews	Pivotal Research Inc. and Affordable Housing and Homelessness
2	City of	Email invitations	Community

	Edmonton staff	to Branch Managers to opt into participating in focus groups	Services Department Strategy Section and Affordable Housing and Homelessness
2	Finance representatives from City of Edmonton business areas	Email invitations to attend virtual Q&A sessions before submitting finances in a Google Sheet template	Community Services Financial and Corporate Services and Affordable Housing and Homelessness
2	Individuals with Lived/Living Experience of homelessness Funders, community organizations, allied systems of care	Online survey, focus groups, facilitated in-person discussions, roving dialogue, in Circle with Elders	Homeward Trust, Y Station Consulting, pipikwan pèhtâkwan, and Affordable Housing and Homelessness
2	Youth with lived experiences of unsheltered homelessness	In-person survey and focus groups	MAPS Alberta, Action Alliance for Youth Inclusion, and Affordable Housing and Homelessness
3	City of Edmonton staff	Two in-person open houses, focus groups and 1:1 discussions, and a worksheet template for feedback	Affordable Housing and Homelessness

Who Was Engaged

Phase 1: Market Research

- 641 Edmontonians through open panel survey
- Six focus groups
- Five lived experience interviews
- GBA+ analysis (Exposure to homelessness):
 - 141 - High Exposure

- 312 - Medium Exposure
- 188 - Low Exposure
- Further breakdown of subgroups:
 - 41 - Individuals self-reporting they are experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness
 - 58 - Individuals self-identified as Indigenous
 - 130 - Identified as young males

Phase 2: Internal Corporate-wide Engagement

- Community Services Department:
 - Affordable Housing and Homelessness
 - Safe and Healthy Communities
 - Animal Care and Park Rangers
 - Community Standards Peace Officers
 - Neighbourhood Services
 - River Valley and Horticulture
 - Indigenous Relations
 - Complaints and Investigations
 - Community Resources and Recreation Centres
- City Operations
 - Transit Safety
 - Infrastructure Operations
- Integrated Infrastructure Services
 - Facility Infrastructure Delivery
 - Facility Planning and Design
 - Open Spaces Planning and Design
- Urban Planning and Economy
 - DCMO
 - Economic Investment Services
 - Planning and Environment Services
- Office of the City Manager
 - Edmonton Fire Rescue, Public Safety
- Edmonton Police Services
- Edmonton Public Library

Phase 3: Internal Targeted Validation

The following business areas were provided with worksheets to validate the exercises independently if desired:

- Affordable Housing and Homelessness - Prevention and Outreach
- 311
- Communications
- Neighbourhood Services
- Transit Safety (COTT)
- Safe and Healthy Communities (COTT & HSOC)
- Community Recreation and Culture
- RECOVER Urban Wellbeing
- Community Resources
- Integrated Infrastructure Services
- Intergovernmental Relations
- Real Estate
- Development Approvals and Inspections
- Operations Business Performing and Analytics
- Edmonton Fire and Rescue Services (HSOC)

The following business areas, departments and key external partners requested or were offered a presentation and/or focus group and/or attended the open house:

- Affordable Housing and Homelessness - Prevention & Tenant Support Services and Outreach
- 311
- Community Standards and Neighbourhoods
- Community Recreation and Culture
- Communications
- RECOVER Urban Wellbeing
- Development Approvals
- Edmonton Police Services and the Joint Encampment Response Committee
- Intergovernmental Relations
- City Operations Leadership Team
- Homeward Trust Edmonton
- The Government of Alberta
- Edmonton Public Library

Integrated Community Engagement Participants

- Community Plan Lived Experience Engagement: 154 individuals living in shelters, supportive housing, and encampments at the time of the

dialogue.

- Community Plan Service Provider and Funder Engagement: 177 individuals working in the homeless serving system of care were engaged through an online survey or in-person through facilitated discussions.
- Community-based research on youth experiences in encampments: 32 individuals aged 16-25 were engaged. The Canadian definition of “youth homelessness” caps at 24 years old but neurobiology suggests that the human brain continues to develop and mature until 25.

What Was Asked

Phase 1: Market Research Sample Questions

“I think that the longer [youth are] on the street, the more likely it is they’re going to get exposed to or involved in something that potentially could be life altering for them; and you know that’s a huge concern... Some of the feedback we’ve gotten from adults when they fall into homelessness is the shock and helpless feeling of ‘I don’t know what to do.’ The systems that we have can take anywhere from 90 days before they get in contact with the houseless person. And in the meantime, they’re trying to navigate the streets, for however long until they get that support. Now imagine being a kid, or somebody 19 or 20 years old, trying to navigate [that] and not necessarily knowing where to go. How do you navigate that?” - Community-based research on youth experiences in encampments participant

Examples of questions provided in the focus groups and lived-experience interviews included participants being asked to share their perceptions about homelessness in Edmonton. They were also asked if their perceptions have an impact on their own behaviours, how they measure success in addressing homelessness, and who is responsible for addressing homelessness.

Survey participants were presented with a simplified list of activities being undertaken by the City of Edmonton. Using this list of activities, they were then asked to rate the level of involvement desired from the City of Edmonton in those activities and to rank the importance of those activities to them. Another sample question from the survey asked participants to, “Indicate your level of agreement with the following statement about what success in addressing homelessness would look like using a scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree”. Participants could select “Don’t Know” if they were not sure or did not understand what is being asked.

Phase 2: Internal Engagement Sample Questions

- How might you see your work contributing to the City’s response to homelessness? How do you track or measure this work?
- Are there tools, resources, policies, frameworks in place to help guide your work in homelessness response?
- What is working well and leading you towards meeting the City’s goal around ending all chronic and episodic homelessness?
- What is not working well and would need to be changed in order to

meet the City's goal to end homelessness?

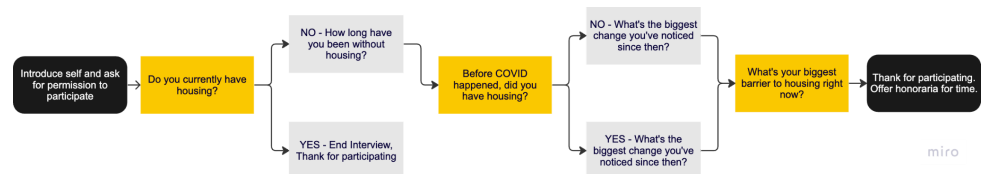
- What makes the work that you and your team do in response to homelessness unique?

Phase 3: Internal Validation Sample Questions:

- Are any of these proposed actions out of alignment with your business area's goals?
- Would this action require additional resources to implement?
- Is there anyone else we should connect with on this action?

Integrated Community Engagement Questions:

Community Plan Lived Experience Engagement: The researchers created opportunities for qualitative data through story-telling. They successfully created and supported dialogue with participants by meeting them where they were at. This took many forms, from setting up a coffee station outside of a participating agency, to participating in a Sweatlodge Ceremony before the dialogue took place, to holding focus groups on site and in Circle with Elders. The story-telling, or qualitative data, was analyzed for themes. Demographic information was recorded only when it was self-reported by participants.



Community Plan Agency and Funder Engagement:

- What are the barriers for collaboration right now?
- What is working to keep people housed?
- What is the main reason for why houselessness is a problem in Edmonton?
- How do you measure the impact and effectiveness of your housing initiatives?
- What is something you have either seen or heard about that works well elsewhere?

Community-based research on youth experiences in encampments sample questions:

- Participants were asked where they stayed last night and then where they've stayed anytime during the past 12 months. The options were:

slept outside (park, roadside, doorway), couch surfed, shelter space (emergency shelters), short term accommodations (transitional housing), permanent supportive housing (group home/harm reduction), rented or owned accommodation, and jailed, temporarily detained, or other incarceration.

- Participants were asked to rate their overall health by considering their mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Participants were given a scale from 1 to 4 to use for this question: 1 = very unhealthy; 2 = somewhat unhealthy; 3 = somewhat healthy; and 4 = very healthy.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

On May 21, 2024 The City of Edmonton and Homeward Trust Edmonton, will present a draft of the 2024 Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness to Community and Public Services Committee. Feedback from this meeting may influence the City of Edmonton's Corporate Homelessness Plan. After those influences are considered and included as needed, CS01759 The City of Edmonton's Housing and Homelessness Services Plan (formerly known as the Corporate Homelessness Plan) will be released and presented to Community and Public Services Committee on June 17, 2024.