



STAFF REPORT INFORMATION ONLY

Supplementary Report – Interim Strategies to Address Shelter Occupancy Levels

Date:	February 3, 2015
To:	City Council
From:	General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration
Wards:	All
Reference Number:	

SUMMARY

This report supplements CD1.6 and updates Council on the services in place to assist homeless people during the winter season, provides a high level overview of current occupancy pressures in the shelter system, and outlines interim strategies in place to address the high occupancy levels in Toronto's emergency shelter system this winter. These strategies include the purchase of blocks of motel/hotel rooms from approved vendors for use by households in the family shelter sector. Space freed up in the family sector is being used by selected households in the co-ed and single adult sectors thereby creating capacity in those emergency shelters.

Financial Impact

Included in the 2015 Recommended Operating Budget for SSHA is funding for enhanced services for the homeless and those at risk of \$7.792 million that will reduce projected occupancy to meet the 90 per cent target. The change in service levels and the financial impact are included in the 2015 Recommended Operating Budget for Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration (SSHA) which is currently under review by the Budget Committee, and will be before City Council for consideration in March 2015.

The 2015 Recommended Operating Budget for Shelter, Support and Housing Administration (SSHA) includes \$0.845 million gross for the purchase of temporary shelter through the motel/hotel sector. The purchase of 20 motel/hotel rooms costs \$48,000 per month based on a monthly cost of \$2,400 per room.

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

Equity Impact

The emergency shelter system in Toronto serves equity-seeking groups such as seniors, people with disabilities, individuals with mental health issues, the working poor, and other vulnerable groups. Effective operation of the shelter system is important in ensuring that temporary accommodation is available to a variety of equity seeking-groups.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting of December 16, 17, 18, 2013, City Council unanimously adopted the *2014-2019 Housing Stability Services Planning Framework*. The service planning framework includes a strategic direction "to maintain a strong emergency shelter system" by achieving high shelter standards and a 90 per cent occupancy target in all sectors of the City's emergency shelter system.

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

At its meeting of January 15, 2015, Community Development and Recreation Committee (CDRC) recommended City Council adoption of CD1.6, *Homelessness and Cold Weather*, and requested the General Manager, SSHA to report directly to City Council "on the adequacy of beds and drop-in services available to homeless people during this winter season and strategies that have been implemented immediately to reduce the occupancy levels of shelters to 90 per cent in each sector."

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2015.CD1.6>

COMMENTS

a. **Services to Assist Homeless People During the Winter**

A number of additional services are available during the winter to assist people who are experiencing homelessness. Winter 2014/15 is the first season that the Medical Officer of Health (MOH) has responsibility for calling an Extreme Cold Weather Alert (ECWA) when Environment Canada forecasts that the overnight temperature will reach minus 15 or colder in the City of Toronto. He can also call an Alert at warmer temperatures when the official weather forecast includes factors that increase the impact of cold weather on health.

When an ECWA is called, additional services are automatically triggered by SSHA including two 24-hour extreme cold weather alert drop-ins, additional street outreach, a direction to shelters to relax client service restrictions, availability of 26 extreme weather beds and distribution of TTC tokens for people to get to shelter. The activation of these enhanced services is publicized through media release, direct distribution of information to SSHA's network of agencies that serve homeless people, and information posted on the City's website. The information also encourages members of the public to call 311 if they see someone who they think needs shelter or outreach assistance due to the cold weather.

The 24-hour extreme cold weather alert drop-ins are a new service enhancement for the 2014/15 winter season building on the results of the warming centre pilot at Metro Hall last winter. They are open from 3 p.m. on the day an ECWA is called and close by noon on the day when the ECWA is terminated. Services available include warm food and drinks, mats for sleeping, and referrals to shelter and other services. Currently, one drop-in operates in the downtown west and one in the downtown east and both are pet friendly. A third extreme cold weather drop-in specifically for youth is anticipated to open as a pilot in February.

Overall, use of the 24-hour extreme cold weather drop-ins has been steady with an average at time of writing of 55 intakes per day and overnight occupancy of 40 at the downtown west location and with an average of 83 intakes per day and overnight occupancy of 34 at the downtown east location. The total number of intakes includes all people who visit the centre including those who may stay for a short time to warm up and then leave. The overnight occupancy number counts the people in the drop-in at 4:00 a.m. and reflects the number of people using the drop-in as a place to sleep.

Street outreach patrols during ECWAs have engaged with 23 to 30 people per night and check on them more than once. Most choose not to accept offers of service. Approximately two people per night have accepted a referral and transportation to a shelter or drop-in. There have been a small number of instances when outreach workers have called emergency services because of an immediate concern for the safety of an individual.

Between mid-November and mid-April, the City-funded and volunteer-operated Out of the Cold (OOTC) program is in effect every day, providing meals and overnight accommodation in faith-based facilities throughout the city. Space and other standards are governed by the Toronto Shelter Standards. Currently, there are 16 OOTC sites, providing services for 15 to 75 people each. On any given night there are up to four sites in operation. In addition, the City's Streets to Homes Assessment and Referral Centre (SHARC) at 129 Peter Street is open for respite 24 hours a day every day of the year.

b. Occupancy Pressures in the Shelter System

The current capacity of Toronto's emergency shelter system for people experiencing homelessness is just over 4,400 beds in 58 locations across the city. Nine shelters are operated by the City and 49 are operated by community non-profit agencies through purchase-of-service contracts. The total capacity of the shelter system includes 350 motel beds funded for families, 40 beds at the SHARC, and the 172 flex beds that were made part of the permanent system by City Council in 2013. On weekends an additional 85 beds are available through a part-time program at University Settlement House which provides service Friday through Sunday.

Monthly average nightly occupancy has been climbing year over year since 2012. The overall shelter occupancy rate in the first weeks of January 2015 was approximately 93

per cent, with some sectors, particularly co-ed and women, even higher, as shown in the table below.

Sector	% Occupancy
Youth	94%
Single Women	97%
Single Men	95%
Co-ed Adult	98%
Family (shelters)	96%
Family (motels)	70%
Total	93%

The shelter system includes transitional beds which are not always available for direct emergency referrals. This means that occupancy levels in the permanent emergency shelter system are in some cases tighter than the aggregate data suggest.

The goal of the emergency shelter system is to intervene at a time of crisis in people's lives and help them, in a short period of time, to get into permanent housing. Over the years, in response to service pressures in other sectors such as health services and as affordable housing has become more scarce in Toronto, the shelter system has, by default, filled the gaps created by these systems by providing shelter, sometimes for very long periods of time, to people who should more appropriately be housed in affordable housing, supportive housing, long term care facilities or other forms of assisted living. This creates significant pressures on shelter occupancy as these beds are no longer available for their originally intended emergency purpose.

As a result, much of the shelter system is effectively at capacity and nightly occupancy is above Council's 90 per cent occupancy target. This means that people can face challenges in accessing a shelter bed in a timely fashion or in a preferred facility. Anyone seeking access to a shelter bed will be assisted to find an appropriate available bed through the Central Intake telephone service or through the SHARC. If a bed is not immediately available, people can access 24-hour respite services at the SHARC to ensure they have a safe, warm place indoors to wait for a bed to become available.

c. Interim Strategies to Address Occupancy Pressures

A staff report to the March 23rd meeting of CDRC will provide a detailed analysis of how the shelter system is being used. The report will propose strategies to address occupancy pressures in order to achieve the 90 per cent target. These will include actions to relieve pressure by reducing demand as well as actions to increase the supply of emergency shelter beds.

Given the immediate pressure on the shelter system, staff have initiated some interim measures this winter to create additional shelter capacity in the short term.

Expanded Motel Space

SSHA has a long history of accessing motel space to shelter families. This program model is flexible to respond quickly to fluctuations in demand due to seasonal and/or specific system pressures. Utilizing motel space has proven to be a successful option for households experiencing homelessness who require minimal supports and are able to function independently to meet their daily living needs.

Building on past practice and experience with motel vendors, staff contacted new hotel/motel facilities within Toronto to gauge their interest in working with SSHA to shelter homeless households. During November 2014, site visits were completed at five hotel/motel facilities which had expressed an interest. Site visits were conducted to assess suitability, covering such areas as physical layout and space, on-site cooking facilities, accessibility to public transit, and proximity to community amenities. Based on these factors, two facilities were identified as most suitable for immediate use.

In mid-January, blocks of 10 rooms were reserved for SSHA use in each of the two sites. Depending on household configuration, these 20 rooms can accommodate from 60-90 people. Following several days of orienting the motel operators and establishing protocols, staff began to identify suitable households in the existing directly operated family shelters for relocation to the new facilities. These households have already undergone thorough needs assessments and have well developed housing plans. Dedicated housing case management supports are being provided, initially using existing staff resources, to achieve a 6-8 week targeted length of stay. People in the single and co-ed adult sectors, who need more on-site supports, are being moved into the spaces created in the family sector. There is a domino effect of freeing up beds in single and co-ed adult emergency shelters.

The motel rooms have been reserved for an initial commitment of two months. Staff are monitoring the take up of the rooms and the impact on the emergency shelter system. There is flexibility to increase the number of rooms reserved and to extend the time commitment. With respect to the latter point, staff are working on an RFP that will detail minimum mandatory requirements with the purpose of creating a list of successful motel vendors in various geographic areas of the city with proximity to amenities and community agencies to support the individuals/families sheltered. This list could then be used to expand motel capacity as needed to respond to occupancy pressures in the future.

Additional Beds at Existing Sites for the Winter Season

Staff have also been working in partnership with existing shelter providers to identify opportunities for additional beds at various shelter sites. To date, a total of 21 additional beds have been brought online. Eleven beds are in co-ed shelters including four that are fully accessible. The other 10 beds are in the men's sector.

The shelter providers have agreed to keep these additional beds online until April 15, the end of the 2015 winter season.

In addition, renovations at Cornerstone men's shelter are almost complete. When the shelter with its 50 beds reopens in February, it will relieve pressure in the men's sector.

REOI to Expand the Single Women, Single Men, and Co-ed Sectors

Included in the 2015 Recommended Operating Budget for SSHA is funding for enhanced services for the homeless and those at risk of \$7.792 million that will reduce projected occupancy to meet the 90 per cent target. In the interim, SSHA staff have released a Request for Expressions of Interest (REOI) to expand the number of permanent emergency/transitional shelter beds in the single women, single men and co-ed sectors. These are the sectors with the greatest occupancy pressures. The purpose of the REOI is to identify shelter operators and service providers to marginalized populations who would be interested and able to operate new or expanded emergency or transitional shelters, explore service delivery models that address complex needs of service users through a Housing First framework, and identify resources including property, staffing and other supports that will be required for the proposed program. Funding for this expansion is included in the 2015 Recommended Operating Budget for SSHA.

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