

Executive Summary

This report will provide an update about the emergency shelter system and other homelessness services in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, and will outline existing service delivery and priorities for continued service provision.

Background

The City of Greater Sudbury (City) has a service manager mandate from the Province of Ontario to coordinate and/or deliver programming to reduce or prevent homelessness. Funding is received through Federal, Provincial and Municipal levels of government and is administered through the Social Services Division of the Community Development Department. The City works closely with community service providers to operate programs and services that support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, including programs for homelessness prevention, emergency shelter, and basic needs.

On March 17, 2020, the Province of Ontario declared a state of emergency due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Essential services that were allowed to remain open included not-for profit organizations that support the provision of food, shelter, safety or protection, and/or social services and other necessities of life to economically disadvantaged and other vulnerable individuals. Public Health recommendations included enhanced hygiene protocols, limited numbers of people gathering, and physical distancing measures. People were encouraged to stay home, however, for the homeless population this was not an option.

The emergency declaration had an immediate impact on the services provided to the homeless, as in normal circumstances, many services were provided in group settings with no ability to allow for physical distancing. In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, many community organizations and public services closed their doors to the public and started to provide services by phone or virtual means. Community drop-in programs and public services such as libraries, the Ontario Works office, and the downtown transit centre, where people would have had access to washrooms, water, clothing, supports, phones and computers, were no longer available. Not all food and shelter programs were able to meet physical distancing recommendations. Finally, there was nowhere for a person who was homeless to meet isolation requirements due to COVID testing or diagnosis.

Additional Funding

Recognizing the immediate need for communities to mobilize in their response to providing services to the homeless population, both the Federal and Provincial government provided the City with additional funding envelopes to support the COVID response. Under the Federal Reaching Home Program, an additional \$320,575 was provided. Under the Provincial Social Services Relief Fund, an additional \$1,007,400 was

also provided. Both levels of government have requested additional information regarding further funding needs for this response.

Homelessness Prevention

Supporting people to get or stay housed is one of the highest priorities as having a home where a person can safely isolate is the best prevention against COVID. In order to support this goal, greater flexibility has been applied to the local Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative Program to ensure funding needs assist someone to get or stay housed. The Homelessness Network has focused on rapidly rehousing those in shelter by advocating with local landlords to access rooms and apartments. Based on the municipal and provincial emergency directives, Housing Services has temporarily suspended offering units to households from outside of the community, which has resulted in more of the local homeless population being offered community-housing units.

Basic Needs

The Blue Door Soup Kitchen and Elgin Street Mission, operating within the Samaritan Centre, partner with the City to ensure the vulnerable population continues to have access to food and washrooms. These programs closed their dining areas and now provide take-out meals only. The Samaritan Centre is providing controlled access to shower and laundry facilities that allow for physical distancing. Clothing is available through the Community Outreach team and the Samaritan Centre. Funding in the amount of \$24,440 per month has been provided by the City for take-out containers, staffing, and shower supplies, with a commitment to the end of June 2020.

The Sudbury Community Arena is open daily from 9:30 am to 1:30 pm, and again from 5:00 pm to 9:30 pm. Staffed by municipal employees, this provides a safe area where people can eat their meals, use washrooms and handwashing stations, and rest out of the elements all while maintaining physical distancing. Community partners, outreach, and Samaritan Centre staff attend at the arena regularly to check in with their clients and provide support. A water distribution unit has been ordered to be set up in front of the arena to provide access to fresh drinking water daily.

The City also partners with the YMCA at 140 Durham Street to open every day between noon and 5:00 pm. This provides additional access to a sitting area and washrooms, as well as access to phones and computers so people can access the social and health services they require. Funding in the amount of \$19,600 per month has been provided by the City for staffing. Staff will continue to evaluate the effectiveness of keeping this Program in place on a month-to-month basis.

The Off the Street (OTS) Emergency Shelter, operated by Canadian Mental Health Association – Sudbury/Manitoulin (CMHA) extended the shelter hours from 8:00 am to 10:30 am to allow shelter users additional time for showers and washroom use. They are also providing a bagged breakfast.

Emergency Shelters

The Cedar Place Women and Families Shelter, operated by the Salvation Army, followed Public Health Guidelines to enhance cleaning protocols, educate staff and shelter users on hygiene protocols, implemented screening before entry, provide individual rooms for anyone with symptoms, and reorganized food provision to meet physical distancing requirements. The City funds this program under the homelessness sector. This shelter has seen a reduction in occupancy levels during COVID due to families being housed.

The OTS Emergency Shelter, operated by CMHA was operating out of 200 Larch Street. They followed Public Health Guidelines to enhance cleaning protocols, educate staff and shelter users on hygiene protocols, implemented screening before entry, changed sleeping arrangements to head to toe, and moved anyone with symptoms into a separate room and asked them to wear a mask.

As the COVID outbreak developed, it became apparent that the open concept at the 200 Larch Street location could not provide sufficient physical distancing for the safety of the shelter users and staff. As well, there was a need to provide an option for 24-hour care for a person who was homeless and who was required to meet isolation requirements due to COVID testing or diagnosis.

Following a search of available properties the City and CMHA entered into an agreement with the owners to rent Canada's Best Value Inn at 1500 Regent Street. This motel is suitable for use for both the OTS Shelter Program on the main floor and a 24-hour isolation shelter on the top floor that will create efficiencies for shelter staffing and contracted services such as security, laundry, and cleaning.

On April 16, 2020, the OTS Program moved to the temporary location. The new location allows for two persons per room, allowing for over two meters space between the beds. There is a washroom and shower in each room. The inner hotel doors remain open and shelter staff remain in the hallway to provide oversight and support to the shelter users while physically distancing. The hours of this Program are between 10:00 pm to 10:30 am. A shuttle service transports the shelter users from downtown to the hotel in the evening and back to downtown in the morning. This Low Barrier Shelter Program provides for persons who are more likely to be chronically homeless, have an active addiction, a mental illness, acquired brain injury or underlying physical health conditions.

The shelter staff prescreen and monitor the shelter users for COVID symptoms and arrange for persons with symptoms to be tested. Some barriers for testing this population includes lost health cards, no transportation to assessment centre, and no phone to receive test results. CMHA and staff are working closely with Health Sciences North, the Sudbury Nurse Practitioner Clinic, and the Community Para-medicine Program to arrange for persons with symptoms to be tested and to receive results. To date no one from the shelter program has tested positive for COVID-19. Funding is being finalized for the costs associated with additional staffing, shuttle services, along

with further variable funding for food, cleaning, laundry, and personal protective equipment based on utilization.

Supportive Isolation Centre

Since mid-March, a group of community stakeholders including social services and health care leadership have been in regular discussion regarding how to provide health care support for a person who is:

- homeless,
- has no secure, safe or appropriate place to self-isolate,
- has an identified need to self-isolate
 - symptomatic and awaiting COVID-19 test,
 - awaiting test results,
 - positive test result,
- does not require hospitalization

Similar to many other Ontario communities, a Supportive Isolation Centre has been developed to meet these needs. Attached to the OTS Shelter, the top floor of the hotel at 1500 Regent Street is being used for this purpose and can provide for up to 20 people. CMHA will continue to provide the shelter operations and the Sudbury Nurse Practitioner Clinic will oversee the clinical and medical supports. Health care services such as primary care, mental health, addictions, and nursing support are connected to the individuals using the Supportive Isolation Centre as needed. A referral process is in place for people who meet the criteria and need, to be referred from other community partners. People staying in this Program will be transitioned to Health Sciences North when required.

The Supportive Isolation Centre is more than a shelter as it has infectious disease protocols in place and direct access to health supports. People experiencing homelessness often have underlying and chronic health issues that may result in poorer outcomes if diagnosed with COVID-19. Providing this Program is a key priority for ensuring the well-being of vulnerable citizens during the COVID outbreak.

Funding in the amount of \$78,500 per month is being provided by the City to rent the Canada's Best Value Inn, and at the time of writing this report, funding is being finalized for the costs associated with the 24-hour isolation shelter.

Youth Shelter

The Foyer Notre Dame Youth Emergency Shelter closed as scheduled on March 31, 2020. At time of closing, it had been reduced to a 5-bed capacity, had served only two people since January 2020, and had no clients lodging at the site in March.

As a temporary solution for service to homeless youth aged 16 and 17, additional staff were added to the Community Outreach team within the Homelessness Network.

These staff provide outreach, diversion, and navigation support to any youth who are 16 and 17 years of age and are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Their main goal is to support youth to access basic needs through family reunification or temporary housing with friends or family members, while referring to services for additional housing, income, mental health, or addictions support, as required. Both the Off The Street and Cedar Place Emergency Shelter Programs will provide a shelter bed for a youth aged 16 or 17, however, the youth is immediately connected to the youth outreach worker to problem solve to find another more age appropriate housing option.

Staff will continue to seek out and engage with community partners to develop a more collaborative model of service to vulnerable youth.

Next Steps

As the Province proceeds with the phased approach to re-opening services, the City will work to slowly re-open offices to the public and support the Samaritan Centre and other drop-in sites to resume providing basic needs services while meeting Public Health recommendations. The additional services at the Sudbury Arena and YMCA would then be closed.

The OTS Emergency Shelter and the Supportive Isolation Centre are expected to remain in operation for a longer period at the current site in order to protect the health of vulnerable populations. The City will continue to follow Provincial recommendations as it implements its COVID-19 Action Plan for vulnerable people.

The City will continue to request additional funding through Federal and Provincial programs to sufficiently support the homelessness response to COVID-19.

References:

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/covid-19-action-plan-protecting-vulnerable-ontarians>