



## Committee of the Whole Report

### For the Meeting of November 7, 2024

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**To:** Committee of the Whole  
**From:** Daniel Atkinson, Fire Chief  
Tanya Seal-Jones, Emergency Program Coordinator  
**Subject:** Update on 2024-2025 Emergency Winter Weather Response Planning

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### RECOMMENDATION

That Council receive this report for information on the City of Victoria's 2024/25 Emergency Winter Weather Response Plan, what resources exist in other municipalities in the Capital Regional District (CRD), and the Emergency Plans of other municipalities with respect to cold weather events and emergency response.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Responding to the impacts of emergency winter weather takes a collaborative approach and there are several layers of responsibility and resources which support the response ensuring the health and safety of those most significantly impacted by winter weather.

Two critical pieces of legislation to understand are the Assistance to Shelter Act and the new *Emergency and Disaster Management Act* (EDMA) which replaced the Emergency Program Act.

The Assistance to Shelter Act grants local police and RCMP the authority to transport a person who is homeless to a shelter during extreme weather events. Once the individual has arrived at the shelter, they may choose whether or not they want to stay.

EDMA took effect in 2023 and defines an emergency as "*a state that is the result of an event that has occurred, is ongoing or appears imminent, and is caused by one or more incidents including forces of nature, and it requires the prompt coordination of action, or the special regulation of persons or property, to protect the health, safety or well-being of persons*". EDMA is the legislation that governs Local Authorities and outlines their responsibilities for the establishment of emergency programs. EDMA states that a local authority's emergency program must have preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery plans in place for any of the hazards that may affect its jurisdictional area.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to provide council with information on the City of Victoria's 2024/25 Emergency Winter Weather Response Plan and to advise council on the resources and emergency response plans for other regional municipalities.

Although often confused, it is important to understand that a Local Authority's emergency response plans are separate and different from the BC Housing funded Extreme Weather Response (EWR) Program and Plan. All the City's operational emergency response plans, including the Emergency Winter Weather Response Plan, are living documents which are continuously reviewed, exercised, and updated to reflect the current environment and the changing needs of our community.

## BACKGROUND

### BC Housing's Emergency Shelter Program

Under BC Housing's Emergency Shelter Program there are three types of shelters: **year-round**, **temporary**, and **extreme weather winter shelters**. Year-round Emergency Shelters are open year-round, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Temporary Winter Shelters are generally open November 1 to April 30 and are closed from May 1 to October 31. Extreme Weather Response Shelters are open in the winter when the Community Coordinator declares an alert, under the Assistance to Shelter Act, that sleeping outside could threaten health and safety. Extreme Weather Response Shelters remain open at night for the duration of the alert.

BC Housing's Extreme Weather Response (EWR) program funds community-based service providers who activate additional emergency shelter spaces during periods of extreme winter weather. The stated objective of the program is to provide additional spaces when conditions exist that threaten the health and safety of individuals who are experiencing or are at-risk of homelessness. The EWR will fund time-limited, temporary additional shelter spaces that can open during extreme weather providing space to anyone who wants to come inside. Each year BC Housing liaises with service providers in the region who can provide EWR mats. BC Housing will provide funding for a Community Coordinator who will write the EWR plan outlining the activation criteria and the available EWR resources.

### City of Victoria Emergency Winter Weather Response Plan

The City of Victoria maintains several emergency response plans to ensure expected service levels can be maintained and to fulfill our responsibilities under EDMA. For example, the Public Works and Engineering Department maintains the Severe Weather Response Plan (SWRP) which outlines how city staff will respond to heavy rain, flooding, snow and ice conditions, and windstorms. Similarly, the Emergency Management Division of the Fire Department maintains and continually updates the Emergency Winter Weather Response Plan. This plan will be activated when specific emergency conditions exist. It outlines how the City's emergency program will operationally respond to ensure the life, health, and safety of those vulnerable to the impacts of emergency winter weather is protected.

All City departments will work together during emergency events, and an Emergency Operations Centre (EOC), may be established for coordination across departments and external organizations if required. Although the City's Emergency Winter Weather Response Plan is influenced by the status of

the BC Housing Extreme Weather (EWR) Response Plan, it is not directly affiliated with it. When developing emergency plans, municipalities must consider all hazards, potential resources, vulnerabilities, and impacts.

The City of Victoria's Emergency Winter Weather Response Plan will be activated when all of the following criteria have been met:

- a) Emergency weather conditions exist (as declared by Environment and Climate Change Canada), and
- b) all other options and resources have been exhausted – all shelters are full including community service providers, BC Housing seasonal shelters, and EWR sites, and
- c) there is a need for additional warm spaces – There are individuals whose lives, health, and safety are being threatened by the emergency weather conditions and there is nowhere else to go.

\*If all the above conditions are met, the City will request a task number from EMCR and may receive funding for eligible response activities including costs associated with operating a warming centre.

## **ISSUES & ANALYSIS**

Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic, BC Housing's EWR program proved to be sufficient in addressing the needs of the unhoused community in the Capital Region District (CRD) during periods of extreme winter weather. The EWR Community Coordinator and Plan encompassed the Greater Victoria area, with shelter and EWR resources available in multiple communities throughout the region. Following the end of the pandemic, the region has experienced a significant decline in service providers who are participating in the BC Housing funded EWR program. As a result, there has been no regional approach nor a coordinated regional plan for the past 3 years resulting in an insufficient number of spaces for the unhoused to shelter during extreme weather events.

The Victoria Fire Department, through the Fire Chief and the Emergency Program Coordinator, contacted other municipalities in the CRD to determine the number of service providers in their respective communities who are participating in the BC Housing EWR Program and for additional information regarding their municipalities emergency plan as it relates to emergency cold weather response.

While not all municipalities responded to our request for information, those who did reply have confirmed that with the exception of Sooke and Salt Spring Island, the City of Victoria is the only community where service providers will be participating in the BC Housing EWR Program for the 2024 – 2025 winter season. Additionally, the City of Victoria is currently the only municipality in the CRD that will activate their Emergency Plan and open additional warming centre spaces when all other resources have been exhausted. When activated, Victoria is the only municipality with emergency warming centre services for the unhoused population from across all jurisdictions in the CRD.

During extreme weather conditions, representatives and emergency services personnel from the affected municipalities will receive alerts issued by the BC Housing funded EWR Community Coordinator advising that their EWR Plan has been activated. This alerts local police and RCMP to conduct wellness checks with the unhoused community in accordance with the *Assistance to Shelter Act*. In the event police encounter individuals who require shelter, and all local shelter resources are full (or non-existent), these individuals will be transported to the nearest available shelter space which

will be located in either Victoria, Sooke, or on Salt Spring Island. Once all shelter spaces and EWR sites are full, and if a need remains unaddressed, the City of Victoria Emergency Winter Weather Response Plan will be activated, and warming centres will be opened.

During the winter months of 2023-2024, there were several instances where, during emergency weather events, unhoused individuals were transported from other municipalities in the CRD to shelter service providers located in Victoria. This resulted in shelter spaces and EWR sites quickly reaching their capacity. The City of Victoria Emergency Winter Weather Response Plan was activated, and warming centres were opened to meet the additional demand. Once activated, the regions unhoused continued to arrive in Victoria seeking respite from the cold, some by taxi from other municipalities, which were paid for by City of Victoria Warming Centre staff when they arrived.

## 2024 – 2025 Winter Weather Resources

\*Refer to BC Housing’s Extreme Weather Response Plan for a current listing of EWR sites

Resource	Organization
Serves hot drinks and food. Truck may be requested to attend to emergency scenes, reception centres, group lodging facilities, and warming centres to provide food and drink for evacuees and responders.	Salvation Army Food Truck / Community Response Unit
Upon request and under an approved EMCR task number, BC Transit may provide transportation to and from essential services during emergency events	BC Transit
Van that may be able to provide transportation to shelters, EWR sites, and warming centres during emergency weather events	Victoria Native Friendship centre
Under the Assistance to Shelter act police have the authority to transport people to EWR sites for their own safety during emergency weather events.	VicPD
EWR Community Coordinator	Salvation Army (funded by BC Housing)
<b>Potential Warming Centre Locations Identified in the Emergency Winter Weather Response Plan (City of Victoria)</b>	
Facility name	Capacity
Fernwood Community Centre (NRG)	30
Little Fernwood	20
Victoria Curling Club	25
Save On Foods Memorial Centre	50

Cook Street Village Activity Centre	50
<b>*Victoria is the only municipality in the Region that has a plan in place to open emergency warming centres</b>	

BC HOUSING FUNDED PROGRAMS				
Program Type	Site Name	City	Project Address	Spaces
Extreme Weather Response	EWR - Rock Bay Landing	Victoria	535 Ellice Street	20
Extreme Weather Response	EWR - Addictions & Rehabilitation Centre	Victoria	525 Johnson Street	30
<b>Total Victoria EWR Spaces</b>				<b>50</b>
Extreme Weather Response	EWR - Sooke	Sooke	6750 West Coast Road	13
Extreme Weather Response	EWR - Salt Spring Island	Salt Spring Island	268 Fulford-Ganges Road	10
<b>Additional EWR Spaces</b>				<b>23</b>
<b>TOTAL Combined EWR Spaces</b>				<b>73</b>

Program Type	Municipality	Spaces
Year-Round Shelter Spaces	Victoria	350
Year-Round Shelter Spaces	Saanich	25
Year-Round Shelter Spaces	Salt Spring Island	30

Total number of shelter spaces in Victoria	<b>400</b>
Total number of shelter spaces in all other municipalities in the region combined	<b>78</b>

## OPTIONS & IMPACTS

This report is for information.

## CONCLUSIONS

The City of Victoria Emergency Management Division of the Fire Department is fully prepared to respond to emergency conditions as necessary and provide warm spaces for the unhoused to protect their life and safety. The creation and maintenance of the City's Emergency Winter Weather Response Plan requires significant staff and time resources year-round, not just as winter weather approaches. Staff are continually engaged in hiring, training, scheduling and managing auxiliary extreme weather response staff, coordinating and managing facilities and resources, managing security and cleaners, securing food and drinks for the warming centres, and liaising with stakeholder organizations such as BC Housing, other service providers, transportation services, and facilities.

A lack of available resources and service providers in neighbouring communities has placed additional strain on those service providers located in Victoria, City of Victoria staff, the City's Emergency Program, and the region's unhoused population. The sustained operation of sheltering services requires significant staffing resources, specialized training, ongoing support services, appropriate facilities, and resourcing which far exceeds the capabilities of city staff alone.

Respectfully submitted,

Tanya Seal-Jones  
Emergency Program Coordinator

Daniel Atkinson  
Fire Chief

**Report accepted and recommended by the City Manager**

**List of Attachments** (if relevant)