
Warming Centre Information Session Summary

November 1, 2023, 6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. by Zoom

Overview

On November 1, 2023 City of Toronto staff from Shelter, Support and Housing Administration hosted an information session about the City's Warming Centre strategy. The meeting was hosted on Zoom with 198 participants in total including City staff from the Shelter, Support and Housing Administration Division. Jane Farrow and Pauline Craig of the Dept of Words & Deeds facilitated the information session and prepared this summary.

Meeting Objective:

The meeting was held to introduce the Warming Centres to the communities around planned sites, to discuss any questions or concerns regarding the locations and to begin a conversation that will help guide integration of the Warming Centres into the community to ensure they are a success for everyone. A presentation was provided to explain Warming Centres; how they differ from other shelter supports and facilities; how the locations were selected; and when the Warming Centres will be active. Following the presentation, City staff responded to both written and verbal questions from participants during the session, and questions that had been submitted by email prior to the meeting.

This summary includes a list of the key issues that were raised by the community through their questions and details of the discussion and answers that were provided.

Key Discussion Items

Transparency around the how Warming Centre locations were chosen is important to the community.

Many participants asked why there was no consultation with the community in advance of selecting Warming Centre locations. Staff provided information on the policies and authority given to City staff to find and select appropriate locations so that this process is efficient and not political. The discussion included information about homelessness across the city and how the four Warming Centre locations aim to provide services where they are most needed.

Safety and security are a concern among some community members.

Several participants expressed concerns about potential safety and security issues that they felt could result from a Warming Centre in their neighbourhood. They asked how these issues would be mitigated and what they could do if there were any problems. City staff assured participants that the safety of community members is being taken very seriously and every Warming Center will have a safety and security assessment to determine all necessary measures to minimize impact to the neighbourhood. The following roles and measures are in place and were discussed:

- Well-trained Warming Centre staff
- Security personnel dedicated to each Warming Centre
- Good Neighbor Policies at Warming Centres and other shelter service locations

- Collaboration with Toronto Police Services
- Community Safety Teams at some locations as needed
- Ongoing engagement with community members

Communication and collaboration between the Warming Centre and the community is essential.

Many participants asked about communication and how they could stay informed. Staff explained that the City is committed to ongoing community engagement that will focus on sharing information and working together to ensure that community members and Warming Centre residents feel safe. Participants were provided an email address (WeatherResponseTO@gmail.com) to continue engaging directly with the City's Warming Centre program. Participants were assured that the Warming Centre agreements have been finalized in the last few weeks and communities were notified as quickly as possible.

Understanding the details on how the Warming Centres will operate was important to participants.

Some participants had specific questions about the operations of the Warming Centres. Much of this information was provided in the presentation, but some details were further discussed during the meeting. Questions about funding, how long people can stay in a Warming Centre, what will happen to nearby encampments, and movement of people between Warming Centres were addressed.

Detailed Discussion:

Transparency around the how Warming Centre locations were chosen is important to the community.

Several participants asked why there was no consultation with the community in advance of selecting Warming Centre locations. City staff explained that Warming Centres are a key component of the City of Toronto's 2023 / 2024 Winter Services Plan for people experiencing homelessness. [In Dec 2017](#), City Council created a new process that delegated the authority to select shelters (including Warming Centre) locations to City staff. [In Nov 2021](#), City Council authorized staff to enter into agreements for new or existing shelter, respite centre or Warming Centre spaces to meet urgent or unanticipated needs. These decisions were made to create a human rights- based approach that would make the selection process faster, more efficient and to remove politics from the decision. As a result, the community was not consulted on the locations of Warming Centre sites. Participants were assured that communities were notified as quickly as possible once the locations had been finalized.

City staff told participants that since May 2023 staff have investigated approximately 130 properties across the city with the help of real estate brokers, faith-based and community groups, and other City divisions and agencies. A public Request for Express of Interest (REOI) to call for space was also issued by the City. Staff also explained that Warming Centres and all shelter program locations are required to comply with zoning bylaws and cannot be located in areas that are not appropriate for these uses.

Several participants wanted to know why the four Warming Centre locations had been chosen. Staff explained that there are people experiencing homelessness throughout the city, in all neighbourhoods. Following a Coroner's Office inquest into two deaths in Scarborough, homeless shelters were recommended to provide supports where they are needed including east end of the city. Staff are

working to create spaces across the city so that people do not have to travel a long way to find help. Street Needs Assessments are undertaken regularly to inform programs and policies. The 2021 Street Needs Assessment identified that 51% of individuals experiencing homelessness are located downtown, 13% in North York and 21% in Scarborough. There is hidden homelessness in the city and many people prefer to stay close to the community they are in rather than travel to a downtown shelter service.

Additional questions about Warming Centre locations were addressed as follows:

Q: Why aren't Community Centres used for Warming Centres?

A: Community Centres are only used in emergency situations when the City is unable to locate alternative options for warming centre use. Using Community Centres would take away much needed programming and services that communities depend on.

Q: How was City Council involved in selecting the Warming Centre Locations?

A: Staff explained that City Council makes decisions on policy for addressing the serious issues of homelessness in the city. Council then gives the direction to staff to open Warming Centres and other shelters and supports but Councillors are not directly involved in the selection of the locations.

As authorized by Council, City staff have Delegated Authority to site new shelters in locations that meet zoning by-laws. In November 2021, Toronto City Council adopted a report that authorized the City to enter into new or amend existing agreements with landlords in order to maintain or add new respite or shelter beds. This step was taken to allow the City to open or relocate shelter programs quickly to respond to shelter system pressures and ensure the City can provide critical shelter services and support to as many people as possible.

Q: Are private property owners being paid to host a Warming Centre on their property?

A: Yes, property owners have entered into private market agreements with the City and the property owners are paid a rental amount that was subject to delegated approval by City Staff.

Q: Will Warming Centre locations be re-evaluated?

A: The City is committed to engaging with communities to make the Warming Centres successful. City Council has directed staff to open the Warming Centres as quickly as possible before the cold weather has arrived and staff are not considering relocating the Warming Centres. However, all community feedback is important and will be considered as the program is evaluated this year.

Q: Will Warming Centres impact property values of homeowners in the surrounding community?

A: The City is not aware of any evidence that property values have been affected in communities where Warming Centres have been located. The purpose of the Warming Centres is to protect people who are experiencing homelessness and data from the City's Street Needs Assessment shows there are people experiencing homelessness all across the city - both downtown and in the suburbs - who are not taken care of within the existing shelter system. Warming Centres are needed in these locations.

Q: Will the Warming Centre locations meet the need for spaces to protect people experiencing homelessness this winter?

A: The Warming Centre program is an important start and efforts are underway to continue looking for more Warming Centre spaces. Staff are working to balance the need with available budget. Additional spaces are opening within the shelter system and the City is working to promote an intergovernmental approach that includes the province and federal government.

Q: Will the Warming Centre sites be permanent locations?

A: The City has selected the Warming Centre locations based on a long-term approach to avoid having to select and develop new sites every year. The lease agreements are for more than one year and, the sites will be functioning for more than one winter season.

Safety and security are a concern among some community members.

Several participants expressed concerns about potential safety and security issues that they felt could result from a Warming Centre in their neighbourhood. They asked how these issues would be mitigated and what they could do if there were any problems.

City staff assured participants that the safety of community members is being taken very seriously and every Warming Center has a safety and security assessment to determine necessary measures to minimize impact to the neighbourhood. Staff explained that a city without shelter services would experience different kinds of problems such as more encampments and additional stresses on our health care system. Warming Centres are one way, along with many others, to address the very difficult situation of poverty and homelessness in the city. The following roles and measures to address safety and security were discussed:

- Security guards will be present at each Warming Centre and will be patrolling around the location. In the event of an incident, security will take immediate action and will follow up with the community as needed. Security guards are trained on de-escalation and rapport building before providing an enforcement response.
- Warming Centre staff are trained in de-escalation, harm reduction and they work to develop a rapport with the individual residents. Any incidents are addressed case by case. Staff are not clinicians but they have learned to adapt and have been trained as situations evolve so that they can keep everyone safe – residents, community and other staff.
- For any incidents that may occur outside of the Warming Centre property, staff are committed to working with the community and with Toronto Police to address these appropriately. Staff encourage community members to report incidents to the police so that there is a complaint on record. Participants were told that a flyer is being produced outlining “Who to Call” depending on the nature of the concern. This will be made available to community members.
- A Good Neighbour Policy is in place at each Warming Centre which governs the expected behaviour of anyone using the services.
- Community Safety Teams are people trained to deal with situations outside of the Warming Centre. If a safety assessment deems that a safety team is needed, staff will work with the service operators to establish one if required. These teams can be very effective at mitigating issues and work to liaise with the neighbourhood and Warming Centre staff to make sure issues are addressed.
- Community Members can play an important role in assuring the successful neighbourhood integration of a Warming Centre. Reporting any issues to the correct person or team can be very helpful to mitigate problems. A “who to call” flyer is being developed with the appropriate

contacts and will be available to the community through Councillor newsletters, warming centre staff and the City of Toronto Warming Centre website.

The discussion also included the following questions and answers about security and safety.

Q: If community members see a needle or other dangerous litter what should they do?

A: Do not handle dangerous litter yourself unless you have specific training on how to deal with it. If you find something like this outside of the Warming Centre, call 311. If the dangerous litter is on the property of the Warming Centre, the staff are trained in safe disposal and can take care of it.

Q: What happens if there is a person causing trouble at the Warming Centre?

A: Warming Centres are the last resort for many people. People are never discharged to the streets from a Warming Centre or other shelter service. They may be asked to go to another location, Warming Centre, shelter, or 24-hour respite centre. There will be TTC buses dedicated to transporting people if a person needs to be transferred to de-escalate a negative dynamic. If criminal activity has occurred the police would be involved.

Q: Will the Warming Centre at 75 Elizabeth have a Community Safety Team and what is the catchment area it will cover?

A: Yes, the 75 Elizabeth Street Warming Centre will have a community safety team. The details will be worked out in the coming weeks.

Communication and collaboration between the Warming Centre and the community is essential.

Many participants asked about communication and how they could stay informed about the Warming Centres. Staff explained that community engagement is critical to the success of the Warming Centre program and that the City is committed to consulting with the community on how best to integrate Warming Centres into the neighbourhood. Engagement will continue to focus on sharing information and working together to ensure effective operations of the Warming Centre so that community members and Warming Centre clients feel safe. Participants were provided with an email address to continue engaging directly with the City's Warming Centre program. Participants were assured that the Warming Centre agreements have been finalized in only the last few weeks and communities were notified as quickly as possible.

Understanding details on how the Warming Centres will operate was important to participants.

Some participants had specific questions about the operations of the Warming Centres. Much of this information was provided in the presentation. The following questions were also addressed during the discussion:

Q: When will a Warming Centre be open?

A: The Warming Centres will open when temperatures are -5 degrees Celsius or lower and/or when Environment and Climate Change Canada issues a winter weather event warning. Staff will not want to keep opening and closing the centre if there is only one day of warm weather so this will be evaluated case by case as weather changes. The Warming Centres will be active most of the winter to help prevent cold weather injuries among people experiencing homelessness.

Q: Can people stay overnight in a Warming Centre?

A: Yes, if temperatures are -5 degrees Celsius or lower the Warming Centre will be open overnight and could stay open 24/7 while the weather is cold.

Q: Will people from downtown be moved to suburban Warming Centres

A: People experiencing homelessness will be supported to move to a Warming Centre where there is capacity. In these cases, the City will provide transportation services and relocate clients if needed but will not force anyone to go anywhere they don't want to go.

Q: What happens if there is an encampment near a Warming Centre?

A: Streets to Homes program staff work with individuals staying in encampments across the city. So far this year, Streets to Home have attended encampments more than 3,800 times and have supported more than 265 people living outside to move into permanent housing, including many from encampment sites. However, despite heroic efforts among frontline staff the City is experiencing a homelessness crisis. Currently there are 270+ encampments across the city. Streets to Homes works to support these people and to start the housing process. This takes time. There is not enough available housing. The City is pressing other levels of government to help address this crisis.

Q: How are the Warming Centres funded?

A: The City of Toronto is funding the program as part of the 2023 budget and a 2024 program budget will be submitted for approval. The Warming Centres are all pre-budgeted programs.

An Invitation to Continue the Conversation

The meeting concluded with an invitation to participants to continue the conversation and to reach out via the Warming Centre email account weatherresponseto@gmail.com with additional questions and concerns and to stay involved.