

Extreme Weather Protocol

(D. Iveson)

Recommendation

That the March 24, 2021, Citizen Services report CS00443, be received for information.

Previous Council/Committee Action

At the February 17, 2021, Community and Public Services Committee meeting, Mayor D. Iveson made the following inquiry:

Can Administration provide information summarizing our extreme weather protocols, including:

- How City employees, including EPS officers, are expected to work with Edmontonians experiencing homelessness and other situations that put them at risk to the cold weather.
- How these protocols were followed during this recent extreme cold snap and if there were instances of them not being followed.
- How we work with our partners, including EPS and shelters, to communicate the policy, including when and how it will be enacted.

Executive Summary

City Policy C620 Supporting Vulnerable People During Extreme Weather Conditions sets out the role the City has in planning emergency responses to extreme weather events in collaboration with Homeward Trust and homeless serving-agencies.

Administration most recently activated the extreme weather response from February 4 to February 17, 2021. During this time additional shelter spaces were made available and City buses were used to bring individuals to shelters, providing 1,337 trips throughout the activation. Two events during the activation of the extreme weather response generated public interest. One involved the removal of vulnerable individuals from an LRT station and another involved the removal of an encampment on public land near Hope Mission. The Edmonton Police Service is currently investigating the event at the LRT station. Administration and Edmonton Police Service have aligned processes for how and when the cleanup of encampments will occur.

When an emergency weather response is activated, the public and media are notified along with direct communication and coordination with partner agencies.

Individuals experiencing homelessness or housing instability typically learn of the activation through the agencies where they receive services, from other community members, directly from outreach workers, or through interactions with peace officers and EPS who offer education and referral services.

Report

In July 2019, City Council approved City Policy C620 Supporting Vulnerable People During Extreme Weather Conditions to formalize the City's role in ensuring a systematic response to extreme weather and safeguard the health and lives of Edmontonians at risk. The policy is designed to be flexible in responding to dynamic conditions on the ground and is informed by the work Administration and community agencies have done in past years to ensure a collaborative and system-wide response.

This policy applies to events where all of the following conditions are present:

- a weather warning has been issued
- emergency shelter services are at or above 90 percent capacity
- a decision is made to implement an extreme weather protocol by a body composed of representatives from Homeward Trust Edmonton, City of Edmonton and shelter organizations

In the winter, the primary goal of the extreme weather response is to ensure that vulnerable individuals have a place to be warm and secure from the cold. This is achieved through transfers of guests between responding entities and service providers.

During the winter of 2020/2021, the impact of COVID-19 on existing shelter services and locations where individuals would typically have sought respite through the day, such as libraries or malls, resulted in significant operational changes to emergency overnight and day shelter services. In response, additional daytime support has been required, the City and its partners increased the number of shelter spaces available and most shelters shifted to a 24/7 model to address the loss of daytime space in the community.

The extreme weather response was most recently activated from February 4 to February 17, 2021. Shelter usage was high during the activation but space remained available in the emergency shelter system for those who needed it. Administration worked with community agencies to deliver 1,337 safe overnight transports to emergency shelters during the activation.

Expectations of City and Edmonton Police Service Staff During Winter Emergency

The City of Edmonton's primary role is to supplement and support the existing community-wide response to extreme weather events when the need for support exceeds the capacity of available resources.

Administration takes a principled approach with individuals experiencing homelessness during an extreme weather response activation. These principles are:

- Safety First: The health and safety of individuals is of paramount importance.
- Connected: All efforts will be made to align the City of Edmonton's response with existing efforts and resources, with a focus on connecting people to the supports that best meet their needs.
- Respectful: All individuals are served with dignity and respect.
- Efficient and Effective: Responses, community plans, and protocols are robust and time tested, based on proven best practices.
- Housing First: All efforts will be made to ensure that those who are experiencing homelessness are connected to supports to find permanent, safe and affordable housing.

The Edmonton Police Service supports the principles of the extreme weather response and ensures all efforts are made to connect individuals to social and community resources for assistance.

Overview of Extreme Weather Response in 2021

During the extreme weather response in February 2021, actions included:

- City buses were provided overnight to transport individuals to shelter services and high demand transit centres
- Space within the shelter system was increased:
 - Tipinawâw's capacity increased from 300 spaces to 350
 - Mustard Seed opened an overnight shelter at Trinity Lutheran Church (40 mats)
 - Al Rashid Mosque provided 72 shelter spaces
- Transit peace officers refrained from issuing bylaw tickets to those who were using transit without paid fares in order to stay warm
- Individuals who had been banned at certain shelters for disruptions or violations had their bans temporarily lifted or the banned individuals were provided transportation to a different facility
- The Encampment Response Team paused enforcement against encampments and prioritized wellness checks in collaboration with housing and outreach staff from partner agencies
- City and social agencies used social media to prompt residents to use 211 to notify services if they encounter someone in need of assistance in the cold

Although some individual shelters reached capacity overnight during the activation, space was available within the shelter system at all times.

City buses ran on a north loop and south loop between 9:30 pm and 8:00 am every night of the activation. Up to 141 people used the buses per night. To meet demand, Administration added an additional two buses (total of four) to increase frequency on nights where staffing and resources allowed. An agency outreach worker was onboard each bus to provide support, screen for COVID-19, provide masks where needed and determine the most appropriate shelter to meet individual needs. One peace officer was also onboard each bus to provide assistance and liaise with peace officers in the field.

Police and peace officers patrol bus and LRT stations and pedways as part of a transit safety and security framework (Attachment 1). Patrols were increased during the extreme weather response to conduct wellness checks on individuals, assist with referrals to shelters and the winter emergency bus, and act when enforcement was necessary. Administration requested that Edmonton Police Service provide additional resources for safety patrols in LRT stations and pedways as some peace officers had been reassigned to the winter emergency bus service. Individuals are asked to leave the premises at scheduled closure times and, as the last step, if they were not observing physical distancing requirements, refusing to wear a mask, or creating a disturbance or disorder.

During extremely cold weather, the transfer of individuals to shelters is coordinated when the winter emergency buses or other transportation (eg. REACH 24/7 Crisis Diversion) is available. Individuals may then choose to use the transportation options to access available shelters. It is not uncommon for some individuals to refuse transportation to shelter and in those cases referral and transfer efforts are made to the furthest extent possible. Transfers occur frequently and countless times during the winter months, even when the extreme weather response is not activated.

Protocol Implementation

On the final weekend of the extreme weather response, social media posts circulated regarding police responses to two separate events. One involved removing vulnerable individuals at an LRT station for public health violations and another involved removing an encampment on public land near Hope Mission.

The event captured on social media at the transit station on February 14 is currently under further investigation by Edmonton Police Service.

On February 13, Hope Mission contacted police to check on the well-being of vulnerable persons sheltering in an encampment outside the facility in the extreme cold. Edmonton Police Service contacted Administration to remove the encampment out of concern for the safety of the individuals. The individuals affected accessed the support resources of the Hope Mission for continued shelter.

This interaction between Edmonton Police Service and Administration occurred outside of the formal Encampment Response Team process. The decision to remove the encampment by police was completed in the interest of safety for the affected individuals.

To ensure future encampment actions are approved, supported, and coordinated, Edmonton Police Service and Administration have aligned processes and added a control step, ensuring a single source referral occurs from the Encampment Response Team to operational areas assigned to support the cleanup of encampments. In addition, an encampment response procedure has been developed and implemented, outlining operating procedures for encampment response by both Administration and Edmonton Police Service. These new practices will ensure encampment responses are aligned to larger homeless-serving initiatives and procedures monitored by the Encampment Response Team (Attachment 2).

Communicating Winter Emergency Response

During the winter months, Administration and Homeward Trust Edmonton staff monitor long- and short-range forecasts and shelter capacity data. When a multi-day cold temperature event is imminent, Administration and Homeward Trust Edmonton will engage with shelter providers to determine whether to activate an extreme weather response.

When an extreme weather response is activated, predetermined communication activities are conducted to ensure agency providers and the general public are aware of the response. These activities include:

- email notification to an extended list of homeless-serving agencies and partner organizations
- internal City of Edmonton and Edmonton Police Service messaging on the activation of the response
- public service announcement to traditional media outlets
- website updates

Individuals who are experiencing homelessness or housing instability typically learn of the activation where they receive services, from outreach workers, and through interactions with police and peace officers who offer education and referral services and informal networks.

Budget/Financial Implications

Activation of the extreme weather response typically includes the provision of City buses, staffing costs from agency partners, and staffing costs for transit peace officers. Administration has not calculated the full cost of the February 2021 activation; however, the cost of transit service for this activation was \$60,000.

The total cost for the extreme weather response in January 2020, which included the provision of overnight shelter at Commonwealth Community Recreation Centre and transportation for guests overnight between facilities was \$166,956.

Corporate Outcomes and Performance Management

Corporate Outcome(s): Edmonton is a safe city			
Outcome(s)	Measure(s)	Result(s)	Target(s)
Edmontonians have safe and adequate housing and shelter space	Number of unsheltered individuals	December 2020: 1,943	Decrease year over year

Attachments

1. City of Edmonton and Edmonton Police Service Transit Safety Standard Operating Procedures Overview
2. Encampment Response Procedure Overview

Others Reviewing this Report

- M. Persson, Chief Financial Officer and Deputy City Manager, Financial and Corporate Services
- G. Cebryk, Deputy City Manager, City Operations
- C. Owen, Deputy City Manager, Communications and Engagement
- K. Fallis-Howell, Acting City Solicitor