



Committee of the Whole Report

For the Meeting of August 1, 2024

To: Committee of the Whole

Date: July 31, 2024

From: Jocelyn Jenkyns, City Manager

Subject: Update on Victoria's Housing Encampment Action Response Teams (HEART) and Housing Encampment Action Response Temporary Housing (HEARTH) Program

RECOMMENDATION

1. That Council receive this report for information.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On July 25, 2024, the following motion was adopted by Council:

H.4 Council Member Motion: Urgent Action Required to Support Unsheltered Victorians

Motion:

1. That Council directs staff to report back at the next Committee of the Whole meeting on August 1, 2024, with an update on the status of efforts to support unsheltered persons and people in encampments through the HEART program, the number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in Victoria, and the projected number of shelter spaces, transitional housing, supportive housing, and shelter rate units coming online through HEARTH programs.
2. That this motion be forwarded to the July 25, 2024, daytime meeting of Council for consideration.

BACKGROUND

In Canada the widespread nature of homelessness and the growing lengths of periods for homelessness has garnered the attention of the Federal and Provincial levels of government. In 2019, the Government of Canada released its National Poverty and Housing Strategy and along with it, funding for Point-in-Time counts to track the experiences of homelessness in communities across the country.

Belonging in BC is a comprehensive Homelessness Plan for British Columbia, grounded in prioritizing cultural safety, Indigenous and community partnerships, and the inclusion of people with diverse identities and needs. The Plan sets out the next steps and a framework to be implemented

over the next three to five years in partnership with Indigenous peoples and organizations, communities, and all levels of government. The vision of the Plan is that B.C. is a place where everyone has a home and community, and the overarching goals are to prevent and reduce homelessness; and to ensure that when it does occur, it is rare, brief, and one-time. These goals are to be achieved through three strategic paths: prevention, immediate response, and stability and community integration.

Elements of this plan include:

- Complex care housing
- Supporting youth transitions from care; including new rent supports
- The new Provincial Homeless Encampment and Action Response Teams (HEART) and Homeless Encampment Action Response for Temporary Housing (HEARTH) initiative to provide for rapid, coordinated, multidisciplinary responses when encampments arise
- A new supported rent supplement program, including the Indigenous-led Culturally Aligned Integrated Supports initiative
- More Community Integration Specialists to ensure people in need, including those at risk of or experiencing homelessness, are aware of and connected to income supports and government programs that can help them
- Permanent housing for people at-risk of and experiencing homelessness, including those in temporary COVID-19 response spaces
- Support for people in encampments to stay safe and healthy as homes get built, and to transition to housing
- Resources for community-based homelessness responses and research, initiatives to address stigma, and advisory committees for ongoing collaboration, Homelessness Community Action Grants
- Funding for Indigenous collaboration to prioritize Indigenous-led components and measured impacts throughout the Plan.

HOMELESSNESS IN VICTORIA

There are individual and systemic factors contributing to homelessness in Victoria. Major contributing factors are the extremely low vacancy rate for rental units coupled with the lack of affordable housing which sees half of all renters paying more than 30% of their income on shelter. Individuals struggling with mental health issues as well as family violence, job loss and poverty often find themselves in homelessness.

During the pandemic, the Province purchased several hotels and motels which provided hundreds of spaces for individuals experiencing homelessness. 313 of those units are currently active in Victoria. A number of these facilities are currently being converted into purpose-built supportive housing in Victoria.

Unfortunately, individuals experiencing homelessness continues to be a challenge across the Capital Regional District. According to a recent count, there are approximately 441 people experiencing homelessness who are currently living on the streets and urgently need access to shelter (2023 BC Report on Homeless Counts).

Homelessness Encampment Action Response Team (HEART) & Homeless Encampment Action Response Temporary Housing (HEARTH)

In February 2024, the Province and the City signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that formalizes a shared commitment to better coordinate and implement a rapid response in support of people who are unhoused and are sheltering. To support this work, BC Housing is engaging with the City and service partners to coordinate and implement the Housing Encampment Action Response Teams (HEART) and Homeless Encampment Action Response Temporary Housing (HEARTH) Programs.

The HEART and HEARTH Program is part of the Province’s “Belonging in BC” homelessness plan which expects to add 3900 new supportive housing units and 240 complex-care spaces throughout the Province by 2025.

Bringing together Ministry partners, the City, service providers, health authorities, Indigenous peoples and law enforcement partners, HEART is developing a collaborative response to reducing unsheltered homeless through adding new shelter options and connecting people to shelter as an entry into the permanent housing system.

Under the MOU with the City and funded through HEARTH, BC Housing has opened an additional 60 beds this year. This includes the 30-unit Caledonia Place (formerly Tiny Town) at 940 Caledonia operated by Our Place and 30 nightly shelter beds at 1611 Quadra Street (St. John The Divine Anglican Church), operated by SOLID.

In recent months, a HEART Strategic Working Group comprised of representation from the Province, service providers and the City has accelerated efforts to identify encampment outreach and action required to identify shelter and wrap around service needs for those outdoors.

Supportive Housing

There are 1456 BC Housing supportive housing units in the Capital Region of which 1267 are in Victoria. BC Housing has new supportive housing currently proposed or under construction across the Capital Region, including the announced projects below:

- Crosstown Development, Victoria – 54 permanent supportive housing units – Anticipated opening late fall 2024 / Early 2025
- Drake Road, Salt Spring – 32 permanent supportive housing units and 4 affordable rental homes. In development.
- Russell supportive housing, Victoria – 40 permanent supportive housing. In development.
- Mt Tolmie, Saanich – 50 permanent supportive homes. In development.
- Pandora St, Victoria – 47 supportive homes with CRD
- Discovery Street, Victoria – 90 homes with Our Place

ISSUES & ANALYSIS

One of the City's goals through the work of HEART and HEARTH is to adopt a better data foundation through which regional progress can be monitored. This would require a data source which is more replicable and comprehensive.

There are two potential sources of information we could look at to determine the efficacy of our collaborative efforts:

1. The BC Government's Preventing and Reducing Homelessness: An Integrated Data Project for a region-wide data drawing from multiple sources that is as comprehensive and replicable as our current system permits; and,
2. BC Housing for specific program-level data that would enable us to determine the impacts of specific interventions.

The City will be requesting that the Province provide recent reports for the Integrated Data Project as the Province has not produced reports since the release of the 2019-2021 report.

By using this readily available data from the Province, it will assist us in enumerating individuals accessing services from various Ministries (Health, Housing, Mental Health and Addictions as well as Social Development and Poverty Reduction) which will help us overcome some of the data silos that are being experienced at the community-level.

CONCLUSION

The work of HEART and HEARTH is underway. BC Housing continues to monitor existing funded beds for vacancy opportunities as well as seeking out land and building opportunities to establish new shelter spaces. Progress reports on this work will be provided to Council in the coming months.

Respectfully submitted,

Jocelyn Jenkyns
City Manager

List of Attachments

Belonging in BC
MOU HEART and HEARTH