



STAFF REPORT INFORMATION ONLY

Response to Extreme Cold Weather Alerts

Date:	December 16, 2013
To:	City Council
From:	General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration
Wards:	All
Reference Number:	

SUMMARY

As requested by Community Development and Recreation Committee, this report provides information to Council on the feasibility of establishing a 24 hour warming centre during Extreme Cold Alerts.

Financial Impact

There is no financial impact associated with this report. The Deputy City Manager and Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

Equity Impact

Housing and homelessness services including Toronto's shelter system, serve a range of equity seeking groups including people experiencing homelessness, the working poor, youth, seniors, Aboriginal People, and other vulnerable groups. Effective operation of these services is important to ensure appropriate supports are available when there is danger to homeless and vulnerable people from extreme cold weather emergencies.

DECISION HISTORY

At the meeting on April 3-4, 2013, City Council adopted CD19.1 which provided an update on occupancy in the emergency shelter system and the protocols in place to respond to extreme cold weather alerts.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2013.CD19.1>

At the meeting on December 4, 2013 Community Development and Recreation Committee adopted CD25.10, 2014-2019 Housing Stability Service Planning Framework. This framework will guide Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration (SSHA) and its partners in the planning, management and delivery of SSHA's full range of housing and homelessness services over the next five years.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2013.CD25.10>

ISSUE BACKGROUND

The Community Development and Recreation Committee directed the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration to investigate the feasibility of creating a 24 hour warming centre during Extreme Cold Alerts, similar to the summer cooling centres that currently operate during Extreme Heat Alerts.

This report responds to the Committee's request and is for Council's information.

COMMENTS

Existing Processes and Responses

As reported to Council in April 2013, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration Division has an established business process in place to manage extreme cold weather emergencies. This business process is reviewed yearly in advance of each cold weather season.

An alert is called when there is increased danger to homeless people from extreme cold weather or extreme winter weather conditions. It is usually called in the morning when Environment Canada takes any of these actions:

- Predicts a coming overnight temperature of minus 15 degrees Celsius or lower, without wind chill
- Issues a wind chill warning for outdoor activity for people in the Toronto area
- Predicts extreme weather conditions such as a blizzard, ice storm or sudden drops in temperature

When an extreme cold weather alert is called a notification goes out to over 100 agencies serving people who are homeless or vulnerable, including drop in centres, shelters and housing help centres. Staff at these facilities are directed to post the notice in a location that is accessible to clients. 311 is also notified of an alert. Additionally, an Extreme Cold Weather Alert notice is placed on the Shelter Management Information System (SMIS) which is seen by all shelter workers when they log onto the system. A ticker, highlighted in red, scrolls across the presenting SMIS page indicating that an alert has

been called. A detailed news release is also issued about the Extreme Cold Weather Alert which provides information on services for people who are homeless and how the services can be accessed. The link to the release is also tweeted via the City's twitter account, which currently has approximately 18,000 followers.

In August of this year, SSHA and the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) surveyed drop in and shelter users to find out how they obtained information about extreme weather events. More than 75 percent of respondents indicated that television and radio news outlets were the best way to relay information concerning these types of events. The City's Strategic Communications Division continues to play an important role in providing necessary information to ensure service users and providers were kept informed of extreme weather. SSHA has also developed posters that agencies are expected to post when Extreme Cold Weather Alerts and other weather and declared emergencies are underway. Pocket cards have also been designed for distribution during outreach activities to ensure homeless clients living on the streets have the necessary information to seek shelter during these events.

In order to support homeless and vulnerable individuals during an Extreme Cold Weather Alert, the following additional homelessness services are initiated:

- Additional outreach teams are put on patrol to make further contact with individuals on the street and check on their condition. During the most recent cold weather alerts the additional teams made contact with 25- 30 people a night. Usually a few of these individuals accept offers of service or transportation to a shelter, the Streets to Homes Assessment and Referral Centre (SHARC) or their home.
- Shelters and drop in centres extend their hours of operation to allow clients to stay indoors. This is intended to ensure that clients are out of the cold weather until other services in the area are open. This is a Shelter Standards requirement.
- Extreme Weather beds are activated in the shelter system. In 2013-14, this includes 11 beds at Fort York for Men and 15 beds at Adelaide Women's Resource Centre for Women.
- The 172 emergency/ flex beds that were previously only available for extreme weather alerts, are available on a full time basis. Since the full time activation of these beds, SHARC staff report a reduced number of intakes into their program during cold weather months. For example, in November 2012, there were 4097 total intakes into the program, while in November 2013 this number was reduced to 2679. It appears that by offering these beds on a full time basis, demand for immediate, emergency shelter during extreme weather conditions has been reduced.
- Shelters are required to relax admission and service restriction criteria in order to allow clients more access to shelter programs. This is a Shelter Standards expectation and is intended to ensure that difficult to serve clients are not left without shelter during extreme weather conditions.

- SSHA provides tokens to 16 drop in centres to distribute to clients needing transportation to shelter or other safe spaces during extreme weather. SSHA provides approximately 1600 tokens each year for this purpose.
- The SHARC is always open and has 24-hour street respite for those who do not want a shelter bed, or for whom one is not immediately available.
- Individuals who require emergency shelter assistance during an extreme weather situation, can call 311 or contact the City of Toronto's Central Intake line toll free at 1-877-338- 3398.

In 2012, eleven extreme cold weather alerts were called.

In addition to the above services, sixteen faith based groups across the City provide an additional 88 spaces per night on average through the Out of the Cold program. Out of the Cold programs are coordinated by volunteers. However, the City funds a community agency, Dixon Hall, to provide on-site support for both the volunteers and guests. Dixon Hall provides staffing to manage guest registration, maintain the safety and security of the operations, and provide additional support such as cleaning, shuttling guests to other locations, laundry, and transit token distribution. Dixon Hall also provides additional support to guests with presenting needs such as health issues, and access to housing opportunities.

Cooling and Warming Centres

SSHA has consulted with the OEM to determine the feasibility of creating warming centres, similar to the cooling centres that are managed by the OEM through external partnerships during extreme heat alerts.

An extreme heat alert is called by Toronto Public Health (TPH). Cooling centres are part of the City's response during Extreme Heat Alerts. Centres operate at seven locations in civic centres, community centres, recreation centres and at Metro Hall. The Metro Hall location is the only centre that operates overnight. All other cooling centres are open from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. They are administered by the OEM and staffed by individuals from Change Toronto, a non-profit organization that offers training, volunteer and employment opportunities to people with lived experience of homelessness. The Cooling Centre Traineeship Program is one of their primary projects.

All locations provide visitors and their pets an air conditioned place to rest indoors, receive a cool drink and a light snack. Cots are provided for those who feel ill from the heat; however overnight sleeping accommodation is not provided.

The OEM advise that costs for the Metro Hall cooling centre are approximately \$1,000 per day when the centre is open. This includes costs for refreshments and administrative costs.

This year TPH declared two extreme heat alerts, totalling six days. The Metro Hall cooling centre served, on average, 92 people per day. However attendance overnight was fewer than 9 people.

CONCLUSION

SSHA currently has processes in place to provide for homeless and vulnerable individuals during all extreme weather conditions. These include activating additional outreach teams, extending hours of operation at shelters and drop in centres, activating extreme weather beds, relaxing admission and service restriction criteria at shelters and distributing tokens to clients needing transportation to shelter or other safe spaces during extreme weather.

It would be feasible to extend these services to include an overnight warming centre. A more desirable approach is to continue to offer services in the places that homeless and vulnerable individuals frequent as per existing protocols. Attendance statistics also indicate that overnight use of existing cooling centres is limited. However, SSHA will pilot a warming centre at Metro Hall during Extreme Cold Alerts for the remainder of the 2013/2014 cold alert season. The value of the service will be assessed at the end of the season. The pilot will be undertaken within existing resources.

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