

**OFFICE OF  
THE CITY AUDITOR**

# **REPORT**

**EMERGENCY SUPPORT RESPONSE  
TEAM RECEPTION CENTRE  
MANAGEMENT AUDIT**

**AUGUST 15, 2024**

# Report Summary

## BACKGROUND

The Emergency Support Response Team (ESRT) provides social services to people who are displaced from their homes during an emergency or disaster. This support is intended to meet immediate needs such as shelter, food, and clothing.

ESRT is part of the City's Office of Emergency Management, within the Fire Rescue Services Branch.

## AUDIT OBJECTIVE & SCOPE<sup>1</sup>

The objective of this audit was to determine whether ESRT plans for and operates reception centres to effectively support displaced persons.

The audit looked at the 2023 and May 2024 reception centre activations. The scope of our audit did not include other daily operations of ESRT or the Office of Emergency Management.

## WHAT WE FOUND

Overall we found that ESRT plans for and operates reception centres to effectively support displaced people. In particular we found ESRT:

- Has documented and sufficiently detailed roles and responsibilities for most roles involved with reception centre activations allowing them to efficiently onboard new ESRT members to bring them up to speed for reception centre operations.
- Uses experience with past activations and completion of additional emergency management training for scheduling shifts for key roles at reception centres to effectively match the right people up with the right roles.
- Has exceeded their targeted number of City staff trained to work in the reception centres helping to

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<sup>1</sup> We conducted this engagement in conformance with the Institute of Internal Auditors' *International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing*.

ensure that adequate supply of trained staff are available for future activations.

- Manages the amount of staff required to operate the reception centres by using documented criteria to schedule shifts, ending shifts early during slow periods, and adjusting the total personnel on site to match the number of services they are providing.
- Informally identifies opportunities for improvement and generally implements the key opportunities that they identify.
- Collects and tracks the required information that the Financial Service Branch needs to prepare a submission for reimbursement by the Province.

However, we also found the following areas where ESRT can improve its effectiveness:

- The documentation for a few key roles did not fully capture the breadth of their responsibilities or specific training preferences.
- ESRT relies on staff members' home position supervisors to monitor and approve timesheets for hours worked during reception centre shifts, which could be done in addition to hours worked in their home position. In order to accurately approve time, home position supervisors need access to hours worked at the ESRT reception centre, as well as an understanding of the expectations around not working on earned days off, maximum daily hours, and required rest time between shifts. This information was not readily available to home position supervisors.
- ESRT does not have a formal process to evaluate every reception centre activation, and there was one instance where ESRT did not fully implement a key opportunity for improvement as they originally intended.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recommendation 1 We recommend that the Emergency Support Response Team identify and document the full list of responsibilities and training requirements for key roles during a reception centre activation.
- Recommendation 2 We recommend that the Emergency Support Response Team provide home position supervisors with sufficient information of ESRT's expectation of their oversight, and access to the reception centre shift information.
- Recommendation 3 We recommend that the Emergency Support Response Team implement a post-activation process that evaluates activations for lessons learned and tracks implementation of identified opportunities for improvement.

## WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Continuously improving ESRTs planning and operations of reception centres will lead to clearer practices and processes, increase their effectiveness, and reduce succession risk for future operations. These improvements will lead to a better experience for the people working at and using the reception centres.

# Emergency Support Response Team Details

## BACKGROUND

The Emergency Support Response Team (ESRT) provides emergency social services to support people displaced from their homes during an emergency or disaster. ESRT reception centres are intended to meet immediate needs such as shelter, food, and clothing. ESRT is part of the City's Office of Emergency Management, within the Fire Rescue Services Branch.

## ESRT COMPOSITION

ESRT is made up of:

- The Assistant Deputy Chief, Emergency Management and Communications.
- An Emergency Management Officer.
- Two ESRT Coordinators.
- Over 1,000 ESRT members - these are City employees with a home position outside of ESRT. These City employees have completed ESRT training and may be required to support ESRT activities. Examples of roles these employees fill to support ESRT include:
  - Incident Commander
  - Scheduling Coordinator
  - Systems Lead
  - Registration Services
  - Lodging Services

## ESRT PROGRAM

ESRT Coordinators are responsible for oversight of the ESRT program. This includes recruitment and training of ESRT members, maintaining a call-out list and inventory of logistical assets (such as vehicles, computers, and cots), and updating all ESRT operational and performance information.

ESRT operates in two different modes: daily operations and reception centre activation.

## Daily Operations

Daily operations involve responding to day-to-day local emergencies such as a house or apartment fire. Each coordinator alternates being on call on a 24/7 basis to be able to assess and respond to these emergency situations. They determine whether additional resources or logistics are required based on the number of people displaced.

During their daily operations, ESRT Coordinators also prepare for reception centre activations. This includes recruiting and training new ESRT members, maintaining operational and performance information, and updating ESRT forms and processes.

## Reception Centre Activation

When a major emergency or catastrophe requires the evacuation of residents (either in Edmonton or from other municipalities), the City's Emergency Operations Centre may activate ESRT to establish a reception centre.

The primary purpose of the reception centre is to preserve the physical and emotional well-being of evacuees affected by an emergency or disaster.

During an activation, ESRT is responsible for the following phases of establishing a reception centre:

**Mobilization** - The physical set-up of a reception centre, including establishment of a computer network that ESRT members use to register evacuees.

**Operation** - 24/7 day-to-day operation of reception centres which provide three services:

1. Reception Services - meet and greet, registration and inquiry, referral and information
2. Essential Services - food, shelter, clothing
3. Personal Services - family reunification, medical assistance, mental wellness support, pet care

During the operation phase, ESRT also tracks personnel, materials, and cost of contracted services related to running the reception centre. The Financial Services Branch later

submits these expenses to the Province or evacuated municipality for reimbursement.

**Demobilization** - Take down of the reception centre to restore the site to its original state. This includes storing and accounting for supplies that were not used during the operation phase.

### Recent Reception Centre Activations

In recent years ESRT has been activated five times to establish reception centres to support displaced persons:

#### ESRT Activations 2023 and 2024\*

Evacuation Date & Location	Operational Period (Days)	Displaced Persons Supported (approximate)
May 2023 - Drayton Valley	22	3,100
June 2023 - Edson	12	1,800
August - September 2023 - Northwest Territories	33	7,500
May 2024 - Fort McMurray	5	1,900
July 2024 - Jasper* (ONGOING)	23	2,600

\*As of August 14, 2024

# Document Role Responsibilities and Training Requirements

## KEY FINDINGS

ESRT has well documented roles and responsibilities for front line roles that interact with people who are directly affected by an emergency. These roles include registration services, food services, and lodging services.

However, we found ESRT has not fully documented all the key roles involved in reception centre management:

- The full breadth of responsibilities are not documented for Scheduling Coordinator and Systems Lead roles.
- Specific training requirements are not fully documented for the Incident Commander role.

## UNDOCUMENTED RESPONSIBILITIES

We found that ESRT has not fully documented all of the work done by the Scheduling Coordinator and Systems Lead roles. These roles are key to reception centre operations.

The documentation for these roles only focuses on the responsibilities required as first steps of a reception centre activation. Both of these roles are crucial for reception centre mobilization to be successful, and are part of the first group to be notified upon reception centre activation. However, the documentation does not fully capture some of the tasks these roles complete during or after an activation.

One example of these undocumented responsibilities, for both roles, is assisting the ESRT Coordinator in identifying risks for safety hazard assessments. Another example is the Scheduling Coordinator's responsibility to provide home supervisors with information about the reception centre shifts that their staff work. This includes giving direction on where their staff should



be coding their time and any updated policy changes that relate to ESRT.

### UNDOCUMENTED TRAINING REQUIREMENTS

We found ESRT has not documented the training requirements for the Incident Commander role.

ESRT requires anyone they schedule as an Incident Commander to have completed Incident Command System (ICS) 300 training. ICS is the framework ESRT uses to establish structure to its emergency responses. The ICS 300 course is designed to enable personnel to operate efficiently during an incident or event. Using ICS in supervisory roles is a way of setting common expectations. We found that this training requirement is not documented in any of the materials that describe roles and responsibilities for Incident Commanders.

### WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Documenting all responsibilities and training requirements for key roles will help:

- Establish clear expectations for staff performing the roles.
- Ensure staff have the qualifications required to perform the roles.
- Help new staff understand their roles.

### RECOMMENDATION 1

Identify and document the full list of responsibilities and training requirements for key roles during a reception centre activation.



#### Responsible Party

ESRT Coordinator



Accepted

**Management Response**

An updated ESRT Operations Plan will be developed, including a detailed explanation of roles, expectations, and responsibilities, for all of the ESRT positions. Corresponding training requirements for each position will be detailed in the Plan. An updated ESRT field manual, providing key information in a convenient format, will be available to all ESRT members as a personal reference guide for all of the functional reception areas

**Implementation Date**

January 31, 2025

# Improve Information Access

## KEY FINDINGS

ESRT relies on supervisors of a staff member's home position to monitor and approve timesheets for hours worked during reception centre shifts. Staff sometimes take on reception centre work in addition to hours they work in their home position. A supervisor's monitoring role includes approval of overtime hours worked and ensuring adequate rest time between shifts. Home position supervisors are best suited for this role because ESRT is not able to track every staff member's unique home position work situation.

However, we found that supervisors did not have access to the reception centre shift data that ESRT collects. As well, ESRT did not provide supervisors with information that outlines all the expectations ESRT relies on them to check. They also did not provide pre-shift notifications for the most recent activation for shift approval and awareness.

## NO ACCESS TO TIMELY SHIFT DATA

We found that home position supervisors do not have timely access to ESRT's reception centre shift data.

ESRT relies on home position supervisors to monitor and approve the time for staff who work at reception centres. ESRT expects supervisors to monitor the volume of overtime their staff are working and ensure they get enough rest time between shifts.

ESRT has an undocumented rule that City staff are only allowed to work a maximum of 16 hour days (combined between reception centre shifts and the staff's home position), twice in a week. This is an allowable deviation from the Alberta Employee Standard Code which is a maximum of 12 hours per day. The Scheduling Coordinator helps control this by monitoring the number and duration of shifts they schedule for each individual ESRT member, but they also rely on the home position

supervisors to monitor the combined hours that staff members are working between their ESRT and home position roles.

However, home position supervisors were not informed of this undocumented rule. They also do not have access to real time shift data that ESRT collects during an activation. The supervisors only see the hours worked at the end of a pay period when their staff submit their time. This is too late to make any adjustments that could prevent their staff from working large amounts of overtime or not receiving enough rest between shifts.

### **LACK OF PRE-SHIFT NOTIFICATIONS**

ESRT did not provide home positions supervisors with pre-shift e-mail notifications.

ESRT had planned to provide supervisors with pre-shift email notifications, informing them of when their staff are scheduled to work ESRT shifts. These notifications would have included information pertaining to the dates, start and end times of the shifts, and which cost center the time should be coded to in order to properly track costs for financial reimbursement.

ESRT did provide supervisors with shift summary notifications that included all the shifts their staff worked in a pay period. This information is useful for supervisors to monitor their staff's time after the fact for accuracy of timesheet approval.

However, this notice arrives too late for supervisors to make meaningful adjustments to ensure enough rest between shifts or to limit the amount of overtime worked.

### **WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT**

ESRT relies on home position supervisors to monitor their staff time for both the staff member's home position and time spent working shifts at ESRT reception centres. Providing clear guidance and timely access to information would allow supervisors to adjust schedules as needed on a day-to-day basis, rather than waiting until it's too late to make changes at the end of a pay period.

**RECOMMENDATION 2**

Provide home position supervisors with sufficient information of ESRT's expectation of their oversight, and access to the reception centre shift information.

**Responsible Party**

ESRT Coordinator



Accepted

**Management Response**

A new standardized supervisor notification was developed in March 2024 and will be implemented for future activations. This includes pre and post shift notifications and joining instructions specific to the deployment that convey all of the necessary information to the employee and supervisor. This process will be included within a standard operating procedure.

**Implementation Date**

December 31, 2024

# Implement Post-Activation Evaluation Process

## KEY FINDINGS

ESRT informally identifies opportunities for improvement during and after emergency centre activations. However, they do not have a formal process to evaluate activations to identify lessons learned and create opportunities for future improvement.

In one instance, ESRT identified a key opportunity for improvement that would help home position supervisors monitor staff time and re-confirm their approval for their staff to work reception centre shifts. However, ESRT did not fully take steps to implement this improvement and capitalize on that opportunity.

## FORMALIZE LESSONS LEARNED PROCESS

Although ESRT informally identifies opportunities for improvement, they do not have a formal process to evaluate every activation for lessons learned.

For example, between the 2023 and 2024 fire seasons, ESRT informally identified key opportunities for improvement. They had identified a loophole in how staff could book their time to receive overtime for their ESRT shift. If staff used a vacation day on the same day as their ESRT shift, it would count as working a full shift and then the entirety of their reception centre shift would qualify for overtime pay.

ESRT corrected this for the 2024 fire season by changing the rules around vacation usage. We found no evidence of this issue recurring during the May 2024 reception centre activation.

After one activation in 2023, ESRT started to perform a formal lessons learned activity. However, they did not complete their review and did not develop any opportunities for improvement.

For the other two activations in 2023 we were unable to find any documentation of lesson learned reviews.

### **TRACK IMPLEMENTATION OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT**

ESRT implemented improvements identified informally during the 2023 fire season. These included:

- Plans to create unique cost centres to track costs for each activation, rather than having all activations coded to a single cost center. This will help finance determine the cost of each individual activation and will be useful if there are multiple activations in any particular year.
- Reducing the potential for overtime being worked and staff burnout. Both of these issues were caused by not having a large enough pool of City staff to draw resources from. ESRT did a recruitment push for the 2024 fire season, resulting in over 900 City employees signing up and being trained. These employees can be used to fill reception centre shifts when needed.

We found one example that ESRT intended to implement for the 2024 fire season, but it was not put into place for the first activation of the season in May 2024. This was mentioned in the previous section, to provide home position supervisors notification that their staff was scheduled for a shift.

ESRT had also intended to use these notifications to solve an additional problem identified during the 2023 fire season, when some City staff had worked ESRT shifts without having prior approval from their supervisors. By providing pre-shift notifications, ESRT would also be able to confirm home position supervisor approval for staff to work ESRT shifts. Without these notifications, the potential issue of staff working reception centre shifts without their supervisor's approval has not been addressed.

### **WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT**

Having a formal process to review every activation for lessons learned will help to ensure that ESRT won't miss key opportunities for improvement.

Tracking the implementation of identified opportunities for improvement serves two purposes. It keeps ESRT's focus on the implementation to ensure it is completed and provides a written record for future personnel to work with in the event of staff turnover.

### RECOMMENDATION 3

Implement a post-activation process that evaluates activations for lessons learned and tracks implementation of identified opportunities for improvement.



#### Responsible Party

ESRT Coordinator



Accepted

#### Management Response

A process will be developed to evaluate each operation after its conclusion. This process will include operational feedback and a debriefing from ESRT members. With that information an after action report will be written and include a highlight of the strengths and weaknesses followed by recommendations for improvement. These steps will be further documented in a standard operating procedure.



#### Implementation Date

October 31, 2025



**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

We would like to thank the staff and management from the Office of Emergency Management and Financial Services Branch for their cooperation during the audit.