

What We Heard Report

Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards Review

Affordable Housing & Homelessness, City
of Edmonton

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Edmonton

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PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY & RESULTS

Project Overview

At the direction of Council in 2020¹, the City of Edmonton engaged with emergency shelter providers and affected parties to define the minimum standards for an emergency shelter, as well as what shelters could aspire to be. This engagement resulted in the City of Edmonton's first Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards², which City Council approved in 2021. The approved Standards included a commitment to a three year review. On October 23, 2023, City Council directed Administration to explore the appropriate sizes and locations of shelters. As part of updating the 2021 Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards, City Administration will conduct two rounds of public and internal engagement between April and July 2024. This What We Heard report documents the results of the first round of engagement.



What We Heard

In addition to the feedback received on the elements of the 2021 Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards, we also heard feedback on the overall shelter system, which was encouraged by the opening question used in engagement, “what have you noticed over the last three years?”

Shelter System Feedback

At a system level, we heard the following during our engagement sessions:

- Consensus that the shelter system and shelter services have improved over the last three years, in part due to learnings from the 2021 Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards. These improvements include observations that shelter sites:
 - Are cleaner and better organized.

“Shelters cannot be everything to everyone.”

¹ Motion at Community and Public Services Committee Meeting, November 13, 2020. <https://pub-edmonton.escribemeetings.com/Meeting.aspx?Id=b5d73426-fd27-4cbc-8f69-9e4aa395f6c5&Agenda=PostMinutes&lang=English>

² <https://www.edmonton.ca/sites/default/files/public-files/assets/PDF/MinimumEmergencyShelterStandards.pdf>

- Provide better access to hygiene related infrastructure and products.
- Have increased the availability of day sleeping spaces.
- Are offering more low barrier beds.
- Offer a greater ranges of sleeping spaces including some private and semi-private spaces.
- We heard particular praise for the Government of Alberta, for increased shelter investments, supporting shelters to move to a 24/7 model and launching the Navigation and Support Centre.
- There was some hesitation around the use of “emergency shelter” to refer to sites. Some of this hesitation was from emerging stigma around the term “emergency shelter” and their guests, with others noting that their approach does not align with a typical “emergency shelter” approach and so should be called something different.
- Diversion, through a proactive intake process, is a key component of being a housing-focused shelter and it appears to be working.
- Shelter providers have completed considerable community engagement, service provider collaboration and system planning over the last three years to fill gaps, adjust services, and ultimately respond to both long-standing inequities and emerging needs.
- We heard about the need to ensure that shelters are integrating community partners and guests viewpoints and feedback in the development of programs and services.
- We also heard about changes in shelter guests:
 - Demographically, more women, immigrants, refugees, seniors, and youth are accessing shelter services.
 - Additionally, those accessing emergency shelter services are presenting with much more complex needs, such as brain injuries, addictions issues, and mental health challenges.
 - More people are becoming homeless due to purely economic reasons, as market housing rates continue to rise.
- It was noted that programs and services that divert youth from entering homelessness is a primary avenue for preventing chronic homelessness.
- Because of this increased breadth and complexity of shelter guests, shelter operators shared that they cannot be everything for everyone. This has led to an increase in the diversity of shelters and options available. As a result, new shelter approaches and programs



“People deserve the dignity to self-regulate.”

have arisen to respond to these unique needs (such as housing focused women's only shelters); some dedicated shelter types, such as domestic violence shelters, are frequently full.

- The importance of building and maintaining communities and relationships was a strong element highlighted by the engagement participants. Shelter support actions should take into account the need for individuals to have meaningful relationships and community, particularly after they are connected to a permanent housing solution.
- Some niche guest types, such as single fathers with children or individuals using an oxygen tank, are having difficulty finding the right shelter to receive supports.
- The ongoing housing bottleneck, with insufficient affordable and supportive housing, is impacting how successful housing programs and activities that are located in shelters can be.
- We also heard about data sharing limitations and associated challenges for supporting guests across all shelter sites.
- The importance of evaluation and continuous improvement activities at shelter sites was identified as an important activity that shelters should be focused on.
- More consistent training was identified as an important need for shelter staff. Providing the right services requires having the right training and the right people for the job. This applies to every position, from security guards to case managers. This includes hiring staff with the right education and experience, including lived experience.



“There is a difference between how many people should be in a shelter during “normal” conditions and emergency conditions.”

Shelter Standards Feedback

When reviewing the current City of Edmonton Minimum Emergency Shelter standards, we heard the following during our engagement sessions:

- Agreement from all engagement participants that this tool should be considered a *best practice guide* rather than a *standard*.
- There should be a greater focus on system navigation at each site. In this case, system navigation would refer to sites having dedicated and trained staff to assist guests in identifying where and how to access off-site programs and services.
- There is a desire to have a greater health and safety focus for shelter sites, with elements like undertaking a Crime Prevention Through

Environmental Design (CPTED) assessment and ensuring adequate training and staff supports for physical/mental wellness.

- Stabilization emerged as a common theme. People need to have their basic health, spiritual, and mental health stabilized before they are ready to discuss housing or support services. An effective process involves providing an immediate response to individuals' sheltering needs (sleep, shower, meal) followed by a stabilization period, which increases the probability of achieving sustainable housing for guests. Notably, having integrated health and pharmacy services were identified as a key element to providing immediate stabilization and care across all types of shelters.
- We heard that shelters should be welcoming. The diversity of people accessing shelters is widening, ensuring that all faiths, genders, ages, etc. are welcome will reduce barriers to shelter access.
- Shelter operators continue to make positive efforts to connect with the communities around their shelters in a variety of ways.
- It is costly and time consuming to renovate existing buildings for new purposes, as such, purpose built structures are ideal if not still costly. Moveable walls and partitions offer a good way to allow for flexibility and responsiveness to changing needs.

"The 9-5 world doesn't work for people experiencing homelessness, they are very busy people you know."

Size and Location of Shelters Feedback

In order to provide comprehensive feedback to Council, Administration spoke with engagement participants to gather their thoughts on the location and size of shelters in Edmonton. We heard that:

- The City should not create restrictions on the sizes, spacing, or location of shelters.
- When asked about the ideal size of shelters, feedback generally indicated that more program specific sites should be smaller, in the 30-50 person range. For more general, low-barrier sites the number was around 100-125. However, these shelter sizes were identified as being optimal and would not necessarily be attained when considering funding and physical space limitations.
- Concerns about limitations focused on a worry that shelter operators would not have the flexibility to quickly stand up larger sites as needed (e.g. if an established shelter site had to close unexpectedly), that shelters would not be able to operate shelters where the need

was greatest, and that funding opportunities may be negatively impacted if limitations were in place.

- Operators also noted the difficulty in finding suitable locations for emergency shelters, particularly in locating landlords willing to lease for an emergency shelter use and in finding locations that satisfy space and layout requirements, while also being affordable.
 - Feedback noted that shelter site searches routinely were not able to find adequate shelter sites in more shelter friendly zones, such as residential or commercial areas.
 - Competition for desirable leased spaces was also identified as an ongoing issue, when searching for shelter locations.

What We Did

- Administration recommendation: replace the word “Standards” with “Best Practices Guide”. As such, the updated name will be the “City of Edmonton Emergency Shelter Best Practices Guide”.
- The overall structure of the Guide will be revamped, providing guidance around three areas:
 - Shelter space considerations - Shelter infrastructure and space related items (e.g. having a de-institutionalized design)
 - Core operations - Common elements for all shelters (e.g. 24/7, providing nutritious meals and snacks).
 - Services and Programming - Shelter-specific services, programming and policies, depending on target client group (e.g. women’s only)
- The inclusion of an additional Guiding Principle, that Shelters should respect and support a client’s self-determination, including their choice and autonomy to access services and programming.
- In response to feedback on shelters not being able to be everything to everyone, a new recommended approach is being suggested:
 - First, shelters should undertake an analysis of their shelter area of focus to identify who they want to serve and what kinds of goals they want to achieve.
 - Then they can structure programs, services, and policies around their intended outcomes.

Shelters can be a pathway to housing or they can be a pathway to entrenchment.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT APPROACH

How We Engaged

City Administration identified the key players in the shelter ecosystem and the potential focus groups according to programming and population. We emailed representatives from these groups with 2-3 dates and times options for a focus group or one on one interview.

- Virtual, in-person, and hybrid focus groups and one on one meetings
- Site visits
- Surveys
- Attending existing collaborative tables

Who We Engaged

- Alberta Health Services
- Al Rashid Mosque
- Canadian Shelter Transformation Network
- Catholic Social Services
- Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations
- Edmonton Police Services
- Enterprise 203 Holdings LP O'Chiese First Nation
- E4C (Women's Emergency Accommodation Centre)
- Homeward Trust Edmonton
- Hope Mission
- Indigenous Housing Collective, End Poverty Edmonton
- Interfaith Housing Coalition
- Mustard Seed
- NiGiNan Housing Ventures
- Native Counseling Services of Alberta and Enoch WÎHCIHAW
MASKOKAMIK SOCIETY
- Sage Seniors Association
- Salvation Army
- WIN House
- Women's Advisory Voice of Edmonton Committee
- Youth Agency Collaboration
- Youth Empowerment and Support Services
- 24/7 Crisis Diversion Monthly Meeting, REACH Edmonton
- City of Edmonton staff

What We Asked

- What have you noticed about shelters, the shelter system, and/or those using shelter services over the last three years?
- What would you add, remove, or change about the various elements of the 2021 standard?
- “We create as a community to connect people to what matters to them” (ConnectEdmonton). Is there any advice you would offer the City about:
 - How to create positive relationships between shelters and surrounding neighbourhoods?
 - Are there ways that the impacts of shelters on nearby communities (and vice versa) has been eased or improved?
Regular communication strategies?
- The ideal size of emergency shelters? (Square footage, or number of beds?)
- The ideal amount of distance between shelters? (In city blocks or kilometers?)
- The ideal location(s) of shelters in different areas of the City (for example, in business or commercial areas or in neighbourhoods, clustered together in the core or spread out across the City?)

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

The Project Team has drafted the City of Edmonton Emergency Shelter Best Practices Guide 2024 along with this What We Heard report. The draft Guide was shared back with participants at the end of June 2024 for validation. For any questions or concerns, the public may contact Jared Abbott, Planning and Policy Analyst, Affordable Housing and Homelessness at: jared.abbott@edmonton.ca.