

TORONTO STAFF REPORT

September 9, 2005

To: Community Services Committee

From: General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration

Subject: Determining the Number and Service Needs of Homeless Persons Living on Toronto's Streets and in its Public Spaces: Follow-up Report

Purpose:

This report responds to motions made by Community Services Committee at its June 29, 2005 meeting in considering the June 14, 2005 report from the General Manager, Shelter Support and Housing Administration entitled "Determining the Number and Service Needs of Homeless Persons Living on Toronto's Streets and in its Public Spaces".

Financial Implications and Impact Statement:

Funds required to implement the initiative are included within the Shelter, Housing and Support Approved 2005 Operating Budget within Supporting Community Partnerships Initiative (SCPI), and approved by Council at its meeting of February 1, 2 and 3, 2005, from adoption of the report entitled "From the Streets into Homes: A Strategy to Assist Homeless Persons Find Permanent Housing", Policy and Finance Committee Report 2, Clause 1.

The Deputy City Manager/Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this report and concurs with the financial impact statement.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that:

- (1) Council support the implementation of a Street Needs Assessment initiative to determine the range of services needed to assist homeless people living on the streets and in public spaces find and keep permanent housing;
- (2) Council approve the five principles to govern the Street Needs Assessment initiative as outlined in Appendix A;

- (3) Council approve the Street Needs Assessment approach substantially as outlined in Appendix B;
- (4) The General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration be delegated authority to finalize the operational details of the Street Needs Assessment initiative consistent with the principles in Appendix A and the approach substantially as outlined in Appendix B;
- (5) In finalizing the operational details of the Street Needs Assessment initiative, the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration consider motions two to five on this subject from the Advisory Committee on Homeless and Socially Isolated Persons;
- (6) The General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration be delegated authority to implement the Street Needs Assessment initiative in the spring of 2006;
- (7) The General Manager, Shelter Support and Housing Administration report on the findings of the Street Needs Assessment within three months of completing the initiative; and
- (8) The appropriate City officials be authorized and directed to take the necessary action to give effect thereto.

Background:

City Council, at its meeting of February 1, 2 and 3 approved the report "From the Streets into Homes: A Strategy to Assist Homeless Persons Find Permanent Housing". This report established City Council's commitment to ending street homelessness by assisting homeless persons find permanent housing, and approved an outreach-based strategy to assist homeless persons find permanent housing. As one component of this Strategy, it directed the General Manager, Shelter, Housing and Support to recommend an appropriate method for determining the number and service needs of homeless persons living on Toronto's streets and in its public spaces.

At its June 29, 2005 meeting, Community Services Committee considered a report dated June 14, 2005 from the General Manager, Shelter Support and Housing Administration entitled "Determining the Number and Service Needs of Homeless Persons Living on Toronto's Streets and in its Public Spaces" (Community Services Report 6, Clause 22(g)). The Committee requested the General Manager, Shelter Support and Housing Administration to report back on three matters, and these are addressed in this report:

- that the study have as its central organizing goal a Needs Assessment and that the principles and methodologies chosen reflect this goal;
- that the methodologies used in Year 1 be evaluated and reported back to the Community Services Committee in late winter 2006; and
- that the methodologies used include qualitative as well as quantitative approaches

The Community Services Committee also referred the report to the Advisory Committee on Homeless and Socially Isolated Persons for consultation with community agencies, directors of out of the cold programs and volunteers, and requested that the Advisory Committee report back to Community Services Committee with suggestions and response. The requested suggestions and response, in the form of seven motions from the Advisory Committee, are also before the September 15, 2005 meeting of the Community Services Committee.

Comments:

As discussed in the June 14, 2005 report, there are several approaches that have been used in other jurisdictions to determine the number and service needs of homeless individuals who are absolutely homeless. Staff recommended principles and an approach based on research about the various approaches used elsewhere and consultation with other jurisdictions through a research forum. These recommended principles and the approach were developed with the support of the Street Outreach Steering Committee (SOSC), a 33 member group established at the direction of Council to assist in and assess the implementation of the outreach strategy. The SOSC is comprised of key community partners including mental health, youth and Aboriginal services, shelter providers and local businesses, and senior staff from a number of City divisions and agencies.

Principles:

Council requested staff to report on an appropriate method for determining the number and service needs of homeless persons on Toronto's streets and public spaces. Community Services Committee requested "that the study have as its central organizing goal a Needs Assessment and that the principles and methodologies chosen reflect this goal (motion 2(a))".

A principle-based approach is recommended as the underlying principles for any initiative will have a significant impact on how it is designed, and decisions made in the course of working through implementation details. Recommended principles were outlined in the June 14, 2005 report as follows:

- (1) Community agencies, volunteers and the city can work collaboratively to determine the number and needs of the homeless on the street and in public spaces;
- (2) Conducting a count and needs assessment should be respectful of homeless persons and the community agencies that serve them – it should use existing expertise that local agencies have and should not be used to "out" homeless persons in hiding, create a record of every individual unsheltered, or provide information to law enforcement;
- (3) There are localized differences and diversity of homeless populations and these need to be respected when demonstrating homelessness on the streets and in public spaces across the entire City;
- (4) The methods used should be applied consistently across the City, even if the level of application is different, with sufficient techniques and measures for quality assurance and

continuous learning integrated into the methodology, recognizing that any number produced will likely be an undercount and future counts will likely be higher as the methodology improves; and

- (5) The results should be used to assist the City, community agencies and others with service co-ordination, service planning and advocacy, shifting the debate from the scope of the issue to what should be done about the issue.

In response to the motion by Community Services Committee, changes and clarifications have been made to the principles to ensure consistency with the request that the needs assessment aspect of the initiative be the central organizing goal. Principle 5 has been significantly revised, and has been moved to the top of the list:

The purpose of the initiative is to determine the services that people who are homeless need in order to help them find and keep permanent housing, and in order to assist the City, community agencies and others with service co-ordination, service planning and advocacy. The number of people who are living on Toronto's streets and in its public spaces will be determined for the purpose of assessing the location, scale and dimension of service needs, and in planning appropriate program responses.

This revision better reflects the intent of Council that the initiative fit into the overall strategy of helping homeless persons find and keep permanent housing. In addition, the revision more clearly states the original intent of principle 5, which is to collect information that will improve the ability of the City, community agencies and others to develop and deliver programs to respond to service needs (types of programs, location of programs, size of programs, etc.).

The complete list of revised principles is attached as Appendix A.

Street Needs Assessment Approach:

The Street Needs Assessment approach is based on the principles discussed above, and is detailed in Appendix B. In summary, staff are proposing that a needs assessment of homeless individuals on the street, in public spaces and in shelters (not the hidden homeless) be implemented this coming spring, in collaboration with volunteers, community agencies and other organizations such as hospitals.

The needs assessment survey instrument would comprise a number of questions (approximately 10) intended to determine what services the individual needs that would help them find and keep housing (such as questions about length of time homeless, factors contributing to their homelessness, use of services and shelters, and what they believe they need to help them find and keep housing), and basic demographic and other data to assist in assessing the scale and dimensions of service need in Toronto (such as age, gender, source of income, and their view of their health status). The survey instrument will draw on sample questions from survey instruments used in other jurisdictions to assess needs and will be developed in consultation with the Street Outreach Steering Committee.

The needs assessment will occur on a detailed level in the downtown core with a sample survey approach used in selected areas outside of the downtown. Sample sizes will vary depending upon the anticipated concentration of people who are absolutely homeless in the sample area. A follow-up needs assessment survey will be done the following day at selected drop-ins to assist with quality assurance and to obtain more detailed qualitative information. Community Services Committee requested “that the methodologies used include qualitative as well as quantitative approaches (motion 2 (c))”. As described above, it is intended that the needs assessment include both approaches.

Community Services Committee requested “that the methodologies used in Year 1 be evaluated and reported back to the Community Services Committee in late winter 2006 (motion 2(b))”. As mentioned in the June 14, 2005 report, other jurisdictions advise that as assessments are repeated, the methodology improves and the number of people interviewed increases as a result. Therefore it is appropriate to evaluate the methodology on an ongoing basis in the event that Council decides to have more than one needs assessment. As for Toronto’s first needs assessment, quality assurance techniques will be built into the methodology to help mitigate under-representation in the data during the first year.

Staff will report on the results of the street needs assessment within three months of completion. It is critical that the results of the needs assessment be treated sensitively and reported out at a level sufficient to assist with service planning at a community council or city-wide scale, but not so detailed that it would identify the location of groups of individuals, such as at the neighbourhood, ward or individual level. The results report would also include an evaluation of the methodology. At that time, it would be appropriate for Council to consider whether or not a second needs assessment should be conducted.

Advisory Committee on Homeless and Socially Isolated Persons:

The Advisory Committee has made 7 motions for consideration by Community Services Committee. Motions 2 to 5 inclusive relate to implementation of the street needs assessment. The General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration will consider these motions during the process of developing the detailed methodology for the Street Needs Assessment.

Conclusions:

This report responds to motions made by Community Services Committee at its June 29, 2005 meeting in considering the June 14, 2005 report from the General Manager, Shelter Support and Housing Administration entitled “Determining the Number and Service Needs of Homeless Persons Living on Toronto’s Streets and in its Public Spaces”. It recommends five principles and an approach for determining the service needs of people who are absolutely homeless. If approved, the Street Needs Assessment would be implemented in the spring of 2006, with a report about the findings within three months of completing the initiative.

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List of Attachments:

Appendix A: Principles to Govern the Street Needs Assessment Initiative
Appendix B: Street Needs Assessment Approach

Appendix A: Principles to Govern the Street Needs Assessment Initiative

- (1) The purpose of the initiative is to determine the services that people who are homeless need in order to help them find and keep permanent housing, and in order to assist the City, community agencies and others with service co-ordination, service planning and advocacy. The number of people who are living on Toronto's streets and in its public spaces will be determined for the purpose of assessing the location, scale and dimension of service needs, and in planning appropriate program responses.
- (2) Community agencies, volunteers and the city can work collaboratively to determine the service needs of people who are homeless and living on the streets and in its public spaces.
- (3) The manner in which the Street Needs Assessment initiative is conducted will be respectful of homeless persons and the community agencies that serve them – it will use existing expertise that local agencies have, and it will not be used to “out” homeless persons in hiding, create a record of every individual unsheltered, or provide information to law enforcement.
- (4) There are differences in homeless populations and their circumstances (e.g. people living in ravines compared to those living on streets; people living alone compared to those living in groups) and these differences will be respected when demonstrating the service needs of people who are homeless and living on the streets and in public spaces across the entire City.
- (5) The methods used should be applied consistently across the City, even if the level of application is different, with sufficient techniques and measures for quality assurance and continuous learning integrated into the methodology, and recognizing that the results produced will likely understate the scale of need.

Appendix B: Street Needs Assessment Approach

Timing of the Assessment:

- (a) Conduct a point-in-time needs assessment survey on one evening/night in spring.
- (b) Augment with a follow-up survey in selected drop-ins the following day to attempt to determine if there were any people missed.

Assessment Areas:

- (a) For the first needs assessment, focus on key areas to help test the model. Conduct a detailed census in downtown areas, and a sample from known high, medium and low concentration areas outside of the downtown area, including different types of locations (such as parks, streets, ravines).
- (b) Have local experts (including homeless people, community agencies, medical institutions and staff of City departments) identify the high, medium and low concentrations of homeless persons in their area.
- (c) Make the maximum geographic area any one assessment team responsible for no greater than 2 square kilometers. Areas with greater anticipated concentrations will have more assessment teams, and areas with lower anticipated concentrations will have fewer assessment teams.
- (d) Conduct a needs assessment at shelters on the same night.
- (e) As possible, conduct a needs assessment of homeless individuals in hospitals, treatment, custody, etc. on the same evening.

During the Assessment:

- (a) Have the needs assessment conducted by teams comprised of community agency staff, volunteers and city staff collaboratively in different areas of the city using a consistent approach.
- (b) Make each assessment team 3-5 people. Ensure more qualified people are mixed with less qualified people on each team. Provide training on how to do the assessment, and also on sensitivity (with participation of homeless persons in the development and delivery of sensitivity training).
- (c) Use buttons or other identifiable markings to identify the assessment team members.
- (d) Engage all individuals encountered to determine if they are homeless (even if they don't "look" homeless).
- (e) If it is determined that the person is homeless through the initial engagement, then conduct an approximately 10 question survey with each homeless individual, which may include such things as basic demographic data, housing and shelter history, type of housing sought, other service needs, etc.
- (f) Offer a useful item in appreciation for participation (e.g. hats or a small honorarium).
- (g) Don't wake homeless people up. Complete a shorter assessment by observation.
- (h) Have outreach vans on standby to offer help should homeless person so request.

Quality Assurance:

- (a) Determine a probable adjustment factor for the number actually interviewed.
- (b) Review completed surveys with each team as they come in.

After the Assessment:

- (a) Roll data up to the Community Council District and city-wide level only – no ward estimates.
- (b) Also report data out by a description of the type of area in which they were located (ravine, park, street, alleyway, etc.)
- (c) Process the results and key findings with community agencies and other stakeholders (e.g. hospitals).