



STAFF REPORT INFORMATION ONLY

Update on Schoolhouse Shelter – 349 George Street (Ward 27)

Date:	May 8, 2012
To:	Community Development and Recreation Committee
From:	General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration
Wards:	Ward 27
Reference Number:	

SUMMARY

At its meeting of March 27, 2012 the Community Development and Recreation Committee passed a motion recommending that the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, provide an update to the May meeting on the full history, current status and future plans for the Schoolhouse Shelter, a 55-bed transitional shelter for men. This report provides that update.

Access and Equity Statement

The Schoolhouse Shelter serves equity-seeking groups such as seniors, people with disabilities, individuals with mental health issues, the working poor, and other vulnerable groups. The closure of the Schoolhouse program will decrease the range of shelter options available particularly for men who actively consume alcohol. Special attention is being paid to the needs of the residents in seeking appropriate housing in the community.

Financial Impact

Funding for this service of \$746,790.00 (gross) and \$135,908.00 (net) is included in the 2012 Approved Operating Budget for Shelter, Support and Housing Administration. Closure of this shelter will result in annual savings of \$135,908.00 net.

The Deputy City Manager and Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

DECISION HISTORY

The property at 349 George Street was built in 1886 and was previously used as a school. The former City of Toronto has owned and operated the Schoolhouse program since 1978. At the time of amalgamation Council considered the future of the Schoolhouse and in March of 1999 approved some upgrades to the building and transferred operation of the program to Dixon Hall.

<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/1999/agendas/council/cc/cc990413/cn4rpt/cl002.htm>

Per diem rates for the program are approved annually along with per diems for all other purchase of service shelters.

In 2005 Shelter, Support and Housing Administration provided an information report to Community Services Committee regarding Harm Reduction programming.

<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/2005/agendas/committees/cms/cms051108/it011.pdf>

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<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2012.CD11.6.pdf>

ISSUE BACKGROUND

In 2009, the current operator, Dixon Hall, approached the City indicating that they wished to end their contract for operation of the Schoolhouse shelter located at 349 George Street, which is owned by the City of Toronto. Based on discussions with Dixon Hall related to the program model and the condition of the property, City staff made the decision to proceed with the closure of the program. A plan was put in place for the closure and both staff and clients were advised in November of 2011 that the program would be closed. Admissions were also suspended at this time.

Some questions have been raised about why the shelter is being closed. This report provides an update on the full history, current status and future plans for the shelter.

COMMENTS

History

The property at 349 George Street was constructed in 1886 as a school house. The facility has operated as a government funded residential program since 1978 when the former City of Toronto took over operation. At the time, on-site programming was similar to that offered today though overseen by City staff. In 1999, at the time of amalgamation, Council approved the transfer of the program to a community agency to operate as a purchase of service shelter. The focus of the program was to assist homeless

men in moving to the community. Referrals to the program were to come primarily from other shelters, and it was to be a model "with features of both rooming house and shelter projects." At the time it was noted that the building was in need of considerable upgrading and some changes to the building were made as a result.

Physical Plant

The shelter is a 3-storey property with a total size of 7,200 square feet. The basement has a staff office, laundry room, bathroom with showers and a TV room, which is also where clients eat their breakfast and dinner. On the main floor there is a staff office, two dormitories, one with 9 beds and one with 16 beds, and a kitchen/servery. On the second floor, there are two dormitories with 15 beds each, a client bathroom and a staff bathroom.

State of good repair issues with the building for the next 5 years are estimated at approximately \$300,000 and include items such as roof replacement, interior painting and rehabilitation of exterior walls.

Program Model

The Schoolhouse is a 55-bed transitional shelter for men in a City owned property situated next door to Seaton House on George Street. It operates from 4 pm to 10 am, Monday to Friday and is closed during the day on weekdays. On the weekends the program operates 24 hours a day. The program is operated by Dixon Hall under a purchase of service contract with the City. Dixon Hall is a community non-profit multi-service agency that provides housing and homelessness services.

The program receives a per diem of \$46.50 per occupied bed. In addition to the per diem, the Agency also collects a \$7.00 per night user fee from each Schoolhouse resident. Dixon's policy is that all clients in the program must pay the fee, though on occasion they will waive fees. As such, the majority of clients staying in the program have available funds and are in receipt of income either through employment (usually casual), or income support (OW, ODSP, OAS, CPP).

Men are permitted to drink on site. They purchase their own alcohol and bring it to the facility. They are permitted to consume up to 12 cans or bottles of beer daily. Some men do not drink at all and others may consume more than the allowable limit as staff do not control or closely monitor consumption. They do, however, monitor client behaviour and will address it as required.

There are housing help workers who are available to assist clients in moving to the community but there is no other programming provided on site.

A review performed in July of 2011 found that 20 of the 55 residents had been at the shelter for more than 3 years and another 10 had been in the shelter for more than one year using it as de-facto housing. 65% of the residents of the shelter had income from

Ontario Works (OW), Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) or pensions. Dixon Hall identified that approximately one-third of clients had some type of mental illness and that 75 percent of the clients use alcohol.

Harm Reduction Programs

In the fall of 2005 the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, provided a report to the Community Services Committee regarding Harm Reduction programs in shelters. This report noted that in 2002, as part of the approval of the Toronto Shelter Standards, Council had approved the principle that:

“In order to increase the accessibility of the shelter system and to respond to diverse resident needs, a range of service approaches from abstinence to harm reduction must be available within the shelter system.”

In the report the General Manager noted that Toronto Hostel Services promotes a harm reduction approach which states that admission and discharge to shelters cannot be based on substance use alone and that these decisions need to be based on the behaviours of the client as well. He went on to state that:

"In addition to following this general principle, a small number of shelters have specialized harm reduction programs. These programs provide a high tolerance of behaviours associated with substance use, but also provide a high level of support to people who are substance users, many of whom also have health and mental health issues."

In that report, 3 programs were identified as harm reduction programs (2 of which are still operating): The Seaton House Annex, Eva's Satellite and the Women's Residence Lounge program (since closed). The Schoolhouse was not identified as a harm reduction program then, and still would not be, because there is no associated programming that either assists men to use alcohol more safely or assists them in moving towards recovery.

Review of Program Model

In 2009 Dixon Hall approached the City and indicated that they wished to terminate their contract for the operation of the Schoolhouse shelter. They noted that the program was operating at a deficit, that there were issues with the condition of the property and that in addition, the strategic direction of the agency was now to focus more on permanent housing and employment and the current model of programming at the Schoolhouse was not in keeping with this direction.

Staff reviewed the financial circumstances of the program and were able to re-allocate funding from another Dixon Hall program to allow the site to operate without a deficit while a decision was made regarding the program and the termination of the contract.

At that time staff asked Dixon Hall conditions under which they might consider continuing to operate the program. The agency suggested that if the City agreed to reduce the number of beds on site; increased funding to allow for daytime programming hours; and, increased funding for further case management and counselling programming, then Dixon Hall would consider continuing to operate the program.

City staff reviewed the program and the physical plant and the financial situation of the program.

The review showed that for the two previous years the program had operated at only 88% capacity with an average occupancy of 48. This meant that the program was not being fully utilized. Many of the men had been staying in the program for an extended time. Half of the beds were occupied by clients who had stayed over one year. Clients were able to manage their income sufficiently to pay an ongoing user fee while staying continuously in this site, essentially using the program as housing. In keeping with the City's Housing First policy, staff concluded that these clients would be better served through housing in the community.

In relation to the physical plant, as noted above, there are outstanding state of good repair costs. Additionally, the building is not accessible and is very challenging to any client with mobility issues. In order to provide additional programming on site it was anticipated that some further renovations would be required.

Staff also reviewed the costs of the model proposed by Dixon Hall. Expansion to full 24-hour programming and the additional funding for harm reduction programming was estimated to result in an annual increase of at least \$225,000 gross. This increase would have included staffing costs for daytime programming as well as funds to offset the elimination of the 9 bed main floor dorm to accommodate dining and daytime programming. The occupancy under this model would have been reduced to 46.

As the additional per diem required to provide this funding would be above the maximum provincial funding, the cost would be born 100% by the City and there would be no provincial revenues. As this was new funding, the City was unable to provide the agency with assurance that funding would be available for the proposed enhanced model.

In consideration of all these issues, Dixon Hall advised the City they would proceed with the cancellation of their contract and City staff made the decision that the program would not be replaced at this site.

Opening and Closing Shelter Programs

SSHA is the provincially designated Service System Manager for shelters and manages the shelter system within its funding authorities up to the approved Operating Budget approved by Council. Any material changes within this envelope are reported out to Council annually.

The shelter system is not a static system and has always had fluctuating capacity numbers. Since 2008, not including the Schoolhouse, 115 shelter beds have closed and 133 shelter beds have opened. In some cases actual programs have been closed or opened and in other cases beds may be added or subtracted from individual sites. Sites have been closed to be redeveloped for housing, to relocate to new physical premises or because the physical plant was not adequate. In all cases bed openings and closings were reported out to Council through the annual shelter per-diem report. Only in cases where there were other requirements such as capital funding did individual reports come forward to Council regarding openings and closings.

Housing Options in the Community

For a number of years Hostel Services has aimed to reduce the number of cots/mats in the shelter system and to decrease the number of overnight only programs. In keeping with the City's Affordable Housing Strategy and Housing First approach, there has also been a stated aim of returning the shelter system to its original emergency purpose. Once the decision is made to close a program, it is done in an organized way with additional resources provided to assist in helping clients access housing in the community or alternative shelter. Where housing follow up supports are in place they are continued for up to a year to support clients in housing.

Clients moving into housing when a shelter closes access similar types of housing to clients moving out of the shelter system throughout the year. Clients will move into either private market or social housing. Some will move into private individual units, others will move into shared accommodation – either sharing an apartment with another person, or moving into a rooming or boarding house.

Supportive housing programs are also available in a variety of models including single units, shared, rooming and boarding houses. The common factor is that the operator or an outside social agency provides on-site or visiting supports that assist the person to integrate into the community and maintain a successful tenancy. Tenants receive supports with health or mental health issues, budgeting and banking, plans for returning to school or work.

Occasionally, housing allowance programs are available when a program closes. These provide either the client or the landlord with a financial top up that will allow them to lease units that have a higher rent than they might otherwise be able to afford.

Current Status

Hostel Services and Dixon Hall have worked together to develop a process that will assist clients in achieving community housing or alternative shelter. Housing workers from Dixon Hall and Hostel Services have been working with residents since November of 2011 to help them to secure housing.

At the time admissions were suspended there were 55 men in the program. Since that time 27 have left the program and have not returned. Of these 27, 9 have moved into housing, 1 was discharged to hospital, the 17 remaining failed to return to the program or went to another shelter, with a small number discharged due to behaviour. The occupancy of the facility is now 28. Staff continue to work with these clients to find appropriate housing or alternative shelter prior to the closing of the Schoolhouse.

Conclusion

After review of the physical site, program model and financial situation of the shelter, City staff made the decision to close the site. There were three primary and interrelated factors that led to this decision. First, the shelter was being used as housing, rather than emergency shelter for a majority of clients, with clients managing their income to pay a user fee and more than half of the clients staying for more than a year. In keeping with the City's Housing First policy, these clients would be better served through housing in the community.

Secondly, the physical building is not appropriate for the vulnerable client group being served. There is a lack of programming space required to provide needed harm reduction supports, and a lack of accessibility for clients with mobility issues. Finally, in order to ensure operation of the program without a deficit, including expansion to full 24-hour programming and providing appropriate harm reduction programming would result in an annual cost increase to the City of at least \$225,000.

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