



STAFF REPORT ACTION REQUIRED

Feasibility of Enhanced Cold Weather Drop-In Services

Date:	May 6, 2015
To:	Community Development and Recreation Committee
From:	General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration
Wards:	All
Reference Number:	

SUMMARY

This report responds to the request to report on the feasibility of operating additional drop-in and/or warming services during the 2015/2016 winter season regardless of any issuance of Extreme Cold Weather Alerts.

Community-based Extreme Cold Weather Alert (ECWA) drop-in services complement the Out of the Cold program, which operates daily from November 15 to April 15 across rotating sites, as well as 24-hour full-time service offered at the Streets to Homes Assessment and Referral Centre (SHARC). Drop-in services that respond to cold weather events are unique in the City of Toronto. They offer a low-barrier operating model with an approach to service that cannot be accessed in the same way elsewhere.

Based on a review of the ECWA drop-in services funded by Shelter, Support and Housing Administration (SSHA) from November 15, 2014 to April 15, 2015, an analysis of service use, patterns of extreme cold weather experienced in recent years, and consultations with service users, service providers and City staff, the feasibility of several service models for Cold Weather services was assessed.

Taking into account available resources, this report recommends maintaining the current alert-based service model for the 2015/2016 winter season while proposing consideration of an enhanced service model through the 2016 budget process for the 2016/2017 winter season and subsequent years.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, recommends that:

1. City Council authorize the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, to enter into agreements with Margaret's Housing and Community Support Services Inc. and St. Felix Social Ministries Outreach to provide 24-hour drop-in services based on the issuance of Extreme Cold Weather Alerts or at the request of General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, from November 15, 2015 to April 15, 2016 for up to \$460,000; and
2. City Council authorize the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, to submit a business case for enhanced Cold Weather drop-in services for consideration through the 2016 City Operating budget process.

Financial Impact

The recommendations in this report have no financial impact beyond the approved 2015 Operating Budget for SSHA.

City Council approved \$240,000 of Provincial Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI) funding in the 2015 Operating Base Budget for SSHA for Extreme Cold Weather Alert drop-in services. Due to unanticipated costs related to ensuring the safety of service users and staff and high service demand, it is anticipated that the total cost of operating the same services for the 2015/2016 cold weather season may reach \$460,000, depending on the number of Extreme Cold Weather Alerts. It is expected that one-time SSHA funding will be available to fund the additional service requirements resulting in no net impact.

An enhanced service model, as described in this report, may cost up to \$656,000. There is insufficient funding in the approved Operating Budget for SSHA to introduce the enhanced service level for the 2015/2016 winter season. Enhancements, beginning in the 2016/2017 winter season, would be considered through the 2016 Operating Budget process.

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. ECWA drop-in services provide accessible, pet-friendly supports when cold weather conditions increase the vulnerability of people experiencing homelessness.

DECISION HISTORY

On February 10 and 11, 2015, City Council directed the General Manager, SSHA, to report to the May 21, 2015 meeting of the Community Development and Recreation Committee on the feasibility of operating additional drop-in and/or warming services during the 2016 winter season, complementing and supplementing the Out of the Cold program and schedule, regardless of any issuance of Extreme Cold Weather Alerts. (<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2015.CD1.6>)

At the meeting held July 8, 9, 10 and 11, 2014, City Council adopted a report reviewing the City's cold weather protocols and the health impacts of cold weather. Council directed the General Manager, SSHA, to issue a Request for Expression of Interest (REOI) in 2014 to establish community interest in operating and/or co-ordinating 24-hour drop-in services during Extreme Cold Weather Alerts. (<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2014.CD30.6>)

At the meeting held December 16, 17 and 18, 2013 City Council received a report on the feasibility of establishing 24-hour warming centres during Extreme Cold Weather Alerts. (<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2013/cc/bgrd/backgroundfile-64903.pdf>)

ISSUE BACKGROUND

Extreme Cold Weather Alerts

Extreme Cold Weather Alerts (ECWAs) are declared by the Medical Officer of Health when cold weather conditions are expected to be associated with elevated health risks. The objectives of calling ECWAs are to:

- Warn people who are vulnerable to cold weather that such conditions are expected or already exist in the City;
- Urge vulnerable people to take measures to protect their health and to come indoors if they are sleeping outdoors or in precarious situations; and
- Trigger response activities by City and community partners to protect vulnerable people within the city (e.g. enhance services).

ECWAs may be called between November 15 and April 15 each year when Environment Canada forecasts a temperature of -15°C or colder. The Medical Officer of Health may also issue an alert based on a number of other factors including wind chill, precipitation, extended periods of cold weather, or sudden changes to colder weather.

Health Impacts of Cold Weather on People Experiencing Homelessness

As adapted from Toronto Public Health's report on the ["Health Impacts of Cold Weather"](#):

People experiencing homelessness are at greater risk of cold injuries because they are more likely to spend long periods of time outside, and so their exposure to cold is greater and longer than for most people. As well, many of the chronic problems faced by homeless people, including inadequate clothing, malnutrition, and underlying infection, increase the risk of developing and dying from hypothermia.

A number of studies additionally identify factors such as alcohol use, [mental health issues], and use of certain medications as risk factors for hypothermia. These are issues that are common among those experiencing homelessness, often resulting in multiple overlapping risk factors that contribute to an outcome of death due to hypothermia. ... Deaths represent the most severe and least likely cold-related injury.

[Other] severe non-fatal impacts of cold exposure ... include amputation of affected areas or extended hospitalizations. Known risk factors for frostbite are similar to those for hypothermia. These include low temperature, wind, wetness ... and existing co-morbidities including chronic conditions such as the presence of cardiovascular illness, diabetes and depression.

Extreme Cold Weather Services

When an ECWA is called, the City activates additional services for people experiencing homelessness. SSHA distributes TTC tokens to 17 drop-in services that provide service users with one token per ECWA to travel to a shelter or an ECWA drop-in service.

During ECWAs, Streets to Homes provides 24-hour street outreach services by adding two overnight street outreach teams (11 pm to 7 am). Street Outreach workers connect with people who are sleeping outdoors and may offer transport to services. The teams recheck individuals who refuse transport and respond to concerned citizen calls from 311.

The Streets to Homes Assessment and Referral Centre (SHARC), located at 129 Peter Street, is open 24-hours, 365 days a year and provides respite for individuals who want to come in from the cold. SHARC plays an important coordinating function for all of the City's ECWA services.

Hostel Services opens Extreme Cold Weather beds when an ECWA is called – 11 beds for men at Fort York Residence and 15 beds for women at the Adelaide Resource Centre for Women. In addition, all shelters in the City relax their service restriction policies, allowing individuals who have displayed threatening or disruptive behaviour to stay at the shelter despite an active service restriction.

The Out of the Cold (OOTC) program operates from November 15 to April 15 each year. There are 16 OOTC sites located throughout the city that typically operate one night per week. The number of beds available at each location currently varies from 15 to 75. On any given night there could be up to four sites operating. The OOTC program provides low-barrier service including a mat and a meal. Because most sites are open only one day each week, the program does not provide case management supports.

During the winter of 2013/2014, the City of Toronto issued 36 Extreme Cold Weather Alerts. Due to the exceptionally cold winter weather, SSHA opened a pilot warming centre in the rotunda at Metro Hall during ECWAs from January to April 2014, with an average nightly occupancy of 63 people.

A review of the City's experience with the pilot warming centre in Metro Hall indicated that it provided a low-barrier drop-in service that was accessed by people who do not readily use the emergency shelter system due to the perceived structure and expectations at shelters, such as curfew. The review highlighted that a community-based model was preferred, with a service model most aligned with drop-ins.

City Council subsequently authorized SSHA to release a Request for Expressions of Interest (REOI) to establish community interest in operating and/or co-ordinating 24-hour drop-in services during ECWAs. An REOI was released in the summer of 2014 and the City entered into agreements with three community agencies to provide service during ECWAs during the 2014/2015 winter season.

Margaret's Toronto East Drop-in (323 Dundas Street East at Sherbourne Street) and St. Felix Centre (25 Augusta Avenue at Queen and Spadina Streets) operated co-ed drop-in services for individuals 16 and older from November 15, 2014 to April 15, 2015. The YMCA (7 Vanauley Street at Queen and Spadina Streets) provided youth-only drop-in services for ages 16 to 24 on a pilot basis beginning in February 2015. However, because service numbers for the YMCA were very low (1 to 3 people a night), the service was discontinued a month later. A description of the key components of the ECWA drop-in service model is provided in Attachment A.

City Council, on February 10 and 11, 2015, directed SSHA to review the feasibility of operating additional drop-in and/or warming services during the 2015/2016 winter season, complementing and supplementing the OOTC program and schedule, regardless of any issuance of ECWAs.

COMMENTS

Extreme Cold Weather Drop-In Use

The City of Toronto issued 39 ECWAs from November 15, 2014 to April 15, 2015, which resulted in 43.75 days of Extreme Cold Weather drop-in services at both locations serving adults. The YMCA was open to youth during ECWAs from February 8, 2015 to March 5, 2015, resulting in 21.25 days of service.

Adult Services (Ages 16 and Over)

The average nightly occupancy at Margaret’s Toronto East Drop-In and St. Felix Centre was approximately 42 at each drop-in location. Although the overnight capacity at each site was 40, both agencies regularly exceeded this number. Service users identified the drop-ins as their preferred service during ECWAs. Attachment B shows the overnight occupancy at both agencies.

Margaret’s, in the downtown east, saw an average of 118 people daily, who would regularly come and go during the ECWA. St. Felix Centre, in the downtown west, saw an average of 56 individuals each day. St. Felix Centre's service users were more likely to arrive when an alert was called and would stay at the facility for the duration of the alert. Attachment C illustrates total daily service users at both agencies.

Both Margaret’s and St. Felix Centre accepted couples and were pet-friendly. The agencies saw an average of 2.3 couples each night, with a maximum of 6 couples at a single site at one time. The agencies also accommodated an average of two pets each night, with a maximum of six at a single site at one time. The agencies saw a total of 168 pets (non-unique) over the entire season. Key demographic information for Margaret’s and St. Felix Centre is provided in Attachment D.

Youth Service (Ages 16 to 24)

The average nightly occupancy at the YMCA’s ECWA drop-in was 2. A majority of youth who visited this drop-in were transferred to shelter beds the same day. The pilot project did not demonstrate that there is demand for separate ongoing youth focused ECWA drop-in services.

Cost of 2014/2015 Extreme Cold Weather Drop-In Services

The 2015 Operating Budget for SSHA allocated \$240,000 for ECWA drop-in service. This was based on a projected cost of \$3,000 per adult site, per day for up to 40 days of operation. Due to the high demand for service and the complex needs of clients, staff spent more time supervising the space and managing conflict than anticipated. The daily maximum rate for the service was increased to allow the agencies to hire additional staff and security early in the season and services were activated for 43.75 days. As a result, the cost of operating the service exceeded the budget forecast. The actual cost of operating the drop-in services over the 2014/2015 cold weather season is provided below:

Time Period	Days of Service	Start Up, On Call & Overhead Costs	Program Operating Costs	Total
Nov 15 – Dec 31/14	0	\$81,500	0	\$ 81,500
Jan 1 – Feb 28/15	38	N/A	\$312,439	\$312,439
Mar 1 – April 15/15	5.75	N/A	\$ 52,280	\$ 52,280
Total	43.75	\$81,500	\$364,719	\$446,219

Consultations

Service use numbers and feedback from service user consultations clearly demonstrate the need for ECWA drop-in services. Some of the user feedback is included in Attachment E, along with a more detailed discussion on the consultations that were undertaken by SSHA. The main themes emerging from the consultations with service users and service providers and discussions with Toronto Police Service include:

- Low-barrier drop-in services, in which people can stay together as a couple and/or bring their pets, are important for people with specific service needs that are not currently met by shelters, nor would be met with an expansion of shelter beds.
- Service users prefer a 24-hour, continuous winter service, which does not close when an ECWA ends.
- Service providers found staffing-up after an ECWA was called difficult, as was maintaining a sufficient staff pool for longer term alerts (there were 17 continuous days of alerts in February 2015).
- Toronto Police Service commented that weather conditions, such as snow, may not result in alerts being called, but create dangerous conditions for service users.

Service Delivery Options

The following service delivery options were discussed with drop-in service users and providers. ECWA drop-in services can be viewed along a continuum, from alert-based response to five months of continuous service. While there are advantages and disadvantages for each option, the decision should ultimately be based on the desired purpose of the service.

1. Alert-based Response

The 2014/2015 season followed an alert-based response model, where services opened and closed based on ECWAs, as determined by the Medical Officer of Health. Drop-in services were open for 43.75 days of service across 14 series of ECWAs. While there is no way of knowing if the 2015/2016 winter will be equally cold, it would be prudent to maintain a budget for 40 ECWAs next season.

Advantages:

- Services are activated by the Medical Officer of Health calling an ECWA based on the health impacts of cold weather.
- If the season is unusually warm, drop-in services would not be provided, which would reduce the financial impact.

Disadvantages:

- Service users indicated that for people experiencing homelessness during the winter, the temperature threshold required to issue an ECWA feels arbitrary. There is no noticeable difference between -10°C and -15°C for people who are street-involved.
- Services providers indicated that the temperature threshold creates a feeling of uncertainty about when an alert will be called. Not knowing if they will be operating until 7 am each morning makes it difficult for agencies to plan adequate staffing and leaves service users feeling unsettled.
- It is difficult for staff to build trusting relationships with service users during short periods of alerts, which reduces the likelihood of providing referrals to other services such as housing help.

Cost:

Time Period	Days of Service	Health and Safety Enhancements*	ECWA Daily Rate**	Total
Nov 15/15 – Dec 31/15	1	\$100,000	\$ 9,000	\$109,000
Jan 1/16 – Feb 29/16	36	N/A	\$324,000	\$324,000
Mar 1/16 – April 15/16	3	N/A	\$ 27,000	\$ 27,000
Total	40	\$100,000	\$360,000	\$460,000

*Includes addressing security issues, purchasing mats/bedding, and laundry services.

**Based on a rate of \$4500 per day of service for each location, resulting in a cost of \$9000 per ECWA.

2. Five Months Continuous Service

At the other extreme of the continuum of cold weather service models, drop-in services could stay open for the entire five-month season from November 15 to April 15, 24-hours a day.

Advantages:

- It is easier for agencies to plan for the season and hire staff, which may translate into relative cost savings compared to an emergency response.
- Agency staff would be able to connect and build trusting relationships with service users. The possibility of making referrals is higher.

Disadvantages:

- This service model would be expensive to maintain and, traditionally, November, December, March and April have experienced very few ECWAs.

- It would be difficult to explain why a service that has been open through a warm March/April is required to close after April 15.

Cost:

Time Period	Days of Service	Health and Safety Enhancements	ECWA Daily Rate*	Total
Nov 15/15 – Apr 15/16	122	\$60,000	\$1,158,000	\$1,273,000
Total	122	\$60,000	\$1,158,000	\$1,273,000

*There would likely be efficiency savings from operating a service for five months; however, a consistent daily rate of \$4500 per agency provides the best estimate.

3. January/February Continuous Service, Plus Alert-based Model for Remainder of Cold Weather Season

This service model combines the advantages of operating for a pre-determined period, while maintaining the essential purpose of this service as a response to extreme cold weather. A hybrid model combining options one and two, above, would provide continuous 24-hour drop-in services for January and February with alert-based services based on ECWAs in November, December, March and April.

Advantages:

- Two months of full-time service is easier for agencies to manage and staff, and there is a rationale for providing full-time service in January and February, which are statistically the coldest months of the year. Attachment F shows aggregated monthly alerts over the past 10 years.
- Agencies will be able to plan partnerships for additional service delivery such as harm reduction or nursing supports.
- Service users will be able to stay in one place during the coldest months of the year, which helps to create an environment of ownership and respect for the service and also allows staff to build relationships based on trust.

Disadvantages:

- If January and February don't have a high number of alerts, ECWA drop-in services will still operate on a 24/7 basis.
- The service will no longer be based solely on the health impacts of cold weather.

Cost:

Time Period	Days of Service	Health and Safety Enhancements	ECWA Daily Rate*	Total
Nov 15 – Dec 31/15	1	\$80,000	\$ 9,000	\$ 89,000
Jan 1 – Feb 29/16	60	N/A	\$540,000	\$540,000
Mar 1 – April 15/16	3	N/A	\$ 27,000	\$ 27,000
Total	64	\$80,000	\$576,000	\$656,000

*There would likely be efficiency savings from operating a service full-time for two months; however, a consistent daily rate of \$4500 per agency provides the best estimate.

Conclusion

Given the logistical and client service advantages of continuous operation during the period when, historically, there are frequent and sustained periods of extreme cold weather, Option 3, January/February continuous service, plus an alert-based model for the remainder of the November 15 – April 15 season, is SSHA's preferred service model. Two months of continuous service in January/February enables community agencies to design a program model with a range of supports to meet the complex needs of service users during the coldest months of the year.

Resources are not available in the approved Operating Budget for SSHA to introduce this enhanced service level for the 2015/2016 winter season. It is recommended that City Council authorize the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration to submit a business case through the 2016 budget process for the enhanced service levels to be implemented in the 2016/2017 winter season and beyond.

Twenty-four hour drop-in services will continue to be triggered by ECWAs for the 2015/2016 winter season. It is recommended that Council authorize the General Manager to enter into agreements with Margaret's Housing and Community Support Services Inc. and St. Felix Social Ministries Outreach for this purpose.

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ATTACHMENTS

- Attachment A: 2014/15 Service Model and Key Components of Service
- Attachment B: ECWA Drop-In Overnight Occupancy
- Attachment C: ECWA Drop-In Daily Service Users
- Attachment D: Demographic Information
- Attachment E: Consultation Summary
- Attachment F: Aggregate Monthly Extreme Cold Weather Alerts: 2004/2005 to 2014/2015

Attachment A: 2014/2015 Service Model and Key Components of Service

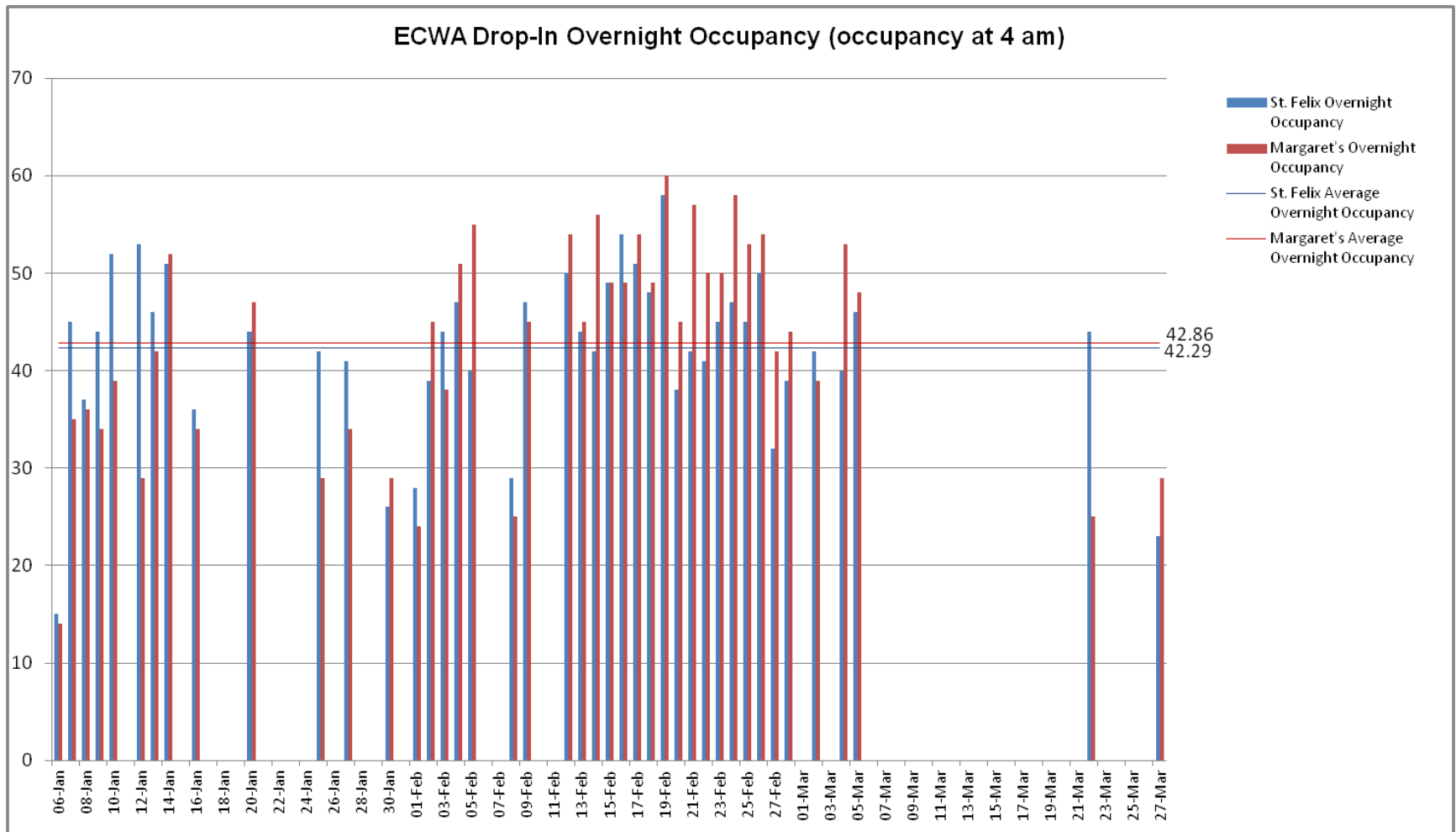
For the 2014/2015 season, the Extreme Cold Weather drop-in services operated as a key component of SSHA's integrated and coordinated winter response for vulnerable people who need shelter and other supports because of inclement weather. The drop-in services operated 24-hours during ECWAs, commencing within eight hours of an ECWA being called and ending a maximum of three hours after an alert was terminated.

Services were low-barrier and targeted at individuals who are homeless, at risk of becoming homeless, precariously housed and/or have complex needs. For these drop-ins, low-barrier was characterized by having very few rules and expectations, including no curfew, no set meal times and a high tolerance for disruptive behaviour. Decisions on service restrictions were behaviour-based, focussing on the safety of staff and service users.

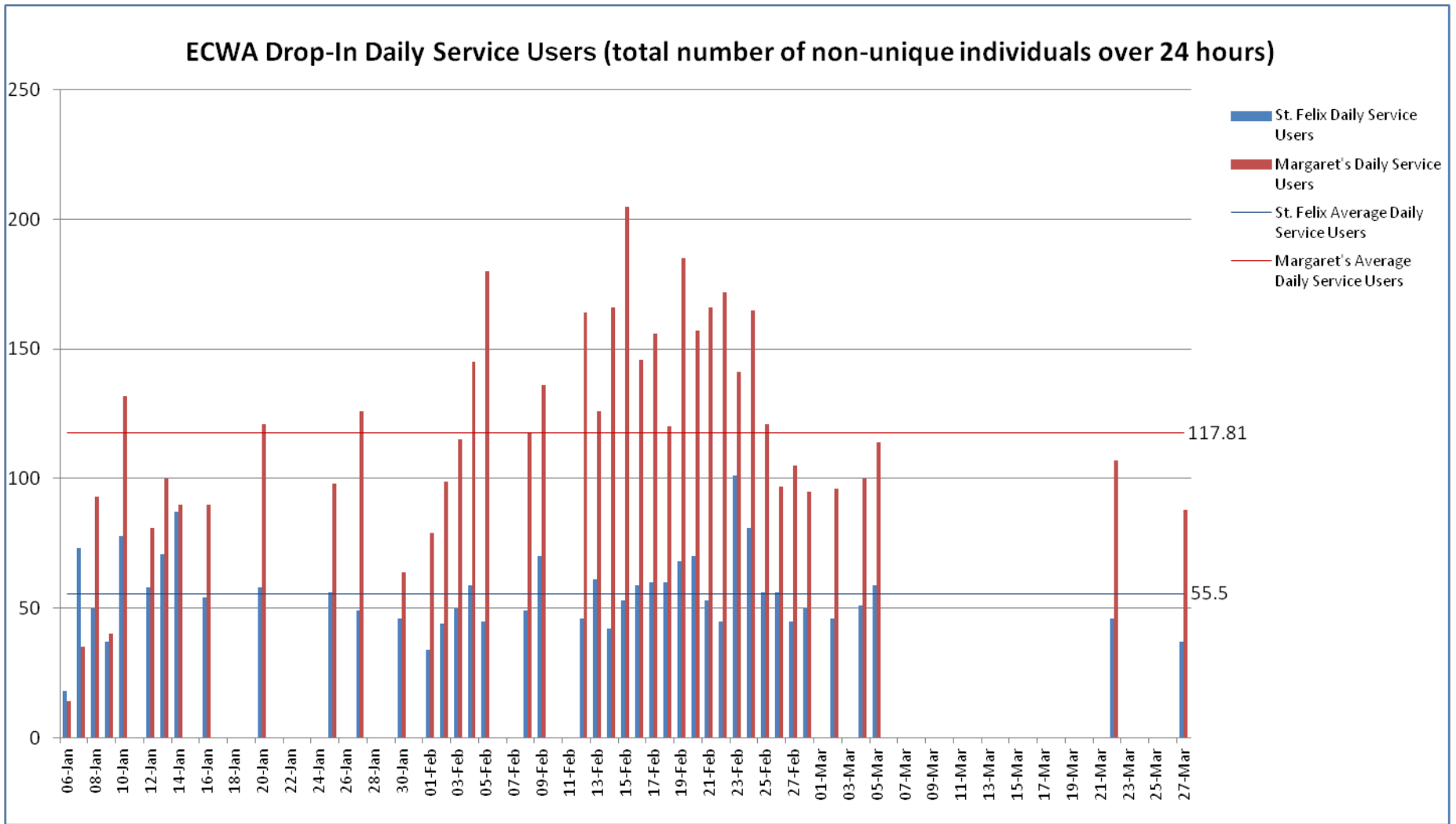
Drop-in services were provided in a safe and welcoming environment. Staff involved in the provision of services were considered respectful, non-judgemental and skilled at de-escalating conflict that could potentially threaten the safety and security of individuals and property. The drop-ins provided blankets and mats, a warm space for service users to sleep, food that was warm and nutritious, access to washrooms, TTC tokens, and access or referral to healthcare services.

Feedback from service users indicates that an expansion of the shelter system during cold weather would not adequately address the needs of this client group.

Attachment B



Attachment C



Attachment D: Demographic Information

Demographic data for the two sites are shown separately as there are some noteworthy differences between service users at each location, indicating the need for ongoing east and west end services.

Since the drop-in services are low-barrier, service users were not required to give personal information. As a result, there are some variances in the demographic information reported to SSHA; however, these are small, between 0.4% and 3.4%, and should not take away from using this data to plan services for next year.

Demographic Category*	Margaret's Toronto East Drop-In	St. Felix Centre
16-24	8.89%	3.35%
25-64	82.82%	89.27%
65+	8.35%	5.06%
Male	77.91%	75.12%
Female	20.92%	25.14%
Couples	3.35%	7.98%
Transgender	3.27%	0.04%
Aboriginal	4.28%	10.21%
Observed physical disability	1.48%	0.56%

*Not all categories will equal 100%.

Attachment E: Consultation Summary

Success Stories

Very early in the ECWA season, Streets to Homes street outreach reported the following success story: John Smith has been a client of Streets to Homes since 2008. Since that time it has been very challenging to engage him in services. In fact, he has declined all offers of assistance. On an overnight shift in January, a street outreach team connected with John at the Courthouse next to Nathan Phillip's Square. He was cold and when the team offered transport to the drop-in service at St. Felix Centre, where he could have some warm soup and watch TV (because he did not think that he could go to sleep), he agreed. The staff at St. Felix Centre were great in welcoming him and assisting him to store his large tarp that he uses to sleep in the out of doors. This has been a huge success after six years of efforts on his behalf by the entire Outreach Team. The environment that St. Felix Centre's ECWA drop-in set up, including the TV, great food and very welcoming staff, contributed to John's success.

Another drop-in service user indicated that were it not for the Extreme Cold Weather drop-in services, she would be sleeping outdoors because it is difficult for her to find somewhere that will welcome her and her two pets.

A drop-in service user at Margaret's said she liked going to Margaret's because she felt welcome, accepted and was able to sleep on a mat beside her boyfriend. Being able to have him beside her was so important that she said she would rather sleep outside than sleep in a women's shelter without him. She was very grateful to come inside to a safe place in the extreme cold.

Service User Consultations

On March 3 and 5, 2015, SSHA conducted focus groups with service users at Margaret's, St. Felix Centre and the YMCA. Through small group conversations, eight people at Margaret's, nine people at St. Felix Centre and two youth at the YCMA provided feedback on what worked and what could be improved at the Extreme Cold Weather drop-in services.

Service users were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire. 14 individuals completed the questionnaire, representing a return rate of 74%. While this is a very small sample of people who used the Extreme Cold Weather drop-in services, the sample appears quite representative of all service users. The people who participated in the focus groups ranged in age from 18 to 63 and the average age was 42. Over 75% of participants were male. Over 25% of participants identified as Aboriginal. Over 70% identified a physical or mental health challenge. Over 75% were not housed at the time of the focus group. While over 70% of participants had not stayed in a shelter during the winter season, 75% had used an Out of the Cold.

Service users highlighted several key aspects of service that made the Extreme Cold Weather drop-ins different from, and in their estimation preferable to, other services. Primarily, the low-barrier approach to service delivery was empowering. People felt comfortable using the services and particularly highlighted the role of staff and peer workers in creating an environment that felt safe and welcoming. The staff successfully created a space that was free of judgment and they were able to engage service users in conversation.

Service users also discussed the sense of community, a family forming at the drop-in services. People with housing came to the drop-in for social interaction and warm, nutritious food. Many people felt the drop-in services were a place to call a home. Service users felt invested in keeping the drop-in spaces safe and clean.

The comfort and community felt in the drop-ins created a space of stability for individuals who generally do not feel this sense of stability in other services. This creates a base from which people experiencing homelessness can begin to engage with services and “get done what you need to get done”. Service users identified their own successes with accepting agency referrals, connecting with drop-in staff and being connected with nursing services. Access to phones and computers was also considered helpful.

The co-ed, pet-friendly space, open to couples was universally viewed as an excellent service model for those people using the drop-in services. The youth using Margaret’s and St. Felix Centre enjoyed the intergenerational aspect of the drop-in services – again as part of the community that was formed over the 43.75 days of service.

Some suggested improvements included:

- Access to showers
- Lockers to store personal belongings
- Onsite substance use counsellor
- Onsite crisis counsellor
- More support to find housing
- Therapy sessions/counselling, but not in an institutional format
- More staff training to work with mental health

Service users universally preferred a service that is open 24-hours, full-time throughout all of winter. Even if not for the full season, the drop-in services should be open for a definite period of time. Decisions around when an alert was called felt arbitrary for people. -10°C did not feel any different from -15°C. Likewise, having three hours to leave when an alert was terminated made it very difficult to plan where to go the following night.

If the Extreme Cold Weather drop-in services were not open, many service users would sleep on the street, use the Out of the Cold program or go to 129 Peter Street; however, the groups at Margaret’s and St. Felix Centre felt very strongly that the drop-in programs were the best service option for them. Generally, people did not want the alerts to end.

Service Provider Consultations

Group Served

Both Margaret's and St. Felix Centre reported that a majority of the Extreme Cold Weather drop-in service users were new to their respective drop-ins, whereas the youth who used the YMCA were predominantly youth that they already serve. The service users at both adult drop-ins presented with considerably more severe complex issues than the agencies' regular users. Some people reported that they had active service restrictions at all of the shelters where they could have gone, so the drop-in services were a place of last resort.

There were a small group of service users that frequented the drop-ins during every alert who displayed particularly disruptive behaviour, which posed a challenge for accommodating other people's needs for a place to rest. This group accounted for the majority of calls to Toronto Paramedic Services and Toronto Police Services.

Current Service Model

The largest challenge for the agencies of offering a low-barrier, alert-based drop-in service model was staffing. As noted above, the ECWA service users were substantially different from both drop-ins' regular service users. Staff burnout was an issue, as was maintaining a pool of relief staff for the entire season when there were a maximum of eight hours to staff the service after an alert was called.

The east and west service distribution was successful. Service users like to stay where they are comfortable and it can be a challenge for them to move east or west of Yonge Street when they traditionally access services in a particular area and identify this area of the city as their community.

Like service users, drop-in staff noted that an alert-based service model is difficult to manage, as it is difficult to explain why an alert has been terminated when it is still very cold outside.

Preferred Service Model

With an alert-based model, staffing posed the greatest challenge. The agencies suggested a longer period of full-time service would help them plan for the season. A more defined service model would not only make planning shifts easier, it would also allow the agencies to arrange for other organizations to provide services onsite. For example, crisis and substance use counselling, nursing care and employment services could arrange to be onsite during specified hours. This broadens the range of opportunities available to service users in a space where they feel safe and comfortable.

While a longer, set period of service has advantages, five months of full-time service from November 15 to April 15 (the entire cold weather season) would pose another set of challenges when the season ends and clients have to leave. Continual service in January

and February and alert-based service for the remainder of the season would help to plan staffing and service provision, but present less of a challenge for clients when overnight services end.

More sites with smaller capacity would be ideal, but the east and west service distribution should be maintained.

Some suggestions to improve the service for clients include:

- More training to help staff prepare for the Extreme Cold Weather season, particularly in areas such as nonviolent crisis intervention
- Having a Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS) Worker come to work with people on income supports
- Onsite housing workers
- More mental health supports
- For longer series of alerts, allow a grace period for service users to plan their next steps (i.e., if there are 7 days of alerts, allow an additional 24 hours after the last alert is terminated for people to move out)

Discussion with Toronto Police Services

- Conversations with Neighbourhood Officers in 14 and 51 Divisions were very positive. Both Divisions noted the drop-in services were a valuable addition to their communities. Officers used the drop-in services as resources when they found people sleeping outdoors and in stairwells.
- Both 14 and 51 Divisions agreed that operating full-time in January and February would be beneficial. Even on days that are not cold enough for an alert to be called, other weather conditions such as snow can increase the dangers for people sleeping outdoors. The stability that comes with knowing a space will be available for a longer period of time may help service users get into a routine and adjust to basic rules and expectations that ensure the safety of everyone in the drop-ins. It is much easier to treat a space that is essentially transient with little respect; whereas people tend to feel more ownership and responsibility for a space they know they will be using the next day too.

Other Considerations

The 2014/2015 ECWA drop-ins highlighted some gaps in the current services available to people experiencing homelessness:

- There are a lack of pet-friendly spaces and shelter beds for couples, which results in people sleeping outdoors when they would otherwise be able to engage with the shelter system and its associated supports.

- Street-involved women and youth are more likely to travel and live with a group of people for protection.
- There are a group of individuals who occasionally use the shelter system, but preferred the ECWA drop-in services when they were open because they were low-barrier. A low-barrier shelter would meet the needs of these individuals and would create a permanent, stable space where people would be able to access housing and case management supports. The drop-ins were best able to connect with people after building relationships through 17 straight days of service.
- There are still a group of people who will not go indoors in even the worst weather. These individuals are often living with extremely complex issues that our current homeless service system does not adequately address. Shelter, outreach, drop-in and housing help workers successfully engage with a range of vulnerable people increasing their housing stability and community supports. However, more solution-focussed research and innovative programming is required to better assist those who are deeply entrenched in street homelessness.

Attachment F: Aggregate Monthly Extreme Cold Weather Alerts: 2004/2005 to 2014/2015

