

Review of policies and procedures related to Warming Centres

Date: April 13, 2023

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

From: General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration

Wards: All

SUMMARY

Each year, the City develops a Winter Services Plan to outline how it will serve people experiencing homelessness during the winter months. These efforts are critical to enhance safety and protect people during cold and severe weather. However, the City of Toronto is currently facing immediate and urgent financial challenges, which includes a \$317 million gap for COVID-19 response funding for shelters, and a \$97 million current funding requirement for shelter for refugee claimants. In the absence of federal and provincial financial support, or new revenue tools for Toronto, the City will not be able to maintain current service levels in the shelter system.

On January 11, 2023, Economic and Community Development Committee directed the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration to review policies and procedures related to the opening and operations of emergency Warming Centres and report back with recommendations on improvements that can be made. On February 7 and 8, 2023, City Council adopted Item HL1.6 and requested the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration to report back on the feasibility of providing 24/7 drop in spaces either at City of Toronto facilities or at locations provided by community/faith-based institutions, and to include a roundtable and survey of homeless serving organizations when conducting the review of policies and procedures of emergency Warming Centres operations. This report responds to these requests and identifies a number of actions to support people experiencing homelessness who are vulnerable to illness and injury as a result of exposure to cold temperatures, including:

- A. Revising criteria for activating Warming Centres
- B. Formalizing a proactive and collaborative approach to securing properties
- C. Increasing housing opportunities and shelter system flow
- D. Enhancing partnerships and collaboration

These actions are based on feedback from community partners and stakeholders, inputs from service users and staff, and advice from health experts including Toronto

Public Health. Additionally, implementation of any of these actions are subject to available space, staffing and budget.

The City of Toronto is committed to making homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring - but it can't do it alone. The current situation requires urgent and coordinated action across all orders of government. New and enhanced investments in housing and health and social services are critical to support those experiencing homelessness. Concurrently, targeted upstream interventions across systems and across governments are needed to address the root causes of poverty and homelessness, including increasing access to affordable housing, income supports that reflect the current cost of living, healthcare, employment opportunities and education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

1. City Council request the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, in collaboration with the Executive Director, Corporate Real Estate Management, to create an Inter-Divisional and City Agency Working Group to develop a long-term strategy for Warming Centres and other winter services and annual Winter Capital Plans to identify locations for Warming Centres and/or 24-hour respite sites, and review available buildings, including City/agency-owned sites, private market spaces and/or community partner owned and/or operated spaces.
2. City Council request the Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario to provide \$5 million to the City of Toronto in additional funding for the winter services response for the activation of additional Warming Centres in the 2023-2024 winter season.
3. City Council request the Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario to urgently allocate an additional \$20 million in Canada-Ontario Housing Benefits (COHB) in 2023-2024 to help between 1,600 and 2,000 households to exit the shelter system and move into permanent housing.
4. City Council authorize the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration to enter into a data sharing agreement with ICES (formerly the Institute for Clinical and Evaluative Sciences) to share shelter client data with ICES and receive de-identified administrative healthcare data from ICES as part of the Health of People Experiencing Homelessness project, for the purposes of planning and providing health services for people who access Toronto's shelter system, in alignment with SSHA's Council-approved Homelessness Solutions Service Plan, and on terms and conditions satisfactory to the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, and in a form satisfactory with the City Solicitor.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

The Winter Services Response program initiative crosses two fiscal years, beginning in November of the current fiscal year through April of the following fiscal year.

Funding of \$16.2 million is included for Winter Services Response in the 2023 Approved Budget for SSHA to provide 419 beds between January 1, 2023 and April 15, 2023 and November 15 and December 31, 2023. These costs are part of the City's inter-governmental request for \$317 million in COVID-19 funding and if required is supported by the City's one-time 2023 back stop strategy.

The City's emergency provisions will fully exhaust the City's one-time backstop strategy and funds will no longer be available for other ongoing commitments, COVID-19 impacts or service delivery in 2024. Therefore, in the absence of future funding commitments from the federal and provincial governments for 2023, funding will no longer be available for any contractual obligations under Winter Services program starting January 1, 2024. Therefore, the report through Recommendation 2 requests funding of \$5 million from the federal and provincial governments to continue the delivery of these services beyond December 31, 2023.

To provide further relief for the base shelter system, Recommendation 3 of the report further requests the Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario to invest an additional \$20 million in Canada-Ontario Housing Benefits (COHB) in 2024 to help between 1,600 and 2,000 households to exit the shelter system and move into permanent housing.

In the absence of timely and sufficient funding commitments from the federal and provincial governments, the City will need to review current programming levels and adjust or reduce programming in advance of 2024.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial implications as contained in the Financial Impact Section.

EQUITY IMPACT

Toronto's homelessness service system serves a range of equity-deserving groups, including people experiencing chronic homelessness, seniors, low-income households, people with disabilities, Indigenous people, Black people, 2SLGBTQ+ people, women and youth. Winter services support people experiencing homelessness who are less likely to access traditional shelter services. Ensuring vulnerable groups have access to safe, high quality emergency shelter and access to permanent housing opportunities is an important determinant of health and also improves the social and economic status of an individual.

DECISION HISTORY

On February 7 and 8, 2023, City Council adopted HL1.6 "Cold weather and the effects on those experiencing homelessness" that requested the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration to include, in the upcoming report to the Economic and Community Development Committee, the feasibility of providing 24/7 drop in spaces either at City of Toronto facilities or at locations provided by community/faith-based institutions; and to include a roundtable and survey of homeless serving organizations when conducting the review of policies and procedures of emergency Warming Centres operations requested in Item EC1.9.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.HL1.6>

On January 11, 2023, Economic and Community Development Committee directed the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration to review all policies and procedures related to the opening and operations of Emergency Warming Centres and report back at the April 25, 2023 meeting with recommendations on improvements that can be made including opening centres more proactively and reinvesting in community-outreach programs, such as Out of The Cold, which could reduce the pressures on city facilities.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.EC1.9>

On July 6, 2022, Economic and Community Development Committee requested the Deputy City Managers, Infrastructure and Development Services and Community and Social Services to consider, as part of an Enhanced Emergency Cooling System, inclusion of dedicated fixed-site and resourced 24/7 cooling centres, increased funding and resources for drop-ins, community centres and libraries to expanded support (e.g. onsite health care, food, drink and transit fare) during extreme heat, deployment of supports including HTO to Go water trailers and expansion of year round public washroom facilities to public parks and encampments, as well as innovative programs to support air cooling options for low income tenants.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.EC31.7>

At its June 26, 2018 meeting, City Council authorized the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration and approved the funding for a new capital project to install sprung structures to establish up to four temporary 24-hour respite sites.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2018.CD29.8>

At its January 31, 2018 meeting, City Council directed the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration to retain operations of the 24-hour winter respite sites, Warming Centres and drop-in programs beyond the scheduled April 15, 2018 timeline.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2018.CD25.5>

At its meeting on July 4-7, 2017, City Council authorized the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration to increase the capacity of the winter respite services and provide for continuous operation between November 15, 2017 and April 15, 2018.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2017.CD21.16>

At its meeting October 5, 6 and 7, 2016, City Council considered a report from the Board of Health on reducing the health impacts of cold weather. It furthermore approved funding to extend 24-hour cold weather drop-in services to operate continuous overnight winter respite services from December 15 to February 28, 2017, and that a third such service be added.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2016.HL14.4>

In November 3-4, 2015, City Council approved the release of funding the Property Tax Stabilization Fund and directed Shelter, Support and Housing Administration and the Medical Officer of Health to open two continuous 24-hour cold weather drop-in services on an as needed basis as early as mid-November 2015.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2015.HL7.3>

At its meeting on July 8-11, 2014, City Council approved the transfer of responsibility for coordinating Toronto's cold weather alert and response program when Environment Canada forecasts a temperature of -15°C or colder, taking into account wind chill and other weather conditions from Shelter, Support and Housing Administration to the Medical Officer of Health in time for the 2014-2015 cold weather season, and the criteria be updated as appropriate based on current scientific evidence. Council also directed the SSHA to identify standards, locations and operators to establish 24-hour drop-in services during Extreme Cold Weather Alerts based on the pilot of a Warming Centre at Metro Hall.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2014.CD30.6>

In December 2013, City Council requested that the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, in consultation with the Medical Officer of Health and the Director, Office of Emergency Management, review the temperature thresholds for issuing an Emergency Cold Weather Alert and determine whether any changes to the protocol were required.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2013.CD25.10>

COMMENTS

1. Shelter System Update

Shelter pressures

Toronto operates the largest shelter system in the country and faces ongoing and increasing demand for emergency shelter. Since spring 2021, the shelter system has responded by enhancing capacity by nearly 50%, with the number served increasing from 6,000 to 9,000 people nightly. The shelter system is currently serving twice as many people as it was six years ago. Despite continually adding new beds, there is increasing pressure on the shelter system, which is at capacity most nights. Even at the service level of almost 9,000 spaces, we are unable to match all people reaching out for shelter.

The increase in demand for shelter space is due to a number of factors including insufficient affordable housing supply, increased housing costs, a volatile economy with

high inflation, wages, social assistance rates and income supports that are too low to keep up with the cost of living in Toronto and across Ontario, and a growing demand for shelter from new asylum seekers as border restrictions have eased. The 2021 Street Needs Assessment found that 45% of people experiencing homelessness who had lived in Toronto for less than one year came from another Ontario community – majority of which are municipalities within the Greater Toronto Area. Toronto has the highest average number of emergency shelter beds per capita. For some people, coming to Toronto to access homelessness services is the only option when other communities have much smaller shelter systems.

While the system saw an increase in the number of people exiting homelessness to move to permanent housing over the course of 2022, this was far out-weighted by the increase in demand. A total of 4,385 people were successfully moved to permanent housing in 2022 and an additional 940 people in the first two months of 2023. Meanwhile, there were 9,795 new entries into homelessness over the course of 2022 and an additional 1,678 new entries in January and February of 2023. This net increase in demand despite the progress in connecting people to housing highlights the broad capacity issues facing the City's shelter system.

To respond to the growing and unprecedented demand for shelter services, in 2018 the City set a target of opening 1,000 new shelter beds. Through the Housing and Shelter Infrastructure Development project, the focus has transitioned to also support the creation of supportive housing units, recognizing the need for more permanent solutions to homelessness and complementing the City's commitments to creating 4,000 new affordable and supportive housing opportunities in 2023 and 2024. To date, seven new shelter sites are in operation adding 680 beds, and 75 additional shelter beds still in development at one site set to open in 2024. Further, 33 transitional housing spaces and 212 permanent supportive housing opportunities are in development through this plan.

Demand for Winter Services

With the shelter system at capacity, there is no space to support surges in demand that may occur in response to severe winter weather. This can result in people seeking shelter in other public spaces, such as the transit system, hospital emergency departments, libraries and coffee shops. To better serve people's needs, additional service responses are activated during the winter months to provide access to appropriate warm indoor spaces for people experiencing homelessness who are vulnerable to illness and injury related to exposure to cold temperatures. This service response has involved partnership and coordination across City divisions and between the City, community service providers and faith-based organizations.

While the response has changed and evolved over the years, winter services have typically involved temporary services activated based on extreme weather conditions (i.e. Extreme Cold Weather Alerts); and specific services activated throughout the winter months and/or designated time periods. Between 2015 and 2022, many services that opened as temporary winter services were converted to permanent 24/7 services that are incorporated into the base shelter system today, supporting the overall increase in system capacity.

In recent winters, temporarily activated winter services that provide overnight sleeping spaces quickly reached capacity. In periods where those winter services remained open for long stretches of time, the programs remained full and became inaccessible to new admissions if weather conditions worsened.

Winter Services Plan 2022-2023

The City's 2022-2023 Winter Services Plan outlines how it serves people experiencing homelessness during the winter months. All actions taken by the City to prepare for winter helped to create more than 1,000 spaces through expanded capacity in shelters, additional room in the refugee-specific system, and new affordable homes with supports. The Winter Services Plan was designed to be adaptive and evolve to respond to changing needs, as required throughout the winter. This year's Winter Plan added:

- 132 new planned single spaces opened in the shelter system
- 630 spaces gained by adjusting physical distancing between beds (in alignment with advice from Toronto Public Health)
- 100 rooms for singles and families in the refugee shelter system
- initially three and then one additional for a total of four Warming Centres activated during Extreme Cold Weather Alerts or other weather-based conditions, adding 134 spaces and additional overflow capacity as needed in the rotunda of Metro Hall. One Warming Centre with 45 spaces remained open continuously 24/7 from February 16 to April 15, following direction and additional funding from City Council
- enhanced 24/7 street outreach services during Extreme Cold Weather Alerts or other weather-based conditions, focused on wellness checks and encouraging those staying outdoors to come inside, as well as providing blankets, sleeping bags and warm winter clothing by street outreach staff throughout the winter

The plan also included approximately 400 new affordable homes with supports, prioritized for people experiencing homelessness who are staying in emergency shelters or living outdoors. Since November 15, over 405 households (i.e. individuals, couples or families experiencing homelessness) were supported to move into these new affordable homes with supports, freeing up space in the shelter system for people to come inside during the winter season.

2. Opening and Operations of Warming Centres

Warming Centres are defined as: "indoor space for people during cold weather alerts. Facilities vary, but often include City of Toronto buildings or community recreation centres. Services vary, depending on the facility, and may include at a minimum resting spaces, snacks and referrals to emergency shelter."

Warming Centres provide a surge response that offers overflow space when demand for shelter space increases due to cold or inclement winter weather conditions. In particular, they provide indoor spaces for people who are less likely to access traditional shelter services. Individuals can walk in to access the space; no referral is required.

Extreme Cold Weather Alerts

Since 1996, the City has used a system of Extreme Cold Weather Alerts (ECWAs) to trigger the activation of additional services for people experiencing homelessness during very cold weather conditions.

Between 2004 and 2014, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration (SSHA) was responsible for declaring an ECWA and coordinating a response to support people experiencing homelessness. In December 2013, City Council requested SSHA, in consultation with Toronto Public Health (TPH) and the Office of Emergency Management (OEM), review the temperature thresholds for issuing an ECWA. Subsequent to the recommendations presented to Council in June 2014, a threshold of -15°C was maintained, with the introduction of consideration for a wind chill to -20. The responsibility for issuing ECWAs was transitioned to the Medical Officer of Health at TPH, with SSHA coordinating the response to support people experiencing homelessness.

In 2015, the ECWA thresholds were reviewed again. TPH supported maintaining the threshold for issuing an ECWA when Environment Canada forecasts a temperature of -15°C or colder or a wind chill of -20 or colder, but also taking into consideration other environmental factors which may affect health risk.

In the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 winter seasons, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the responsibility for declaring an ECWA was temporarily transitioned to the Office of Emergency Management (OEM). This winter (2022-2023), between November 15 and April 15, the Medical Officer of Health resumed responsibility for issuing an ECWA.

Current policies and procedures

SSHA coordinates the operational winter response for people experiencing homelessness. Since 2020, SSHA has also been applying a broader range of weather factors to determine when to activate Warming Centres to meet the needs of vulnerable residents. Warming Centres may open outside of Extreme Cold Weather Alerts, including during periods of temperatures warmer than -15°C, if the forecast includes one or more factors that increase the impact of cold weather on health, including wind chill, low daytime temperatures, snow accumulation and precipitation.

Over the past three winters, Warming Centres were activated more often based on consideration of broader weather conditions than the ECWA thresholds, more than doubling the number of dates that Warming Centres were open (Table 1). Warming Centres also continue to have occupancy for up to two or three days after an activation has terminated, without admitting new clients, to ensure that all clients at the Warming Centre have a place to go (e.g. referral to a shelter or 24-hour respite).

Table 1. Number of dates that Warming Centres opened due to an ECWA or SSHA weather-based decision, and number of dates of occupancy in the past three winters.

Winter Season	Number of Dates Open Due to:		Number of dates that Warming Centres had occupants
	Extreme Cold Weather Alerts	SSHA Activations	
2020-21	11	25	39
2021-22	46	58	111
2022-23 (to date)	13	32	50

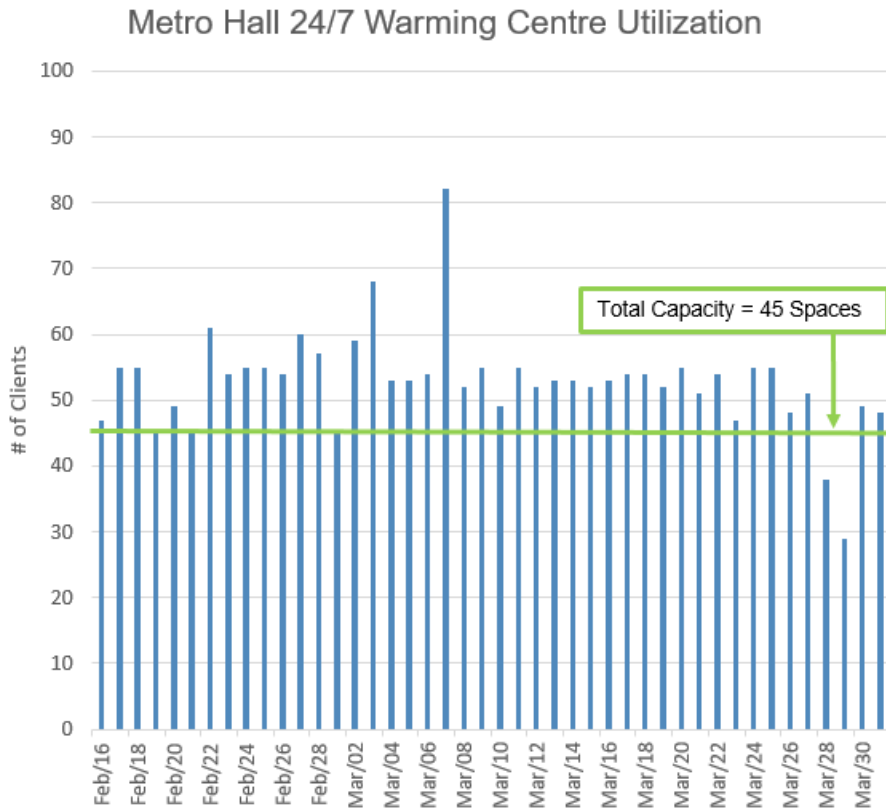
When an ECWA or SSHA-based decision is made to open, the Warming Centre operators are notified by 7:30 a.m. to enable them to set up and open by 7:00 p.m. An email is also sent to homeless service providers including daytime drop-ins and street outreach services to inform that Warming Centres will be open at 7:00 p.m. Service providers post the information in their programs and/or share the information with their clients. Updates are also added on the City website on the main landing page and in the [Homeless Help section](#), as well as through social media. Relevant internal City stakeholders and City Councillors are also notified.

24/7 Warming Centre Pilot

On February 15, 2023, City Council increased the 2023 Operating Budget for SSHA by \$0.800 million gross and net to open one additional 24/7 Warming Centre until April 15, 2023. On February, 16, 2023, the 24/7 Warming Centre pilot at Metro Hall, delivered continuous 24/7 operation of warming centre services to people experiencing homelessness, delivered in partnership with the community non-profit organization Fred Victor.

Like other 24/7 services, since beginning continuous operations, the facility was at capacity or over capacity on 42 days (95% of the time) between opening on February 16 and March 31, 2023 (see Figure 1). When necessary, the operator activated overflow capacity in another area at Metro Hall (i.e. the rotunda). The overflow space is separate from the 24/7 Warming Centre and requires additional staff and resources to activate.

Figure 1. Metro Hall 24/7 Warming Centre daily capacity and occupancy, Feb 16 - Mar 31, 2023



Between February 16 and March 31, 2023, the 24/7 Warming Centre served 258 unique clients. An additional 277 unique clients were served in the overflow spaces in the Metro Hall rotunda. Individuals are accessing the 24/7 Warming Centre program for extended periods and in many cases, on multiple occasions. From the time of opening in February, the average length of stay, from admission to discharge was 4.1 days, with some clients staying for longer periods. In a survey of 25 clients at the 24/7 Warming Centre between March 16 and March 21, 2023, the vast majority of respondents (96%) had stayed six or more nights, with 68% having stayed more than 10 nights. The majority (92%) reported staying at other shelters in the past, although only 36% had stayed at another Warming Centre this winter.

SSHA reviewed the 24/7 Warming Centre to learn from the experience this year and understand how well the model meets the needs of people experiencing homelessness and supports the Winter Services Plan. The review involved a survey of 24/7 Warming Centre clients and staff, and review of feedback provided by the service provider that operated the 24/7 Warming Centre as well as facilities management leads at Metro Hall.

Issues and challenges noted by staff and clients were consistent. Staff surveyed (n=26) indicated that they were able to provide a warm and accessible space to come in from the cold, and were usually able to meet basic needs in the temporary site. Clients surveyed (n=25), similarly, reported very high levels of satisfaction with their interactions with, and support received from, staff.

Key areas of concern on the facilities as noted by clients and Warming centre staff primarily include the space being inappropriate for a continuously operated facility; the lack of showers, kitchen, storage and office space. Further, many people highlighted issues related to the lack of onsite housing, health and social/recreational supports.

Fred Victor, the operator at the 24/7 Warming Centre, employed over 30 peers (i.e. people with lived experience of homelessness and housing vulnerability) at the site. The peers worked under the supervision of experienced management staff. This helped to address staffing challenges experienced in the sector, and enabled the 24/7 operations to ramp up within a short time frame. The success of the peer-based staffing model was also clear in the survey of clients and staff, which showed that the staffing model helped to support trust and engagement. The 24/7 Warming Centre program seemed to create access for vulnerable clients who may not frequently access other shelter services due to distrust in the shelter system, service restrictions and/or complex mental health and substance use issues.

Overall, the operator of the 24/7 Warming Centre noted that there were advantages to continuous operations, compared to opening and closing based on weather conditions. Remaining open eased the staffing challenges and allowed for some better support and engagement with clients to connect them to other shelter programs or services. However, the model presented challenges for providing the level of support needed for clients, including lack of space and resources for individual client meetings or group activities to offer housing and/or social/recreational supports, as well as a short timeframe to establish partnerships for onsite health and social/recreational supports.

In addition, there were notable operational challenges posed by operating within a public, multipurpose facility and office building, above and beyond what has been experienced at Metro Hall in previous years when the Warming Centre was only activated during an ECWA. This included an escalating number of security incidents when the Warming Centre began operating continuously 24/7. Between December and January when the Warming Centre operated as needed, there were seven security incidents. Between February and March this increased to over 40 incidents. The incidents ranged from medical emergencies to workplace violence and property damage.

3. Other Service Models

This section provides information on other service models that are part of Toronto's homelessness services system, and outlines key differences from the Warming Centre model.

24-hour Respite Sites

The City funds seven 24-hour respite sites and two 24-hour women's drop-in services. A 24-hour respite site provides "essential services to individuals experiencing homelessness in an environment that prioritizes ease of access to indoor space. Services provided include resting spaces, meals and service referrals." A 24-hour women's drop-in is defined as "a type of 24-hour respite site that provides services to women and transgender or gender-non-binary people who are experiencing

homelessness.” The 24-hour respite sites and 24-hour women's drop-in services operate in alignment with the [Toronto 24-Hour Respite Standards \(TRS\)](#), which set out principles and standards for service delivery and establish expectations for the minimum level of service. A key difference between 24-hour Respite sites and Warming Centres is that they are intended to operate continuously on a 24-hour basis and have all of the necessary amenities on site to do so.

Many of the 24-hour respite sites operating today were originally opened to add capacity as part of the winter response, but became year round facilities contributing to the significant growth of the shelter system. In 2018, Council approved a new capital project to fund the installation of three high performance membrane structures, or Sprung structures, which continue to operate as 24-hour respite sites, as a key part of the City's approach to meet the immediate needs of people experiencing homelessness.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 24-hour respite sites could be accessed on a walk-in basis. These sites transitioned to referral-based access through Central Intake during the pandemic as part of measures to support physical distancing. In response to COVID-19 public health measures, the 24-hour women's drop-in services also limited drop-in capacity to support physical distancing, although overnight spaces and some drop-in supports and services remain available (e.g. meals, washrooms, phones, access to harm reduction supplies).

Increasing the availability of 24-hour respite sites that can be accessed on a walk-in basis would provide a more established and effective programming model to provide low barrier, continuously operated 24/7 winter services when compared to Warming Centres.

Daytime Drop-In Programs

A network of community organizations across the city offer daytime drop-in services for people experiencing or at-risk of homelessness. The City currently funds 24 daytime drop-in programs to provide inclusive, safe and low barrier services to those experiencing or at-risk of homelessness. A difference between day-time drop-in services, compared to Warming Centres, is that they do not remain open overnight.

Daytime drop-ins provide safe indoor spaces with a range of basic needs and services that underpin the social determinants of health. They can also be a critical outreach tool to engage those who may not access other services. Programs offer nutritious meals, access to healthcare, showers, laundry, information and referrals to other community supports as needed, and social and recreational activities. These programs are also important community building spaces that can address isolation and improve housing stability.

The services are available in different areas of the city. Hours of operation per week vary across the services, ranging from 5 to 68 hours, with an average of 32 hours per week. The capacity and availability of specific services and amenities onsite can also vary. Some daytime drop-ins provide targeted supports for specific communities

experiencing or at-risk of homelessness, including Indigenous communities, 2SLGBTQ+ communities, women and youth.

Out of the Cold Program

The Out of the Cold (OOTC) program in Toronto began operating in 1987 through a coalition of faith-based organizations, providing temporary volunteer-run meal and accommodation services during the winter months. The number of locations and level of services has varied over the years, but sites were open on rotation, with up to four sites open per night between November 15 and April 15. The capacity of each OOTC location ranged from 15 to 80 spaces, for an average total of 97 spaces available in the city each night. A key difference between OOTC program sites and Warming Centres is that the locations changed each day and for the most part were only open for a single night activation even if cold weather conditions lasted longer.

Beginning in 2003, Dixon Hall was engaged to provide onsite support for both the OOTC volunteers and clients. Dixon Hall provided staffing to manage registration, maintain safety and security of the overnight operations, and provide additional support such as cleaning, shuttling clients to other locations, laundry, and transit token distribution. Dixon Hall also provided additional support to clients with needs such as health issues, and access to housing opportunities.

Service users consistently reported a high level of satisfaction and the program was typically at or above capacity.

Challenges and limitations of the OOTC program were encountered each season, including:

- rotating openings at multiple sites made it difficult for clients and homelessness service providers to know which services were open each day
- many sites were only open one night a week, presenting challenges during multi-day ECWA activations and requiring clients to relocate regularly
- increasingly complex needs among a vulnerable client group accessing the services, resulting in inadequate supports to address health, mental health and harm reduction needs
- staffing challenges for the operator resulted in frequent reliance on temp agency staff to fill shifts and vacancies, coupled with an aging volunteer base
- increasing costs for program basics (e.g. food, cleaning), as well as upkeep and maintenance

For the 2017-2018 season, resulting from advocacy by the faith-based organizations delivering OOTC services, one-time additional funding for the OOTC program was provided to support delivery of safer, more accessible services and supports for the service users and providers. SSHA was directed to work with OOTC program service providers and users to develop a sustainable funding plan and elevate the health and safety standards of the program in line with the Toronto 24-hour Respite Standards. Additional funding was provided to offset food and maintenance costs, enhance case management and administrative support, and expand services for the season.

The OOTC program was discontinued in winter 2020-2021 in response to COVID-19 and with advice from TPH. This decision was a result of the emergency public health measures introduced during the pandemic, and helped to mitigate the risk of disease transmission, and prevent challenges with contact tracing. Funding was redirected to provide additional space in the shelter system.

4. Input on Improvements to Winter Services for People Experiencing Homelessness

As directed by Council, SSHA consulted with stakeholders and partners to inform its review of current policies and procedures for activating emergency Warming Centre operations, and options and recommendations for improvement. This included:

- consulting with TPH and other medical experts
- a review of Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) weather statement criteria
- a jurisdictional scan of other Canadian and American cities
- a roundtable discussion meeting with homelessness serving organizations, faith-based leaders and community advocates who work with people experiencing homelessness
- a survey of stakeholders and community partners, including homelessness serving organizations, faith-based groups and physicians/medical experts who work with people experiencing homelessness

The consultations covered current and proposed criteria for activating Warming Centres, and service models for delivering and expanding winter services.

Health evidence and advice

Adverse effects related to exposure to cold weather are well documented in the literature, and known to increase the immediate risk of direct cold weather injuries such as hypothermia, frostnip, frostbite, chilblains, and trench foot. Cold weather can also increase the risk of mortality and hospitalizations for up to several weeks after exposure, especially for people with heart conditions. People experiencing homelessness are among those especially vulnerable to cold weather, along with the elderly, those with pre-existing heart conditions, children and those who work outdoors.

Recent research suggests that greater consideration be given to moderately cold temperatures:

- A Toronto-based study found the risk of hypothermia among people experiencing homelessness increased as temperatures got colder. However, most cases (72%) occurred during periods of low and moderately cold temperatures warmer than -15°C .¹

¹ International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health (2019). [Cold weather Conditions and risk of hypothermia among people experiencing homelessness: Implications for prevention Strategies.](#)

- Among all Ontarians, there was a 3% increase in non-accidental deaths with each 5°C decrease in daily temperature.²

A 2016 analysis was conducted by Toronto Public Health of emergency department visits for cold-related injuries that occurred between 2006 and 2015 at all Toronto hospitals. The analysis found that emergency department visits for cold related injuries in Toronto increased as temperatures decreased, with the majority occurring when the temperature is -5°C or colder:

- 35% of emergency department visits for cold related injuries occurred at -15°C (the current ECWA threshold)
- 59% of occurred at temperatures colder than -10°C
- 83% occurred at temperatures colder than -5°C

The analysis also looked at the percentage of days that Warming Centres could expect to be open based on different temperature thresholds and average weather conditions between November 1 and April 30 of the same nine year period (2006-2015). The analysis found that at:

- -15°C and colder, Warming Centres may be open 13% of the time
- -10°C and colder, this increased to 30% of the time
- -5°C and colder, this increased to 57% of the time

Review of ECCC weather statement criteria

Staff also reviewed the alerts-based process practiced by ECCC to consider the feasibility of aligning SSHA's weather-based responses with weather statements and advisories. ECCC's winter weather alerts system is activated based on conditions that are similar to factors known to have adverse health impacts for those experiencing homelessness:

- Freezing rain warning – when conditions are expected to last more than two hours and pose a hazard to transportation and property
- Snowfall warning – when more than 15 cm of snow is expected in less than 12 hours
- Snow squall warning – when more than 5 cm of snow is expected in less than an hour, or more than 15 cm is expected in less than 12 hours, with wind gusts of more 45 km/hour and causing reduced visibility
- Winter storm warning – when 15 cm of snow, or more, is expected within 12 hours, in combination with high winds, blowing snow and/or freezing rain
- Blizzard warning – when there is a snow fall warning with reduced visibility, more than 40 km/hour winds and an anticipated duration of more than four hours.

Jurisdictional scan

A scan of the policies and procedures for activating Warming Centres in other urban areas, including Hamilton, Ottawa, Edmonton, Calgary, Vancouver, New York, Chicago, Washington D.C. and Seattle, was completed. All cities activate Warming Centre spaces during more severe weather based on specific criteria, with the exception of Calgary where winter services are activated continuously between December 1 and

2 CMAJ (2016). [Assessment of the effect of cold and hot temperatures on mortality in Ontario, Canada: A population-based study.](#)

March 31. In some cases the decision is determined by the Medical Officer of Health, but in most cases the department leading homelessness services is responsible.

A range of criteria are used to determine when Warming Centres will open. Temperature thresholds range from 0°C to minus -15°C. For example, in Vancouver the threshold is set at -5°C or colder, and Hamilton uses the threshold of -15°C or a wind chill of -20. Ottawa and Edmonton use thresholds based on wind chill only (i.e. not on temperature alone) – a wind chill of -15 and -10, respectively. American cities of New York and Chicago use a threshold of 0°C (32°F) or colder including wind chill, and Washington D.C. uses -9.4°C (15°F) or colder including wind chill.

Community feedback - What we heard

The City heard from over 10,000 Toronto residents through letters, emails and deputations to Committees regarding cold weather and the effects on those experiencing homelessness (i.e. related to Items [HL1.6](#), [EC1.9](#)). The letters and speakers highlighted:

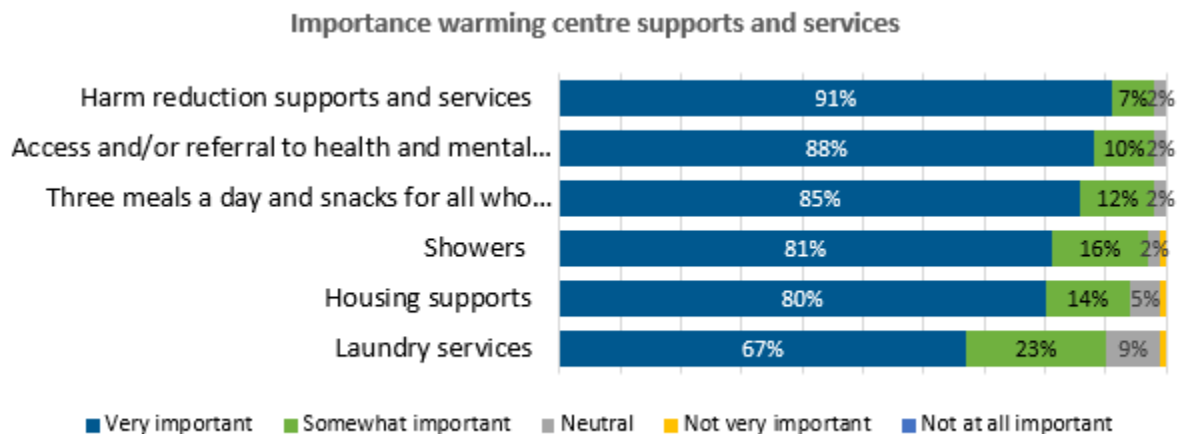
- unclear criteria for opening Warming Centres
- the need for clear communication around when and where Warming Centre services are open
- the reduction in the availability of walk-in spaces at 24-hour respite sites and drop-ins following changes to some services during the pandemic and a call for expansion of 24/7 indoor spaces with walk-in access including access to hot meals, washrooms, and other supports
- broader shelter system capacity issues and implications during the winter for the risk of cold related injuries and death among people experiencing homelessness

Building on these key issues raised at the Committee meetings, SSHA heard from over 200 people through a stakeholder survey and discussion meeting. Key findings include:

- winter response planning and services should not be considered in isolation of, or at the expense of, addressing system capacity issues and the urgent need for affordable and supportive housing
- support for a phased approach in which 24/7 services are activated continuously throughout the winter or at least as soon as temperatures reach 0 degrees, and additional Warming Centre spaces are activated to add surge capacity during more severe weather conditions
- temperature alone should not be the most important factor to consider when determining if surge capacity should be activated. Other conditions such as wind, snow accumulation, ice and freezing rain should also be considered. Over 80% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that this should be done when Environment and Climate Change Canada issues a freezing rain, winter storm, snow squall or snow fall warning
- general support for Warming Centres to be accessible across the city, not only downtown or in the central core

We heard about the need for ensuring that basic needs and services be met, with the vast majority of survey respondents identifying services such as access or referral to health, mental health, harm reduction supports, housing supports, meals and snacks, showers and laundry services as very important (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Stakeholder perspectives on importance of Warming Centre services



While there was less consensus on the type of facility needed, nearly 90% of stakeholders surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the City should establish Warming Centres wherever space can be found, even if not all of the features were available.

The majority of survey respondents supported Warming Centres being located in community/recreation centres, civic centres, existing daytime drop-in facilities, faith-based facilities and Sprung structures. Additional suggestions included empty, abandoned or under-used buildings (e.g. schools, banks, businesses, homes, condos, City office space); repurposed facilities (e.g. hotels, mobile facilities fitted with washrooms and showers, legion halls, buildings at the Exhibition grounds); and facilities already accessed or frequented by people experiencing homelessness (e.g. community health centres, libraries).

5. Overview of Options and Next Steps

Each year, the City develops a Winter Services Plan to outline how it will serve people experiencing homelessness during cold and severe weather, which includes activation of additional spaces during the winter season. However, the City of Toronto is currently facing immediate and urgent financial challenges, which includes a \$317 million gap for COVID-19 response funding for shelters, and a \$97 million current funding requirement for shelter for refugee claimants. In the absence of federal and provincial financial support, or new revenue tools for Toronto, the City will not be able to maintain current service levels in the shelter system.

This report outlines options for improvements in the following areas:

- A. Revising criteria for activating Warming Centres
- B. Formalizing a proactive and collaborative approach to securing properties
- C. Increasing housing opportunities and shelter system flow
- D. Enhancing partnerships and collaboration

These proposed changes are based on feedback from community partners and stakeholders, inputs from service users and staff, and advice from health experts

including Toronto Public Health, for service responses that can support people experiencing homelessness who are vulnerable to illness and injury as a result of exposure to cold temperatures.

The actions outlined in this report will support the winter services plan to be developed for winter 2023-2024, as well as the priorities outlined in the Council approved [Homelessness Solutions Service Plan](#).

A. Revising criteria for activating Warming Centres

The review of the policies and procedures of Warming Centre operations identified the need to improve the criteria and process for activation of Warming Centres. There is the need to have one set of clear criteria for when Warming Centres will be opened. The current system of having two separate processes for activation - with Extreme Cold Weather Alerts declared by the Medical Officer of Health at TPH, and additional weather-based activations determined by SSHA, results in confusion.

Based on the evidence reviewed, as well as the advice of health experts including Toronto Public Health, the proposal is to revise the criteria for activating Warming Centres from -15°C to -5°C. This change is supported by TPH, as the increase in the temperature criteria to -5°C is more protective for people who are sleeping outside.

It is proposed that all Warming Centre activations will be determined by SSHA, as the operational lead for homelessness services. SSHA works closely with TPH for advice and guidance on how to support people experiencing homelessness who are vulnerable to illness and injury as a result of exposure to cold temperatures.

The proposed changes include:

- consolidating the activations into a single process determined by Shelter, Support and Housing Administration for the City of Toronto between November 15 and April 15
- activating Warming Centres based on the following criteria:
 - When temperatures reach -5°C or colder; and/or
 - When Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) issues freezing rain, snow squall, winter storm, snowfall and/or blizzard warnings

The new recommended policy and procedure for activating Warming Centres will replace the need for ECWAs. Beginning in the 2023-2024 season, TPH will stop issuing ECWAs.

TPH will continue to collaborate with SSHA and support this transition through communication and stakeholder management plans, including notification to the ECWA distribution email list to ensure stakeholders are aware of the change and how they can be notified when Warming Centres are activated moving forward. TPH will continue to provide evidence-based information on how to prepare for and protect against cold weather through its website and social media. During this transition, TPH will also support community partners, as needed, in developing policies related to reducing exposure to extreme weather.

B. Proactive and collaborative approach to securing properties

Warming Centres provide valuable surge capacity that allows for additional, easy to access indoor space during severe weather, which supports people who may not otherwise access traditional shelter services.

Additional Warming Centres need to be established for winter 2023/2024, subject to the following factors:

- Availability of the space
- Shelter operator availability and readiness to operate
- Available budget for:
 - Infrastructure costs for the facility, including capital repairs
 - Operating costs (e.g. staff, food/catering)
 - Ancillary services (e.g. cleaning, security services)
 - Ongoing maintenance and repairs

Identifying suitable locations

SSHA will work closely with Corporate Real Estate Management (CREM) to identify properties for Warming Centres and/or 24-hour respite sites. This report recommends the creation of an Inter-Divisional and City Working Group to develop a long-term winter services strategy and annual winter capital plans, supporting the City to methodically address this critical service need and to meet the goal to have one Warming Centre in each quadrant. This group will focus on identifying locations and reviewing available buildings for Warming Centres/winter services, including City/agency-owned sites, private market spaces and/or community partner-owned and/or operated spaces. Having a long-term strategy and ensuring winter planning occurs well in advance of the winter season would allow the City to respond to the needs of people experiencing homelessness in a coordinated, stable, cost-effective and compassionate manner. Outcomes from the Working Group will be reflected in the 2024 Budget submission.

Learnings from the 24/7 Warming Centre operated in winter 2023 demonstrate the importance of having a suitable program model and facilities for 24/7 winter services. When basic amenities are not available at facilities, this impacts the experience of clients, staff and operators. To establish any services that operate on a 24/7 basis, more suitable locations would need to be identified to be managed and operated as 24-hour respite sites.

For the upcoming 2023-2024 winter season, SSHA and CREM have been working to secure at least four Warming Centre sites by the summer of 2023, in advance of the winter season. These sites will ideally be located across the city, with one in each Community Council Area.

SSHA and CREM will work to identify appropriate locations that will better serve client needs. One site with a long-term agreement has already been established for the 2023-2024 winter season.

At minimum, appropriate Warming Centre facilities need to have:

- Washroom facilities for clients (one toilet per 15 clients) and separate facilities for staff
- Space for a fridge to store cold meals (a fridge can be provided, if needed)
- Space for storage and staff desks
- Working and compliant fire and life safety systems
- Proximity to public transit
- Fully accessible spaces (at least some Warming Centres must be accessible)

Though not required, other key features sought for Warming Centres include:

- An open space that can hold approximately 50 cots (30 cots minimum) (approximately 2,500 – 8,000 sq. ft.)
- Existing kitchenette and dining area
- Separate space for staff to take breaks
- Onsite showers available for client use

Engagement with Councillors

City staff have been engaging with Councillors through a survey, with the aim of identifying suitable locations in each Ward that could potentially be used as Warming Centres as requested by City Council at its February 2023 meeting.

Councillors are experts in the communities they represent, with knowledge of buildings and facilities in their wards and connections to community groups and organizations working for the public good. The survey asks if Councillors know of any community or faith-based organizations in their ward that have spaces available for use as a Warming Centre and if any community partners have already reached out to them. SSHA and CREM will follow up on potential locations.

C. Increasing housing opportunities and shelter system flow

In May 2022, City Council adopted report EX32.6 and approved the [24-Month Housing Recovery and Resilience Plan \(2023-2024\)](#), aimed at creating 4,000 new affordable and supportive housing opportunities in 2023 and 2024, including 2,500 new supportive housing and 1,500 affordable housing opportunities through the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit. Further, Council requested the Province of Ontario and the Government of Canada to provide new and enhanced investments to support this plan.

Shelter system flow

As set out in the HousingTO Plan and the Homelessness Solutions Service Plan, by increasing available supportive and affordable housing opportunities and reducing the length of time that people spend in shelter, existing shelter capacity will be freed up to be used for its originally intended purpose of short-term, emergency shelter.

SSHA is investing in a multi-year strategy to increase funding allocations to non-profit shelter service providers to help increase capacity to deliver housing focussed services and establish housing outcome focussed performance metrics, as identified as a priority in the Homelessness Solutions Service Plan. This investment creates greater equity

and stability in staffing levels, and more consistent service levels across the shelter system (whether City-operated, or purchase of service sites). The return on investment is expected to include an improvement in housing outcomes and freeing up shelter capacity as a result.

In 2022, more than 20,700 unique individuals were provided with shelter and support at City-run and -funded shelters, 24-hour respite sites, 24-hour women's drop-in programs and Warming Centres. On average, 8,014 individuals a night stayed in the shelter system in 2022.

In total 4,385 people were assisted to move from the shelter system to housing in 2022, an average of 365 per month.

At the same time, 9,795 new people entered the shelter system for the first time, an average of 816 per month. This trend has been increasing, and in February of 2023, 865 newly identified individuals entered the shelter system for the first time and 492 moved to housing. In order to achieve reductions in shelter capacity and reduce demand for shelter services, the number of people exiting the shelter system each month to housing needs to increase to be greater than the number entering the system each month. Therefore the rate of people moving to housing from shelter needs to double by approximately 400 more people per month to begin freeing up shelter spaces and successfully begin reducing shelter capacity.

Leveraging existing models

Low-barrier shelters and allied services are an important part of Toronto's homelessness service system. A low-barrier program model helps to ensure there is ease of access for people who may not otherwise access shelter services. During COVID-19, to help mitigate the risk of disease transmission, public health measures were introduced that changed the 24-hour respite sites from a walk-in based service to a referral based model.

As most pandemic measures are lifted, there is the opportunity to review existing service models to ensure clients are being served effectively, including having shelters and allied services that provide immediate and low-barrier access. As of March 19, 2023, analysis of the 24-hour respite sites shows an average stay of 356 days. As a next step, SSHA will revisit the 24-hour respite program model for the potential to transition back to walk-in based services. Lower barriers to service would make respite sites more accessible. Any change would need to be done thoughtfully for how to best support the needs of clients, enable client choice, and help to create flow in the shelter system.

The 24-hour women's drop-in services also limited drop-in capacity during the COVID-19 pandemic, in response to public health measures, while maintaining access to some drop-in supports and services (e.g. meals, washrooms, phones, harm reduction supplies). These services, similarly, could be transitioned back to providing increased capacity for drop-in access throughout the day and overnight, which SSHA is already exploring with one 24-hour women's drop-in. There would continue to be dedicated

space to rest overnight, along with the ability to have more individuals in the space at any time, including overnight.

Portable Housing Benefits

Increasing demand for shelter services is outpacing the ability of the City and its community partners to effectively respond to homelessness. Due to a lack of affordable housing options, and income supports which are insufficient to respond to the high cost of housing in Toronto, additional financial support by way of housing benefits are critical to help many people in the shelter system access permanent housing in the private rental market.

The Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit Program (COHB), which is a portable housing benefit that can be used across the province, has proven to be a cost-effective and efficient way to assist people to leave the shelter system and access permanent housing. The COHB has been particularly useful to support refugee households who typically do not need access to supportive housing (i.e. deeply affordable housing with wraparound health and social supports).

In 2022-2023, the City received a COHB allocation of \$12.3 million from the province which supported over 1,600 shelter residents to exit homelessness, 64% of which were refugee households. The City's new 2023-2024 allocation has been set at \$9.5 million which is a 23% decrease from 2022-2023. At the current rate of take up, this allocation is expected to be exhausted by May 31, 2023 after supporting about 800 shelter residents.

New and enhanced investments in COHB funding are urgently required from the provincial and federal governments to support the City's winter and ongoing homelessness response. In order to continue to maintain its effectiveness and meet intended outcomes, it is also critical that new allocations be increased to reflect the increasing cost of rent in Toronto. To highlight this point, a recent report from [Rentals.ca](https://rentals.ca) found that the average cost of a one-bedroom apartment in Toronto increased by almost 23% year-over-year, with the average rent reaching almost \$2,500.

In addition to a number of concurrent actions, this report recommends that City Council request the federal and provincial governments to urgently provide a net new \$20 million allocation of COHB in 2023. This amount would help the City to move between 1,600 and 2,000 households out of the shelter system into permanent housing. It would also support the shared objective of all governments to end chronic homelessness.

D. Enhancing partnerships and collaboration

The City is committed to making homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring; but it can't do it alone. Community partners play a critical role in providing ongoing supports and services for people experiencing homelessness. SSHA partners with over 40 community organizations to deliver and operate shelter and respite services, in addition to many partners providing other homelessness services including drop-in services, street outreach and follow-up supports to support housing stability.

Many community partners, including daytime drop-in providers and faith based organizations, have already reached out to the City and expressed interest and voiced support for working together. The City continues to build on this support and looks forward to enhancing partnerships with community providers, many of whom already have important existing relationships and connections within the communities in which they are located, as well as demonstrated expertise in providing low barrier services to people experiencing homelessness. Many providers, such as the 24-hour Women's drop-in services, also have important experience and learnings to share from their transition to, and ongoing operations as, a 24/7 service, including:

- recruiting and retaining staff to work additional hours and overnight shifts
- adapting to the provision of overnight services
- reaching those most in need
- managing impacts on the neighbourhood and community relations

City staff are connecting directly to explore the feasibility of using available space in faith-based community facilities as Warming Centres. This may identify additional opportunities for space across the city, as well as allow for exploring options to work with experienced homelessness service providers for program and staffing models that could work operationally and support the sector, such as for multi-day activations, rather than a single-day rotation of openings at different locations that occurred through the Out of the Cold program.

SSHA will issue a Request for Expression of Interest for partners to provide physical space that meets the criteria for a Warming Centre or a 24-hour respite site and for partners to operate winter services. Agreements to use any appropriate facilities or properties would be subject to budget approval and availability of a service operator and staffing.

Health of People Experiencing Homelessness Project

It is critical for the City to strengthen our collaboration with health systems partners to address the increasingly complex physical and mental health needs of people experiencing homelessness. The Health of People Experiencing Homelessness Project is a key collaborative initiative between SSHA, Toronto Public Health (TPH), and Inner City Health Associates (ICHA) that will complement our winter response planning and provide us with more information and data to support the City's goal of ensuring that the experience of homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring.

Understanding the health status and health care utilization of people experiencing homelessness is critical for informing the planning and provision of health services in Toronto's shelter system. However, information about health and health service utilization for people experiencing homelessness is not readily available and requires collaboration and coordination across the health care and social services sectors.

SSHA will work with ICES (formerly the Institute for Clinical and Evaluative Sciences) to determine feasibility of linking shelter client data from SSHA's Shelter Management Information System (SMIS) to administrative health care data housed at ICES (see Attachment 1 for further details). Once linked, ICES will provide de-identified linked datasets back to SSHA to analyze, for insight into the health issues impacting shelter

residents and to inform shelter and health service planning and delivery, in alignment with implementation of SSHA's Homelessness Health Services Framework. The Homelessness Health Services Framework is a key component of SSHA's [Homelessness Solutions Service Plan](#), adopted by Council in November 2021, and aims to ensure a coordinated and consistent approach to health services across the homelessness service system.

As a first step, this project aims to test the feasibility of linking shelter administration data from SSHA's Shelter Management Information System (SMIS) to administrative health care data housed at ICES. These databases include the National Ambulatory Care Reporting System (NACRS) which contains data on hospital-based and community-based ambulatory care such as Emergency Department (ED visits) and the Discharge Abstract Database (DAD) which captures data on hospital discharges. Once linked, these data can provide insight into the health issues impacting shelter residents to inform service planning and delivery.

Next Steps

This report identifies a number of changes for Toronto's winter response for people experiencing homelessness, including revising criteria for activating Warming Centres, formalizing a proactive and collaborative approach to securing properties, and enhancing partnerships and collaboration.

Winter services, and Warming Centres in particular, are one part in the overall homelessness services system. A sustained and focused commitment to increasing housing opportunities and shelter system flow is critical to achieve the outcomes that we are working towards: that people experiencing homelessness in Toronto have access to safe, high quality emergency shelter, and that people are provided housing-focused supports that ensure homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring.

We continue to work closely with both the provincial and federal governments to secure additional needed investment to ensure that there is shelter space available in the winter months and throughout the year. Given the City of Toronto's budget pressures, including COVID-19 funding gap and funding requirements for shelter for refugee claimants, the City will not be able to maintain our current service level if additional funding is not forthcoming.

CONTACT

Ashleigh Dalton, Interim Director, Service Planning and Integrity, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, Ashleigh.Dalton@toronto.ca, 416-392-6107

SIGNATURE

Gordon Tanner
General Manager, Shelter Support and Housing Administration

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 - Overview of Health of People Experiencing Homelessness Project

Attachment 1 - Overview of the Health of People Experiencing Homelessness Project

In this collaborative partnership, Toronto Public Health (TPH) is responsible for leading the implementation of the analysis plan; SSHA is responsible for developing reports and recommendations for service planning and policy development; and Inner City Health Associates (ICHA) provides clinical and population health expertise and guidance on how recommendations could be implemented successfully.

Databases considered will include the National Ambulatory Care Reporting System which contains data on hospital-based and community-based ambulatory care such as Emergency Department visits, and the Discharge Abstract Database which captures data on hospital discharges. Once linked, the data can provide insight into the health issues impacting shelter clients and their health care utilization patterns to inform the provision of health services for people who access Toronto's shelter system.

ICES (formerly the Institute for Clinical and Evaluative Sciences) is a non-profit research institute and independent steward of Ontario's individual-level health-related data. As a prescribed entity under the Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA) and Coroners Act, ICES is permitted to collect personally identifiable information to conduct analyses and compile information to inform the "management and effectiveness of the health system and the health or safety of the public" (ICES website). Under PHIPA, ICES must receive approval every three years from the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario to continue operating as a prescribed entity. As such, ICES has strong administrative and physical and technical safeguards in place to allow the secure linking and de-identification of individuals' personal information.

In order to proceed with data integration, SSHA must establish a data sharing agreement with ICES that allows for the disclosure of client-level data once all the requisite privacy protections and requirements are in place, in accordance with the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (MFIPPA), including appropriate collection notices and informed consent. In accordance with a data sharing agreement, ICES would be responsible for linking SMIS data with administrative health care data in a secure manner. This will include at a minimum shelter client's name, date of birth, and gender.

Once the data are linked, ICES will provide de-identified linked datasets back to SSHA, which will be analyzed and used to provide insights into the health issues impacting shelter residents and healthcare utilization patterns, and will inform shelter and health service planning and delivery (e.g. primary care, harm reduction and mental health case management) in alignment with implementation of SSHA's Homelessness Health Services Framework.