




INFORMATION REPORT

TO:	Mayor and Members General Issues Committee
COMMITTEE DATE:	January 18, 2023
SUBJECT/REPORT NO:	Outcomes and Findings of the Encampment Facilitated Sessions (HSC23009) (City Wide) (Outstanding Business List Item)
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	City Wide
PREPARED BY:	Mike Jones (905) 546-2424 Ext. 3824
SUBMITTED BY:	Michelle Baird Director, Housing Services Division Healthy and Safe Communities Department
SIGNATURE:	

COUNCIL DIRECTION

Not Applicable

INFORMATION

On January 13, 2022, Motion 11.1 was moved and approved by the Emergency and Community Services Committee to address comprehensive, human-rights based, health-focused housing solutions for residents living encamped across Hamilton via solution-focused planning session(s) from a broad spectrum of community stakeholders, including people with lived experience, to identify comprehensive, human-rights based, health-focused housing solutions to directly address the needs of residents living encamped in Hamilton.

On July 20, 2022 a consultant-led, facilitated session was held with stakeholders across several sectors with expertise in housing, homelessness, encampments, and encampment response, to discuss systemic issues and their consequences, identify shared values, develop a shared short- and long-term vision, and to co-create a new approach to encampment response by identifying first steps, supports and potential barriers.

OUR Vision: To be the best place to raise a child and age successfully.

OUR Mission: To provide high quality cost conscious public services that contribute to a healthy, safe and prosperous community, in a sustainable manner.

OUR Culture: Collective Ownership, Steadfast Integrity, Courageous Change, Sensational Service, Engaged Empowered Employees.

Since June 2018, representatives from Housing Services Division (HSD) and various other City departments have met formally with stakeholders to increase collaboration in encampment response efforts. At the onset of COVID-19, City staff, homelessness serving agencies, outreach services and community based support programs met weekly as an opportunity to align available resources, assess and respond to potential health and safety risks, and facilitate person-centred engagement opportunities and individualized housing plans for people living in encampments through connections to community-based supports. HSD has continued to provide leadership, support, and expertise, working with other City departments and community stakeholders to improve and coordinate the City's response to encampments through consultation and partnerships with community stakeholders and people with lived experience. The Housing Services Division, working collaboratively with internal and external partners developed a people-centred approach to address the issues of encampments. Many of the issues and challenges noted through the facilitation sessions are issues underway within the HSD planning prior to the encampment sessions.

The community engagement sessions resulted in substantial feedback regarding systemic factors associated with encampments, as well as potential short-term solutions. Key issues highlighted included: the need for additional types of housing, housing stock, and deeper affordability; better coordination of housing, health, and criminal justice systems; requests for alternatives to the existing Parks By-law; improvements to emergency shelters and the alleviation of barriers to access; integrating the community, especially people with lived experience, into planning and response; and learning from other jurisdictions.

In tandem with the formal facilitated sessions, from July 25 to 29, 2022, City staff engaged with 57 individuals living, or having recently lived in encampments across Hamilton, exploring issues contributing to unsheltered homelessness, access to resources and services, and suggestions for how the City and community could improve their response to encampments.

People living in encampments highlighted their frustration with the existing Parks By-law and were clear about its negative impact on physical health, mental health, and their ability to access housing supports and other resources. Additionally, many were concerned with barriers that prevented them from accessing housing and/or emergency shelter. No clear alternatives were recommended, although an overwhelming majority of people living in encampments wanted to see a different approach taken that allowed for more stability and access to resources.

Recommendations were developed utilizing the concerns and solutions shared by stakeholders and people living in encampments. The following recommendations were synthesized by City Staff from the engagement sessions, and a review of best practice reports and work to date by Housing Services Division as solutions required to address

comprehensive, human-rights based, health-focused housing solutions to directly address the needs of residents living encamped in Hamilton.

1. Expand and improve coordination of supports for mental health and substance use
2. Expand the use of harm reduction approaches in emergency shelters, drop-ins, and outreach supports
3. Address barriers to accessing emergency shelter (e.g., people with pets, couples)
4. Explore new approaches to encampment response, utilizing best practices and successes in other jurisdictions
5. Engage with Indigenous partners to identify encampment-related interventions that are culturally appropriate and rooted in the spirit and actions of reconciliation
6. Improve coordination and collaboration of encampment response teams to more efficiently address needs of people living in encampments

A detailed set of encampment response action items were developed to address the recommendations identified and are attached in Appendix “B” to Report HSC23009. The action items are integrated into HSD’s encampment response program and progress will be reported to Council on an ongoing basis.

Background

On April 1, 2021, in Report HSC21008 Housing Focused Street Outreach, supervision of Hamilton’s Street Outreach Team, a team dedicated to providing housing-focused case management services and supports for individuals living unsheltered, was centralized to HSD to allow for enhanced alignment with the housing-focused goals and strategic actions outlined in Hamilton’s System Planning Framework. Housing-focused Street Outreach staff have participated in daily collaboration with other City departments in service and response planning, work directly with community stakeholders to identify resources and supports for people living in encampments, and bring forward the understandings of those with living experience of encampments to inform best practices.

On August 9, 2021, the Emergency and Community Services Committee approved the repealing of the By-law Enforcement Protocol that permitted some individuals to camp in public spaces for up to 14 days, and the City returned to pre-protocol enforcement of Parks By-law 01-291 that prohibits camping on City property, including park areas. Additionally, a six-step encampment response process was approved that defined roles and responsibilities of City departments associated with the response.

On January 13, 2022, Motion 11.1 was moved and approved by the Emergency and Community Services Committee. City staff were directed to host solution-focused

planning session(s) made up of representatives from the health sector, housing service providers, organizations that provide frontline support to the unhoused, people with lived experiences of being unhoused and living in encampments, and other community stakeholders to identify comprehensive, human-rights based, health-focused housing solutions to directly address the needs of residents living encamped in Hamilton.

On March 31, 2022, Council approved the creation of an Encampment Coordination Team to be piloted until the end of 2022 to: a) improve coordination of encampment response and streamline efforts of the many services involved; b) allow for existing Municipal Law Enforcement and Housing Service Division staff to focus on their core business; and, c) were directed to send all forthcoming reports related to encampments to the General Issues Committee.

In June 2022, a consultant from the organization Coueraj was selected to assist in planning, coordinating, and facilitating a consultation of community stakeholders in response to the Motion. A project team of City staff was developed to provide context and direction to the consultant and recommended stakeholders to be included. The team was comprised of staff from the Encampment Coordination Team and Housing Services Division, with support from Strategic Communications.

Simultaneous to the engagement sessions, the Housing Services Division has continued to engage with providers and community partners on solutions to encampments and homelessness. The Housing Services Division has engaged with cross-sectoral community stakeholders in several core community tables, including: Emergency Shelter Coordination Table, Hospital-Shelter Working Group, Coordinated Access Steering Committee, as well as connections with the Community Safety and Well-Being Advisory Committee and Greater Hamilton Health Network. Additionally, HSD has conducted outreach and engagement with sector leadership tables, and continues to work with Coalition of Hamilton Indigenous Leadership (CHIL) to develop partnerships and best practices for engaging with the Indigenous community. The City has committed to facilitating a comprehensive, whole-of-community approach to encampment response and is dedicated to working with stakeholders in the community and people with lived experience on issues towards accomplishing shared goals.

Consultation Process

(I) Community Stakeholders

On July 20, 2022, 35 representative stakeholders were engaged virtually via WebEx by consultant(s) to develop a shared understanding of the issues associated with encampments and encampment response approaches, and to consider potential next steps to be taken by the City and community towards developing a coordinated, person-centred, health and housing focused approach to encampment response.

The session included representatives across several sectors, including: frontline responders; service providers in the community health care, emergency shelter, housing, drop-in, mental health, substance use and concurrent case management fields; stakeholders in the social planning, research, and advocacy sectors; Hamilton Police Services; and City staff from various departments and divisions including Housing Services Division, Municipal Law Enforcement, Hamilton Paramedic Service, and Public Health.

Stakeholders were assigned to one of five breakout groups where a facilitator led discussions on systemic issues of homelessness and their consequences, worked to identify shared values amongst stakeholders, developed a shared short- and long-term vision, and co-created a new approach by identifying first steps, supports, and potential barriers. All responses were captured and recorded by the consultants in real-time and shared as raw data with the project team.

Following the virtual session with stakeholders, a questionnaire was sent to all participants, in attempt to provide an additional opportunity to share information regarding the themes outlined.

A second questionnaire was sent to evaluate the effectiveness of the virtual session, and stakeholders were given an additional opportunity to provide feedback on encampment response, as well as ways they would like to be engaged moving forward.

Feedback received from both questionnaires was incorporated into the development of encampment response recommendations.

(II) People living in Encampments

The project team established to support the consultant was maintained to develop a strategy toward engaging with people living in encampments.

In developing a research tool to receive feedback from people living in encampments, the project team consulted with the lead researcher from the Hamilton Alliance for Tiny Shelters (HATS) who had recently completed qualitative work with Hamilton's unsheltered population. Findings from HATS were incorporated into the development of the City's engagement process, as well as its feedback tool.

The research tool used to engage with people living in encampments incorporated several components. The first section included closed-ended demographic questions. The second section was comprised of open-ended questions exploring issues contributing to unsheltered homelessness, access to resources and services, and suggestions for how the City and community could improve their response to encampments. The third section included a series of rating scale questions meant to

establish satisfaction with a number of issues related to encampments and encampment response.

From July 25 to 29, 2022, City staff engaged with 57 individuals living, or having recently lived in encampments across Hamilton. The engagement was led by Housing-focused Street Outreach, as they had developed previous relationships with many of the people living in encampments and were experienced in collecting sensitive information. They were supported by staff from the Housing Services Division and the Encampment Coordination Team who took notes and completed administrative tasks.

(III) What We Heard

In August 2022, the raw data from the stakeholder consultation was presented by the consultant to City staff. Additionally, City staff also compiled raw data from the interviews conducted with people who lived in encampments. The raw data was compiled and analysed to identify salient themes to be developed into recommendations.

The following are themes identified by stakeholders in the community via the July 20, 2022 facilitated sessions:

- Increased focus on eviction prevention and shelter diversion is required, to prevent people from entering into homelessness.
- Lack of affordable, subsidized, and/or supportive housing available to people experiencing homelessness.
- Better coordination of systems (e.g. health, criminal justice, and housing) required to address gaps in service provision and prevent people from entering into homelessness.
- Negative impacts of Parks By-law on stakeholders, as people in encampments move to more remote and inconspicuous areas, it becomes more difficult to ensure service continuity.
- Alternatives to existing Parks By-law that are more person-centred are required.
- Alternative shelter service models, notably harm reduction-friendly approaches are required to incentivize people to move indoors.
- Encampment response solutions should better utilize existing strengths in non-profit sector in response to encampments.
- Solutions to encampment response should utilize a whole-of-community approach.
- Targeted strategies and/or supports should be introduced for overrepresented groups (e.g. 2SLGBTQ+ and Indigenous peoples).
- People living in encampments should be included in developing solutions, as they have unique expertise.

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- City should utilize the successes of other jurisdictions when developing encampment response strategies.
- City should align encampment response with existing City strategies regarding homelessness and poverty reduction.
- Frustration with a perceived lack of accountability and/or action on homelessness and housing-related issues.

The following are themes identified by people living, or having recently lived in encampments via the July 25 to 29, 2022 engagement:

- People living in encampments experience difficulty maintaining and acquiring housing, notably due to affordability issues, insufficient income, and discrimination.
- Negative impacts of Parks By-law on physical and mental health of people living in encampments, as well as on their ability to attend appointments in community.
- Access to necessary resources to address basic needs is more difficult for unsheltered people when living in encampment, particularly under the context of the existing by-law that requires ongoing movement.
- Barriers to accessing emergency shelter exist that limit unsheltered people with pets, in a couple, or use substances and have harm reduction needs.
- A frustration with the current approach to encampments exists, leading to a belief that the struggles of living unsheltered were not understood.
- No clear consensus on what approach to replace current bylaw with. Irrespective of the approach, there was a preference for services to be easily accessible and a need for a consistent space to stay in.

More detailed information regarding 'What we Heard' is available in Appendix "A" to Report HSC23009.

Recommendations

City staff from the Encampment Coordination Team compiled, reviewed, and analysed data from each consultation and organized the data into themes and recommendations that highlighted the breadth of information shared by both stakeholders and people living in encampments.

On September 20, 2022, a follow-up session was conducted virtually with stakeholders to review the findings of the consultations and ensure the voice of the community was accurately represented in the recommendations. Stakeholders were also offered an opportunity to share written feedback via a questionnaire.

Feedback from the virtual follow-up session and written feedback from the questionnaire was used to finalize recommendations. Additional stakeholders who were unable to

attend the initial virtual facilitated session nor the follow-up session reached out individually to discuss encampment response and provide feedback on the draft recommendations.

There were several systemic issues affecting housing and homelessness raised within the consultations, relating to available housing stock, affordability, intergovernmental approaches to change, and advocacy. While all of these are vital to addressing homelessness, many suggestions required several levers of action and immediate benefits may not be experienced by people living in encampments. Due to the urgency of response required, and because other teams within Housing Services Division are better positioned and already prioritizing a systemic response to housing and homelessness, these items were deemed to be out of scope for the Encampment Coordination Team.

The following recommendations emerged as solutions to address comprehensive, human-rights based, health-focused housing solutions to directly address the needs of residents living encamped in Hamilton. Each recommendation is directly attributable to the concerns and solutions shared by stakeholders and people living in encampments. The City has been engaged in encampment response efforts for several years, and the experiences and expertise of staff have also been taken into account in the development of these recommendations.

1. Expand and improve coordination of supports for mental health and substance use.
2. Expand the use of harm reduction approaches in emergency shelters, drop-ins, and outreach supports.
3. Address barriers to accessing emergency shelter (e.g. people with pets, couples).
4. Explore new approaches to encampment response, utilizing best practices and successes in other jurisdictions.
5. Engage with Indigenous partners to identify encampment-related interventions that are culturally appropriate and rooted in the spirit and actions of reconciliation.
6. Improve coordination and collaboration of encampment response teams to more efficiently address needs of people living in encampments.

A detailed set of encampment response action items (attached in Appendix “B” to Report HSC23009) were developed using feedback from community stakeholders including people with lived experience, and informed by best practices identified by experts and successful approaches used in other communities. The encampment response action items are integrated into HSD’s encampment response program. HSD is committed to reporting back on its progress, and HSD staff will continue their efforts toward providing a coordinated, person-centered response to encampments.

APPENDICES AND SCHEDULES ATTACHED

Appendix "A" to Report HSC23009: What We Heard: Detailed Feedback

Appendix "B" to Report HSC23009: Encampment Response Action Items