

REPORT

Climate Action, Planning and Development

To: Mayor Johnstone and Members of
Council

Date: April 8, 2024

From: Jackie Teed, Director,
Climate Action, Planning and
Development

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Item #: 2024-176

Subject: Crises Response Pilot Project Update

RECOMMENDATION

That Council direct staff to provide a further update in Q3 2024.

PURPOSE

This report is to provide Council with an update on the progress and key developments of the Crises Response Pilot Project.

SUMMARY

New Westminster, similar to other municipalities in Metro Vancouver and the Province, is facing the three related crises of homelessness, mental health and substance use. The City has been active in addressing the externalities related to these crises; however, it has become apparent that a new approach is necessary if real progress is to be made and if costs are to be shifted from the City to the senior levels of government, which have jurisdiction for them.

As a result, the City is launching the Crises Response Pilot Project. This pilot project is based on best practices and lessons learned from other municipalities that are advancing proactive, responsive and strategic organizational approaches to addressing the three crises of homelessness, mental health and substance use.

The pilot project includes the establishment of the following three inter-departmental teams: a **Crises Response Team** which will be responsible for addressing community complaints and requests and prioritizing support to those who are experiencing

homelessness and living with mental health or substance use issues; an **Operations Support Team** which will assist the above cited team in addressing the externalities associated with the three crises; and a **Policy Development and Advocacy Team** which will advocate to the senior levels of government for additional funding, resources and support to sustainability address the three crises. Regarding advocacy related actions, they include a 24/7 shelter, a health connect and resources centre, and additional supportive housing.

The City has made substantial progress towards launching the pilot project, including:

- advancing retaining and training the new staff who will comprise the Crises Response Team, with the remaining staff actively being recruited;
- commencing consultation with business and resident associations, starting with the those located in the Downtown, and faith-based and non-profit organizations;
- engaging the Medical Health Officer, Royal Columbian Hospital, and Fraser Health Authority
- developing terms of reference for two working groups – i.e., one to inform the implementation of the pilot project and one to support advocacy activities;
- retaining an Indigenous owned and led planning consultant, Sanala Planning, to inform all facets of the pilot project to ensure that it is culturally-appropriate and responsive to the needs of Indigenous peoples, given that this population has been significantly impacted by the three crises given the legacy of colonialism and residential schools;
- engaging with the senior levels of government on advocacy actions, including related to a 24/7 shelter, a health connect and resource centre, and additional supportive housing;
- preparing a communications strategy to raise awareness, facilitate engagement and build support for the pilot project and related advocacy actions;
- working with an external evaluator, including developing benchmarks and indicators, which will be essential to documenting progress in addressing the three crises and realizing sustainable funding and resources.

The City is looking to be in a position to fully launch the pilot project in mid-June or early-July 2024.

BACKGROUND

Current Situation

New Westminster, similar to other municipalities in Metro Vancouver and the Province, is facing the three crises of homelessness, mental health and substance use. These crises are complex and inter-related and all fall under the jurisdiction of the senior levels of government. They are also impacting the community in a number of ways, including through the suffering of those directly affected and those who are dealing with the associated externalities. Additionally, the crises are straining City resources, impacting staff health and safety, and contributing to community complaints.

Current Responses

In response to these crises, the City developed a *Downtown Livability Strategy* and established a Downtown Livability Working Group, which comprised representation from all City departments. Since the strategy's development in 2022, the City has undertaken the following actions:

- conducting daily patrols of parks and public spaces with regard to encampments and sheltering;
- contracting bio-hazardous waste collection and disposal services and working with BC Housing on the installation of a 24/7 sanitation trailer;
- focusing additional attention and resources on the Downtown, particularly related to clean-up and maintenance of public spaces;
- increased shelter capacity and working with the senior levels of government on the development of 52 units of supportive housing at 68 Sixth Street;
- working with the Canadian Mental Health Association and the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions on the establishment of Peer Assisted Care Team, which assists residents, including the unsheltered, dealing with a mental health crisis;
- accessing senior government funding for initiatives such as the I's on the Street Micro-Street Cleaning Program, which provides supported employment and contributes to enhanced cleanliness in three neighbourhoods;
- animating and energizing the Downtown through the staging of activities, events and festivals.

Despite these efforts and given the complexity of the three crises, the City realized that a more comprehensive, city-wide approach is needed, which includes dedicated, resourced and trained staff and which is more responsive to the needs of businesses and residents. The City also realized that it needs to significantly enhance advocacy with the senior levels of government to cover its costs related to the three crises and to expand faith-based, non-profit and provincial capacity and resources in addressing them. This is the impetus for the Crises Response Pilot Project.

Crises Response Pilot Project

The Crises Response Pilot Project is based on best practices and lessons learned from other municipalities that are advancing proactive, responsive and strategic organizational approaches to addressing the three crises of homelessness, mental health and substance use. It comprises the following three inter-departmental teams:

- **Crises Response Team** – will be responsible for addressing community complaints and requests; prioritizing support to those who are experiencing homelessness, mental health and substance use issues; and coordinating, responding and providing referrals to faith-based, non-profit and provincial service organizations and teams.

- **Operations Support Team** – will comprise staff from Engineering Operations, Integrated Services and Parks and will play a supportive role to the Crises Response Team in addressing the externalities associated with the three crises.
- **Policy Development and Advocacy Team** – will advocate to the senior levels of government for additional funding, resources and supports to sustainably address the issues, needs and gaps associated with the three crises.

Key to the success of the pilot project will be enhanced relations with provincial bodies that have primary responsibility for addressing the three crises, along with the realization of a 24/7 shelter; a health connect and resource centre which will address the needs of the daytime unsheltered population; and additional supportive housing.

Given the over-representation of Indigenous peoples experiencing homelessness and living with mental health or substance use issues, which is a legacy of colonialism and residential schools, the City is engaging Sanala Planning, which is an Indigenous-owned and led organization to inform all facets of the pilot project. The City will also be engaging with First Nations and Indigenous organizations and peoples to ensure that facilities, services and supports are culturally appropriate and responsive to their needs.

RECRUITMENT UPDATE

The following Crises Response Team positions have been retained or are in the process of being recruited:

Positions (8)	Hired	Active Recruitment in Progress
Manager of Homelessness Services	✓	
Livability Supervisor	✓	
Outreach Worker (first)	✓	
Encampment Safety Officer		✓
Outreach Worker (second)		✓
Homelessness Services Planning Analyst		✓
Policy Development and Advocacy Planning Analyst		✓
Data Analyst (half-time position)		✓
Crisis Response Communications Coordinator		✓

CRISES RESPONSE TEAM UPDATE

The Livability Supervisor and first Outreach Worker are hired and working. Cross training, relationship building, and community orientation is underway. The two team-members are now available to respond to the needs of our community, both through proactively being in the field, and in response to communications from housed residents and/or businesses. As the other staff and components of the pilot project, outlined above and below, come on-line, the activity of the Crises Response Team will be expanded.

ENGAGEMENT UPDATE

Associations and Bodies

City staff have prepared a listing of associations and bodies in which to conduct preliminary consultation. These associations or bodies were selected because they are located in the Downtown, which is the neighbourhood that is most impacted by the three crises, or have a mandate to address the three crises.

City staff met and engaged with the Economic Development Advisory Committee on November 23, 2023. The committee was receptive to the pilot project and some of its members expressed interest in participating in the project or as a working group participant.

In November 2023 City Staff met and engaged with the Medical Health Officer, the Royal Columbian Hospital Medical Directors, the Northwest Division of Family practice, Fraser Health Authority's Division of Mental Health and Substance Use and Fraser Health Authorities Division of Toxic Drug Response and Priority Populations. All of these organizations expressed their support for the project, some offering letters of support and some offering recommendations for project design or operations (See Attachments 1 and 2).

City staff met with the Board of the New Westminster Homelessness Coalition Society on February 8, 2024. The Coalition represents about 20 faith-based and non-profit organizations with a mandate to address homelessness. The Board was receptive to the pilot-project and pledged its support with regard to assisting with its implementation, including raising awareness and participation among its membership.

City staff will be meeting with the Downtown Residents' Association on April 3, 2024 and with the New Westminster Chamber of Commerce and the Downtown New Westminster Business Improvement Association, in a joint session, on April 12, 2024. The purpose of these meetings will be to provide an update on the pilot project with specific reference to addressing the externalities or impacts of the three crises. It will also be an opportunity to discuss ways for businesses and residents to engage in the pilot project, including related to the two working groups.

Working Groups

City staff have developed draft terms of references for two working groups related to the pilot project, which are under review with Sanala Planning.

The Implementation Working Group will have the following responsibilities and will be comprised of representatives from Indigenous, faith-based, non-profit and provincial organizations and teams mandated to address the three crises. It will also comprise people with lived or living experience related to the three crises.

- to ensure that the project is culturally-appropriate, trauma-informed and responsive to a diverse range of needs;
- to facilitate connections, collaboration and referrals between the Crises Response Team and Indigenous, faith-based, non-profit and provincial organizations and teams;
- to inform project refinements based on feedback from those accessing services and supports related to the three crises.

The Engagement and Advocacy Support Working Group will have the following responsibilities and will be comprised of representatives from the City and business and resident associations.

- to support advocacy activities related to the three crises;
- to communicate the concerns of businesses and residents related to the three crises and to inform how the project and advocacy activities can best respond to them;
- to identify a role for and gain the support of businesses and residents in advocacy activities related to the three crises.

ADVOCACY ACTIONS

24/7 Shelter, Health Connect and Resource Centre and Supportive Housing

With regard to the advocacy actions, which include a 24/7 shelter, a health connect and resource centre and additional supportive housing, the City has assembled an inter-departmental team; retained project management services; and developed a project charter. The City has also met with BC Housing, the Fraser Health Authority and the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions with regard to these three actions, plus others. All three bodies appear receptive to further exploring these actions, and better understanding their potential involvement in their development, funding and operation.

Reaching Home Grant

The City has applied for a Reaching Home Program grant to develop a vision, concept, design, program and cost estimate for the previously referenced health connect and resource centre. This centre or hub will address the needs of the daytime unsheltered population, which numbers about 120 people. It will have a health and wellness focus and will address hygiene and sanitation needs, including access to laundry facilities

showers and toilets; provide meal programming and nutritional advice; accommodate provincial outreach teams; offer primary care and substance use services; and provide resource information, navigation assistance, referral services and outreach support. It will be culturally appropriate and responsive to a wide array of needs, with an emphasis on Indigenous peoples and racialized community members.

The City has also provided a letter of support to the Lower Mainland Purpose Society with regard to its application for a Reaching Home Program grant. Purpose Society is proposing to fund two full-time shelter outreach and identification replacement workers to support the needs of the daytime unsheltered population while work progresses on realizing the health connect and resource centre. This outreach will not only significantly benefit this population but the learnings, including related to needs and gaps, will inform the centre's vision, concept, design and program.

Senior staff is also actively advocating to senior government to offset the costs of the Crises Response Team components of the pilot project.

INDEPENDENT EVALUATION

In the event that senior levels of government provide financial resources to this pilot project it is expected that it will be independently evaluated to assess the project's value and transferability to other communities. Continuous evaluation will provide insight and allow the project to be responsive and adapt as new knowledge and learnings become available or as the needs of the community change.

City Staff have engaged potential academic institutions to identify qualified faculty staff to serve on an Evaluation Advisory Committee. This committee will recommend a logic model for study design that includes appropriate qualitative and quantitative evaluation criteria and a process for evaluation. The external Evaluation Advisory Committee will oversee and assist with determining appropriate evaluation criteria, conducting the data collection, the pilot project evaluation and reporting the results of the evaluation. Formal detailed reporting of the evaluation will be provided at one year and at the completion of the project.

Additional appropriate evaluation metrics will be collected continuously throughout the project to be used by the project working groups, staff, the Policy Development and Advocacy Team and pilot project leadership to inform policy, project direction, refinements, resources allocation and advocacy efforts as new information is learned and the needs of those impacted by these crises change throughout the project.

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

Three audiences for the Crisis Response Pilot Project have been identified: the public, internal staff, and external partners. A comprehensive communications plan is being developed to ensure all three audiences are well-informed on the details and progress of the Pilot; the plan will outline the unique needs and communication opportunities of each audience, and identify the optimal print and digital methods for reaching them.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON

The Crises Response Pilot Project includes representation from a number of City departments, including but not limited to: Economic Development, Engineering, Human Resources, Fire and Rescue Services, Office of the CAO, Parks, Planning and Development, and Police.

OPTIONS

The following options are presented for Council's consideration:

1. That Council direct staff to provide a further update in Q3 2024.
2. That Council provide other direction.

Staff recommends option 1.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Royal Columbian Hospital Letter of Support

Attachment 2: Fraser Northwest Division of Family Practice Letter of Support

APPROVALS

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