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Item No. 14.1
Halifax Regional Council
April 23, 2024
May 7, 2024

TO: Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

SUBMITTED BY: Original Signed

Cathie O'Toole, Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: April 19, 2024

SUBJECT: Update on Homelessness

INFORMATION REPORT

ORIGIN

May 3, 2022, Halifax Regional Council Motion (Item No. 15.1.9):

MOVED by Councillor Smith, seconded by Councillor Stoddard

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

1. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to continue to support the Province and other partners to ensure individuals have safe, supportive and affordable housing,
5. Authorize the Chief Administrative Officer to negotiate and enter into a contribution agreement with the United Way to convene a lived experience committee to advise staff,
6. Direct the CAO to return to Council with a subsequent report with an additional analysis and recommendations for actions, including a timeline and plan for supporting the transition of people, education and implementation that is lead and delivered by civilian staff.
7. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to provide a staff report on negotiating a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Province of Nova Scotia on supporting Unsheltered Residents of HRM. The report should include defining the roles of each order of government and specific actions to support and prevent homelessness within the HRM.

MOTION AS AMENDED PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

MOVED by Councillor Smith, seconded by Councillor Stoddard

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

2. Direct the CAO to continue efforts to increase availability of affordable housing as described in the body

of this report, and

4. Direct the CAO to continue to review options to add non-park sites to inventory of outdoor sites available for overnight sheltering,

MOTION PUT AND PASSED.

MOVED by Councillor Smith, seconded by Councillor Stoddard

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

3. Direct the CAO to formalize criteria and locations for the designation of overnight sheltering sites in parks consistent with the criteria and locations described in the body of the staff report dated April 28, 2022, with the removal of the one-night camping sites, and addition of those sites to the list of potential longer term camping sites if required and possible to ensure adequate supply to meet demands to be brought back to Council for consideration.

MOTION AS AMENDED PUT AND PASSED.

June 14, 2022 Halifax Regional Council Motion (15.1.5)

MOVED by Councillor Mancini, seconded by Councillor Austin

THAT Halifax Regional Council endorse the proposed criteria and locations in municipal parks for designated camping intended for those experiencing homelessness.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED

September 12, 2023 Halifax Regional Council Motion (15.1.7)

MOVED by Councillor Cleary, seconded by Councillor Mason

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

1. direct the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to lease private property, if possible, as locations for persons experiencing homelessness to shelter.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED.

MOVED by Councillor Cleary, seconded by Councillor Mason

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

3. direct the CAO to establish additional encampments, temporary housing, or tiny home locations on all types of municipality-owned properties. Such sites may include rights of way, parking lots, and surplus lands.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED.

MOVED by Councillor Cleary, seconded by Councillor Mason

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

4. direct the CAO to write to the province requesting their immediate plans to create deeply affordable housing options in HRM, including the leasing of private property for persons experiencing homelessness and request the province to provide on-site wrap-around services for homeless encampments that have

over ten people.

MOTION AS AMENDED PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

MOVED by Councillor Cleary, seconded by Councillor Mason

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

5. direct the CAO to explore the options of the non-park property types outlined in the staff report dated September 4, 2023, as well as campgrounds, and outdoor facilities, as locations for unhoused persons who are sheltering in a vehicle.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

MOVED by Councillor Cleary, seconded by Councillor Mason

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

6. direct the CAO provide a staff report to explore the feasibility of purchasing and installing prefabricated structures, similar to the Sprung structures in Toronto, to provide rapid response emergency housing in HRM including funding opportunities for installation and operation, which include other orders of government and the private sector.

MOTION AS AMENDED PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

September 12, 2023 Halifax Regional Council Motion (15.1.7)

MOVED by Councillor Russell, seconded by Councillor Lovelace

THAT Halifax Regional Council endorse the approaches contained in the staff report dated October 17, 2023.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

December 20, 2023 Halifax Regional Council Motion (4.1)

MOVED by Councillor Smith, seconded by Councillor Lovelace

THAT Halifax Regional Council: 1. Adopt the recommendations as outlined in the private and confidential report dated December 20, 2023; and 2. Direct that the private and confidential report dated December 20, 2023 be maintained private and confidential.

The report was declassified in February 2024.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Halifax Regional Municipality Charter, S.N.S. 2008, c. 39

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

79A(1) Subject to subsections (2) to (4), the Municipality may only spend money for municipal purposes if

(a) the expenditure is included in the Municipality's operating budget or capital budget or is otherwise authorized by the Municipality; ...

Halifax Regional Municipality By-law P-600 Respecting Municipal Parks

Camping

8. (1) Camping is prohibited in a park unless otherwise posted or by permission.

BACKGROUND

Halifax continues to face a homelessness crisis. As of April 16, 2024, the By Name List (BNL) has reached 1,211 people. The By Name List is a voluntary list that people can join through a service provider, including street outreach services. It is from this list that people are able to access temporary housing and other such supports. Over the past several months the BNL has grown approximately 4% a month. Staff expect that this rate will increase through the spring and summer. It is important to recognize that the BNL number under-reports the number of people facing homelessness in HRM. There are those people who choose not to join the list as well as others who would qualify for it but are perhaps couch surfing, living in their vehicle, or in a similar situation and do not even know that it exists as they do not access navigator, outreach or other service provider assistance.

The municipality recently closed five previously designated locations. Those locations were the former Correctional Center Park in Sackville, Grand Parade, Victoria Park, Saunders Park and the Geary Street green space. These closures were initiated once the province confirmed it was able to provide spaces for those sheltering in these locations. While space was available for each person, many felt they were unable to accept the options offered. There were also many who were able to access housing for the first time through the work of the province and their service providers.

Four designated locations remain active in the municipality. These sites are the Barrington Greenway, the berms on University Avenue, Green Road Park and Lower Flynn Park. Staff recommend that within these locations there can be up to 26 tent sites. There are currently 46 tents or other shelter structures in these spaces with more people moving into them. For example, two more tents moved into the University Avenue location, bringing the total to 12, for a site that staff recommends does not have more than six.

There have also been 15 to 20 tents in non-designated locations, such as Northbrook Park and other park spaces. In the past week and a half, more than one dozen tents have popped up in non-designated sites, including Grafton Street Park, Chocolate Lake Park, Halifax Common, Point Pleasant Park and behind the Portland Street Superstore.

As we have faced previously, the challenge when people overcrowd a designated location, or set up an encampment in a non-designated location, is that there needs to be a place for them to go before we ask them to move. Already there is insufficient space for those seeking to shelter outside. While there are some spaces available in shelters and temporary housing not everyone can or will accept those options. There are people who have previously faced violence, physical assault, and theft in communal shelter settings. It is impossible for them to be in such as space. There are those who need a 'wet' environment to be housed. There are no shelter spaces for couples and a shortage of space for youth. There needs to be space for people to go, and it needs to be space suitable for their individual needs.

It is expected that the number of people seeking to shelter outside will grow in the spring and summer. These increased numbers will come from a variety of sources including:

- CMHC in their last community update noted that rental pressures in Halifax will continue for the foreseeable future. As rental prices rise, accompanied with other cost of living increases, more

people will simply be forced into homelessness due to a lack of income. Some will have no option but to shelter outside.

- Fixed term leases and renovations continually force people out of their housing. Some of these people are unable to find housing. Others are forced to spend too much of their income on housing costs, reducing monies available for food, medication and other essential expenses, increasing the risk of homelessness in the future.
- There are those who were sleeping rough in the fall who found an option for the winter, such as couch surfing with friends or family. Many of these options are not sustainable and people are unable to stay there for extended periods of time. Some of those situations are abusive in nature and inherently unsafe. As their options collapse they are now looking to return to sheltering outside.
- There are those who may be using a shelter but wish to sleep rough as they feel they have more agency when they do not have to comply with shelter rules.
- There are those that find collegiate living very difficult and again will endure this for the winter but will move outside as soon as the weather warms.
- There are people who shelter in other communities for the winter and return to HRM for the summer as they can connect with their chosen community or access desired support services.
- There are some people that come from other parts of Canada and even internationally and shelter outside.
- There are also people among those experiencing homelessness whose primary issue is not the lack of access to shelters or housing options. Their primary issue is unrecognized and untreated serious mental health issues. Many of these people will not be successfully housed until adequate and ongoing mental health services are available to them.

The trends in homelessness over the past several years show exponential growth. While the province has opened over 175 shelter beds in fall 2023 and winter 2024 there is still unmet demand and no indications that this exponential growth will slow.

Finally, as we discuss people sleeping rough and encampments, it is important to remember that encampments are not a solution to homelessness. Encampments are never a home and HRM's lived expertise consultations, along with many other groups, indicate that almost all persons experiencing homelessness want a safe, sustainable, accessible and supportive home. They do not want to live in a tent in an encampment.

Encampments are not safe for those who are forced to live in them. There are many risks to those living in encampments leading to deteriorating physical and mental health. Encampment residents are at high risk for heat and cold related issues, victimization, fire, carbon monoxide poisoning, rats and other vermin, and lack the most basic of services such as running water, bathrooms, food preparation and storage, and other services.

Encampments pose a danger to the community at large. There has been violence arising from encampments, accumulations of human feces, biohazardous waste, weapons and drug paraphernalia surrounding encampments, significant food waste leading to issues with rodents, as well as uncontrolled fires and propane cylinder explosions. Encampments also remove recreation spaces, and their associated benefits, from everyone living in the community. Perceived risks to personal safety impact shopping patterns and staffing requirements for the local business community. Violence, vandalism and vigilantism create challenges again for both encampment residents and the surrounding community.

All of this said, encampments are a necessity at this time until the province and the community can provide suitable sheltering and housing options for people. These options need to meet the needs to people sheltering outside, including the provision of a 'wet' option, space for couples, additional space for youth, and single room occupancy options so that people have a secure space to sleep and store their belongings.

DISCUSSION

Closed Park Locations

Recently the municipality de-designated five locations. Those sites included the Correctional Centre Park in Sackville, Victoria Park, Grand Parade, Saunders Park and Geary Street Green Space. The former Correctional Centre Park in Sackville is going to be used by the province for a tiny homes pilot and site preparation for that work is already underway. The damage to Saunders Park was minimal and the park is re-opened to the public. Geary Street Green Space is fenced to allow for restoration and is expected to be reopened in the coming weeks. Victoria Park and Grand Parade are fenced to allow for remediation pending review of soil testing results. Timing of remediation and reopening for Victoria Park and Grand Parade is constrained by availability of sod and the need to allow sod to take root. Sod is expected to be available in May, work will take approximately 2 weeks and then 3-4 weeks will be required for the grass to take root. These parks are expected to be reopened in early summer.

In addition to these locations, Meagher Park on Chebucto Road (a former encampment site), is still fenced. The final stage of that site remediation is the planting of new flower beds, which will be done when plants are available. The park will be reopened after those plantings are completed.

Existing Shelters

There are multiple shelters in HRM, run by various service providers. In the past several months the Province of Nova Scotia has opened two new shelters. In Dartmouth a 100-bed shelter has been opened in the former St. Paul's Church on Windmill Road. This space has been leased by the province into 2026. As no space was able to host a shelter on the Halifax peninsula, the municipality arranged for the Multi-Purpose Centre of the Halifax Forum to be made available for the province to set up a shelter there. That provides space for up to 93 people. This space at the Multi-Purpose Centre has been committed as a shelter until the end of August 2024. The loss of this shelter space would immediately return over 90 people to sleeping rough in municipal parks and other spaces. Currently, the majority of shelters are filled to near capacity there are available beds.

The municipality is actively seeking an alternative location for this Halifax shelter so that the Multi-Purpose Centre can be returned to planned community use this fall. Currently, staff are reviewing the results from a Request for Expressions of Interest (RFEI) that recently closed, looking for such a space. Responses to the RFEI are being shared with the province and if a suitable location is not available from the RFEI responses, staff will:

1. Continue to examine options such as using a winterized temporary structure to ensure a suitable Halifax shelter continues to be available in the community.
2. Determine if the use of the Multi-Purpose Centre as a shelter space should be extended.

The municipality and the province have made a commitment to announce the approach for a Halifax shelter for the remainder of 2024 before June 30, 2024.

Temporary Housing

The Province has a variety of temporary housing options. While some of them, such as the Pallet village in Sackville are full, others have capacity. The Waverley Inn is providing temporary housing options for women and gender diverse individuals. Their staggered enrollment process continues and there are still some spaces that will become available, though each week the number drops. HRM has recent facilitated repairs to the Halifax and Dartmouth Modulares. This has allowed multiple units in these facilities to re-open after being closed due to damage. While some of these units have already been filled, more intakes will take place as final repairs are completed.

People move to the best option for their particular needs. As people choose the option that is right for them, spaces can become available creating movement within available housing and sheltering options. As someone moves from one place to the other, opportunities open that help ensure persons sleeping rough

have the option to transition from the street to a shelter and housing options. Staff continually monitor these changes to identify opportunities for people sleeping rough and in encampments.

Pending Temporary Housing

As the municipality considers the growing number of people sleeping rough, it is important to recognize that the province is supporting the creation of various other temporary housing options. Currently 19 Pallet shelters are open in Sackville and a further 81 Pallet shelters have been announced for the municipality. Pallet shelters provide a valuable option for those seeking to move inside. A Pallet Shelter village provides access to services, running water, climate control, an ability to have your own space, with a locked door, and a sense of community. Many of the people who choose not to enter or stay in a shelter identify these needs as critical for their success. Provincial and municipal staff are working on finalizing locations and timing. The municipality expects that all of these villages will be operational by mid or late summer.

902 Man Up, the largest service provider of shelter space in Nova Scotia, is opening a supportive housing project called the Transition Campus in the coming weeks. Many of the residents for this facility will come from existing shelters. While not directly reducing the number of people sheltering outside, these transitions will create flow in the system, as well as other opportunities that may help reduce the number of people forced to sleep rough.

Finally, the former Correctional Center Park is the site of a provincial tiny homes pilot. This project will create 60 tiny homes with space for up to 70 people. These tiny homes will have a series of supports for their residents. As the province recently announced, some of these tiny homes will be available in the fall with more ready during the winter.

Between these initiatives and existing space that is being filled, there are 250 or more non-shelter temporary and longer-term housing options coming. Unfortunately, many of them will not be available in time to address the expected rise in people sleeping rough in the short term but will create space to address their needs in the longer term. There will be an interim period of increased demand to support people sleeping rough until these units are ready.

Additional Shelter Options Still Required

In working with people who are sleeping rough, or are staying in shelters, staff have identified a couple of different shelter options that are required and would allow some of those still sleeping rough to move inside. One of the primary needs is for a wet shelter which accepts people who are under the influence. There are challenges in how this type of operation would work and who would be able to run it. There may also be synergies available with the upcoming stabilization centre. There is also need for additional spaces for couples, youth and families. The municipality continues to work with the province to further quantify and explore these needs and options to address them.

Approach to Encampments

While there are significant additional resources coming that will provide many of those sleeping rough a chance to move inside, there are not sufficient spaces nor a variety of operating models necessary to meet all the needs of those sleeping rough. While the municipality aims to eliminate encampments, and is committed to this goal, the need for them in the short term will continue. As identified in the December 19, 2023, and January 23, 2024, reports to Regional Council, the municipality is continuing to look for opportunities to incentivize people to move indoors and disincentivize sleeping rough. Some of these incentives include the creation of necessary and appropriate spaces for people's specific needs.

In the meantime, the municipality will take steps to mitigate the safety issues associated with encampments, with a particular focus on overcrowded designated locations. This approach will also help to protect the use of parks by all residents, as we expect that over the coming months there will be more people sleeping rough seeking sites in areas that are not designated.

Efforts to reduce encampment numbers:

1. Community members found sheltering in non-designated locations are advised about shelter and temporary housing options available and provided assistance to access them. Should they not be able to access an indoor option they are informed if there is capacity at any of the designated locations.
2. Staff engage with any persons sleeping rough and provide them with the option to register on By Name List, so they are eligible for housing and other supports.
3. Clients that navigators identify as suitable for a particular sheltering or housing options are referred directly to the appropriate services provider.
4. Navigators work together from various service providers to develop in individual case management plans to help people exit the street and begin a journey to long term stable housing.

Adjustments: Short- term adjustments to our approach to encampments:

1. Staff have revised the list of prohibited locations for people to shelter to include the recently de-designated locations at Grand Parade, Victoria Park, Saunders Park and the Geary Street green space. People who choose to shelter in these prohibited locations will receive a notice from a Compliance officer as soon as their tent is identified and are required to leave the site within 24 hours. This has been our standard protocol; this action is about expanding the list of prohibited sites.
 - a. In June 2022, Regional Council endorsed a set of criteria when sheltering in an outdoor space would not be permitted. That list included: sites within 50 metres of a school, daycare, or adult care facility; on active sports fields, dugouts, or bleachers; within horticultural displays or gardens; within cemeteries; near environmentally or culturally sensitive areas; blocking a path or right of access; on bridges, docks, or piers; near playgrounds, pools, or splash pads; near skateboard parks or sports courts; near picnic shelters, gazebos; near recreation facilities; or in highly inaccessible spaces for individuals, services, and support providers.

Staff are adding to this, specific sites where sheltering will not be permitted, including Grand Parade, Victoria Park, Saunders Park and Geary Street. People who choose to shelter in these prohibited locations will receive a notice from a Compliance officer as soon as their tent is identified and are required to leave the site within 24 hours. This has been our standard protocol; this action is about expanding the number of sites where sheltering is prohibited.

2. Staff will use additional signage and handouts to better inform people of their options for sleeping rough and what sites are not permitted.
3. HRM will offer free storage options for those persons accessing shelter spaces or staying at an encampment.
4. While indoor spaces are available, HRM and the province will refrain from distributing free tents through outreach staff and service providers.
5. While porta potties and water will continue to be supplied at designated locations, the municipality will not provide power at designated locations at this time but is exploring it with an objective to provide power at locations that will remain throughout the winter months, to help mitigate safety risks. It should be noted that due to the garbage and needles placed in the porta potties by users, the continued availability of these units from suppliers are at risk. There currently is no contingency plan if these services are no longer available.
6. The municipality will strengthen its collaborative initiatives with the province and service providers. The province has recently made significant investments within Shelter Nova Scotia to facilitate this. This will include an increased focus on intensive case management and data collection and management. It will also include a renewed commitment to coordinated access. This will allow better identification of shelter and housing options for people sleeping rough and more equitable delivery of services and supports. Improved data will also help all interest parties make better and evidence-based decisions.

7. HRM will create formal guidelines around encampment sites and seek opportunities to better manage some of the issues, such as waste and garbage.
8. While the municipality hoped to avoid more designated locations, the growth in the number of people in need of additional options has out paced the creation of those options. Due to the existing overcrowding, at designated locations and growth of encampments at non designated locations, the municipality will need to create additional designated locations, as a temporary measure, until options such as Pallet Shelters or other options are available.
9. Staff are creating a risk assessment tool which will help to prioritize who should be supported and required to move to a designated location in the short term while waiting for pending provincial shelter and temporary housing resources.

Long term adjustments to our approach to encampments:

1. While the municipality does not yet have the necessary infrastructure or resources to fully implement this approach, meaningful steps will be taken in the following direction. When people sleeping rough have suitable indoor options that they can access, the municipality will not permit the establishment of encampments. Similar to approaches taken in other jurisdictions, people will be allowed to set up a tent overnight in designated locations, but they must remove those items in the morning and leave the site.
2. Continue to close designated locations, as more shelter and housing becomes available.
3. The berms on University Avenue will be de-designated by the fall due to the high risk from snow and ice control.

Requiring People to Move

There are times when an encampment or individual people sleeping rough must move from their locations. For example, the 50+ community members staying at the Correctional Centre Park needed to relocate to create an opportunity to launch the tiny homes project, that will create new deeply affordable housing stock. There are also times where someone is sheltering in a non-designated location where they need to relocate to a designated location or accept a sheltering or temporary housing if they are able and willing to address this is need. There is also a rapid response process when someone has set up a tent or shelter in a prohibited location. As part of this work HRM staff visit encampment sites daily, identifying new residents as well as people who are in places where they are not permitted to be.

Regular Process

- It is determined or confirmed by the Director of Housing and Homelessness that a person or group of people need to leave a location, based on several factors including a risk assessment of the situation.
- Compliance Officers provide a notice to community members in these spaces with time to allow them to consider their options, connect with street navigators and service providers and explore options. The notice period varies depend on how many people need to move, their specific needs, the options available, and the level of risk that exists with that encampment.
- Service providers who work with the clients in this location are engaged so that they can help the person make a decision about where they are going to go.
- Over the notice period outreach workers regular connect with the impacted community members, offering information, moving and storage assistance. They also provide opportunities for people to tour shelters and temporary housing options that may be available.
- If community members choose not to move after the notice date staff continue to work to overcome what barriers exist to them accepting an alternative option and reiterate the requirement to move.
- Ultimately staff will close the site and require the person to move.
- If someone refuses to move from a site and there are no other options, staff will engage Halifax Regional Police or RCMP to assist with transition.

Rapid response protocol

- Upon discovering a tent or structure in a prohibited location a Compliance Officer will immediately issue a notice to vacate.
- Those notices provide the community member sheltering in the prohibited location 24 hours to leave the location.
- An outreach worker will connect with the person to offer moving support and direction to where they can transition to.
- The following day Compliance Officers will return to the location and ensure the person has left, or if additional assistance is required, help arrange that assistance.
- Should the person refuse to leave HRM will ask police to have a local Community Response Officer visit and ask the person to transition.
- If the person continues to refuse to leave the space HRM will engage Halifax Regional Police or RCMP to assist with transition.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are currently no financial implications. If Council wishes to increase the levels of services/require additional resources above the current budgeted amounts, a report will come back to identify those resources and their financial implications.

ATTACHMENTS

None

If the report is released to the public, a copy can be obtained by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 902.490.4210, or Fax 902.490.4208.

Report Prepared by: Max Chauvin, Director of Housing and Homelessness 902.456.7420
