

HALIFAX

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Item No. 6
Halifax Regional Council
September 28, 2021

TO: Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

SUBMITTED BY:

Original Signed by 

Jacques Dubé, Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: September 13, 2021

SUBJECT: Emergency Supportive Housing and Shelter Accommodation update –
September 2021

INFORMATION REPORT

ORIGIN

August 31, 2021 Regional Council motion (item 14.1):

Moved by Mayor Savage, seconded by Councillor Mason.

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to implement a range of emergency supportive housing and emergency shelter accommodations for those who are unhoused in collaboration with and based on feedback from community-based social services providers and the Province of Nova Scotia to address immediate and emergent needs including measures such as the fit-up of spaces for temporary accommodations, renting of hotel and other spaces and further, and to coordinate and collaborate with community-based social services providers and the Province of Nova Scotia in that respect;

Direct that the Chief Administrative Officer be authorized to spend up to \$500,000 from Fiscal Services in respect of addressing these needs, and report on the use of said funds through monthly public updates as an information report at Regional Council meetings until the end of the fiscal year and then quarterly at a minimum; and,

Further direct the Chief Administrative Officer to work with Department of Community Services and community service providers on a needs-analysis including determining how many people are unhoused, how many of them are currently tenting or occupying other forms of shelter within parks and other public lands in Halifax Regional Municipality and how many can be accommodated in a safer manner.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

The *Halifax Regional Municipality Charter*, S.N.S. 2008, c. 39 provides:

- 7A The purposes of the Municipality are to
...
- (b) provide services, facilities and other things that, in the opinion of the Council, are necessary or desirable for all or part of the Municipality; and
 - (c) develop and maintain safe and viable communities.

BACKGROUND

As noted in the above motion, Halifax Regional Council identified \$500,000 for use in addressing urgent and emergency needs related to homelessness and directed the Chief Administrative Officer to work with the Province of Nova Scotia and community partners to explore use of this funding.

The number of people sleeping rough in Halifax has more than doubled in the past year. According to the Affordable Housing Association, as of August 10, 2021, 400 people are homeless in the municipality. The situation with homelessness is dynamic and changes frequently. Therefore, monthly updates provided to Regional Council will be reflective of a specific period of time, up to the point of having a report prepared in time for review and distribution on the Council agenda. This is the first monthly update report requested by Council and covers the period from the motion being passed on August 31 up to and including September 21, 2021.

DISCUSSION

Housing and Homelessness is not a core municipal mandate, so the municipality does not have existing resources or staff expertise in this area. Therefore, relationships with the Province and community partners is essential in working to determine the best use of available resources in addressing the issue of homelessness.

In the approximate three-week period since the tabling of the Council Motion, work has been focused on three primary areas: (1) planning to peacefully and voluntarily close the encampment at Chebucto/Dublin (Meagher Park); (2) working toward better coordination between the municipality and professional service providers that work in the area of homelessness; and (3) focusing internally, as well as with the Province and other partners, to identify any potential sites (buildings and land) that could be refitted quickly to provide short-term housing on an urgent basis.

Meagher Park

Planning to peacefully and voluntarily close the encampment at Meagher Park is well underway. Staff are aware of the potential for health and safety issues arising at Meagher Park, as well as its proximity to a residential area, and are working closely with volunteers and service providers to identify options and move individuals safely. The plan is contingent on relationships being maintained between service providers and volunteers at the park and will not be enacted unless temporary accommodations can be identified for those living in the park. At the time of the Council motion, work was underway with provincial staff and professional service providers to assess the feasibility of alternative temporary accommodations, including hotels, for those residing in Meagher Park.

The municipality was notified on September 1 by volunteers at the park that there was a need to relocate some individuals. Given the urgency of the situation, the municipality took immediate steps to secure hotel rooms at the Comfort Inn and engage provincial staff and professional service providers to facilitate placing individuals in the hotel. Service providers indicated 10 rooms would be required to address the immediate need at the park. On September 3, the hotel confirmed that the 10 rooms were available until September 15. The municipality received confirmation that everyone who moved into the hotel was connected to a professional support person. Different service providers were supporting different people, and therefore the levels and type of support individuals were receiving at the hotel varied. All individuals at the Comfort Inn were offered alternative accommodations prior to September 15.

On September 18, the municipality was notified by volunteers and service providers of potential health and safety issues at the park and immediately relocated some of the residents to Gray Arena, which was set up as an emergency short-term housing option. As of the writing of this report, Gray Arena is still being utilized as a temporary housing option. Staff and service providers are in regular contact, working together to try to provide the amenities and services required by individuals staying at the arena.

Service providers are continuing to work with those experiencing homelessness at Meagher Park. The municipality is collaborating with the Province and community partners to identify hotels, shelters, or other spaces that have availability immediately and are willing to accept residents from the site. Some individuals continue to be placed in hotels for short term stays supported with the funding identified by the municipality, but suitable options are extremely difficult to identify. In addition to securing these options, it remains essential to ensure that community-based service providers are available and able to provide the supports required to transition clients into temporary housing.

Coordination

Representatives from more than a dozen organizations have been engaged to some degree in the process of exploring ways to better align activities and support the effective coordination of resources among service providers and HRM. A meeting was held on August 26 with HRM and service providers to discuss better ways to collaborate to support individuals who are seeking more stable accommodations. The meeting served as a chance for HRM to hear concerns, ideas, and solutions directly from service providers. As a result of this meeting, service providers committed to putting a proposal together around solutions they would be able to implement with funding from HRM. This conversation was held before Council approved the \$500,000 in the above motion.

The proposal was received on September 3 and discussions with the service providers have continued since. It is recognized that the service providers are the experts in working with unhoused individuals. The proposal has been positioned by service providers as an emergency support fund “to support people living outside access financial resources to move toward shelter and housing”.

As of September 21, staff have received further detail regarding the proposal from a coalition of 11 service providers with proposed parameters for how the fund would be used and administered by a group of core partners. Staff continue to work with service providers to finalize details of the proposal. It is anticipated that a portion of the \$500,000 will go towards this proposal, with remaining amounts going towards fitting up temporary spaces and coordinating supports.

Site Identification

Working internally and with provincial staff and community partners, the municipality has identified a few potential sites (both land and buildings) that may be available for temporary housing and are assessing the appropriateness of use for this purpose, as well as the potential costs to refit, lease, etc. If options are confirmed, service providers and provincial staff will be engaged to determine the possibility of organizations providing staff support. However, the potential use of some of these properties may provide

medium- to long-term solutions and not be available in the immediate future. As noted above, the Gray Arena has already been activated as one short-term emergency solution for some individuals.

Resourcing Update

On September 20, Assistant Chief of Emergency Management, Erica Fleck, was assigned to a three-month role leading the emergency response to homelessness for the municipality. The focus of this role will be on the immediate support required to advance Council's directive to invest \$500,000 towards emergency accommodations.

Simultaneous to these immediate-term efforts, the process of hiring a full-time permanent position of Social Policy Strategist is underway. This position was identified as a commitment in the 2021/22 fiscal budget. It is expected to be filled in the fall of 2021 and will focus on longer-term municipal priorities related to addressing homelessness and homeless encampments in the Halifax region.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Costs for any activities noted in this report will be supported by the \$500,000 approved by Regional Council on August 31.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In addition to the Province, staff have had contact to varying degrees with a number of community-based service providers. These include: Adsum for Women and Children, the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre, North End Community Health Centre / MOSH Housing First, Out of the Cold Community Association, Phoenix Youth Programs, Welcome Housing, YWCA Halifax, Elizabeth Fry Society, Coverdale Courtwork Society, the John Howard Society, Shelter Nova Scotia, and Outreach Street Navigators.

ATTACHMENTS

No attachments.

A copy of this report can be obtained online at halifax.ca or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 902.490.4210.

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