



## The Corporation of the District of Saanich

# Report

**To:** Mayor and Council

**From:** Michael Kaye, Fire Chief

**Date:** December 6, 2024

**Subject:** Extreme Winter Weather Planning and Response

**File:**

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### RECOMMENDATIONS

That Council receive this report for information and direct staff to:

- a. Explore opportunities to expand existing shelter services in the District;
- b. Work with Broadview United Church to advance its objective of establishing extreme weather shelter bed opportunities and work towards issuing a request to other District non-profit service providers that may be interested in providing similar services in the community;
- c. Work with neighbouring municipalities to gather and share information about approaches that will inform potential options for the District and advance coordination where possible.

### PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to provide Council with information regarding the District of Saanich's planning and response strategies for extreme winter weather and to seek guidance from Council on next steps.

To facilitate timely reporting to Council, this report focuses on extreme winter weather challenges and not issues related to summer weather (which can be the subject of future reporting).

### BACKGROUND

At its meeting of November 25, 2024, Council direct staff to report back on:

- The responsibilities of Saanich under the Emergency and Disaster Management Act (EDMA) and Assistance to Shelter Act, particularly as it relates to extreme weather, including for vulnerable people; and
- Requirements to create additional shelter spaces and/or a warming centre in Saanich including opportunities with the Ministry of Emergency Management and Climate Readiness (EMCR).

## Saanich Responsibilities under EDMA

Under EDMA, all governments in BC have legislated responsibilities to establish plans to prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies in their jurisdiction. To fulfill this responsibility, Saanich maintains an Emergency Response Plan (ERP) that provides operational guidance for coordinating actions in major emergencies and disasters that may arise from all hazards threatening the District and the community. Saanich's ERP was developed to align with the updated EDMA.

EDMA 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.” The act provides the legislated framework for local authorities, outlining their responsibilities in establishing emergency programs. Specifically, it mandates that local authorities develop preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery plans for any hazards that may impact their jurisdiction.

EDMA provides direction to local authorities in relation to what must be included in their emergency management plans. The act requires local authorities to include in their plans a description of measures to mitigate any adverse effects of an emergency on individuals who may experience intersectional disadvantage and vulnerable individuals, animals, places or things. The District's ERP outlines response objectives that specifically include strategies and tactics to assist agencies supporting vulnerable populations, particularly those facing intersectional disadvantage and threats to cultural safety.

## Saanich Responsibilities Under the Assistance to Shelter Act

Under the Assistance to Shelter Act, a community representative may issue an extreme weather alert when extreme weather conditions exist. In our region, the Provincial designated extreme weather thresholds are as follows:

- Environment Canada has declared or has forecasted, for the next 24-hour period, a temperature of -4° Celsius or lower as the lowest temperature for that period; or,
- Environment Canada has declared or has forecasted, for the next 24-hour period, a temperature of 0° Celsius or lower as the lowest temperature for that period and has issued a weather warning.

The Act was created as a tool to support law enforcement officers to assist people experiencing homelessness to access safe spaces during extreme weather events. Currently Saanich (Police and Saanich Emergency Program, SEP) receives EWR alerts from the Salvation Army, serving as the community representative for the 2024-2025 winter season. The Minister (Housing and Municipal Affairs) also has the authority to issue an alert in certain circumstances. Once the alert has been issued, police officers may request a person at risk seek either: a) an emergency shelter, or b) any other accommodation that would protect the person at risk from the extreme weather conditions.

Under the Assistance to Shelter Act, the primary responsibilities of the District of Saanich are conducted by Saanich Police. These responsibilities include receiving EWR alerts, conducting proactive check-ins with the unhoused and providing transportation to shelters as necessary.

## DISCUSSION

### Requirements for Additional Shelter Spaces and/or Warming Centre in Saanich

Warming centres and EWR shelters have different requirements as they are different services (as will be discussed below). That said, there are some shared requirements to add spaces of either type in the District:

- A funding source
- A service provider or staffing
- A suitable facility.

At this stage, and given current staffing levels at the District, one of the best opportunities to add spaces in either category is to work with a third-party community organization that is positioned to provide a facility and staffing, coupled with funding from provincial programs to support the operation. Present opportunities will be highlighted below following a brief discussion of the distinction between EWR shelters and warming centres and some background of both in the District.

#### *EWR Shelters*

The BC Housing Extreme Weather Response (EWR) Program began operating in the Capital Region in 2007 to support the provision of emergency shelter spaces. Funded provincially, the program initially adopted a regional planning approach to identify service providers (existing shelter sites) that would expand capacity during extreme weather events. Since its inception, and for many years afterward, this program was primarily carried out between the City of Victoria and the District of Saanich, as BC Housing required participation from at least two municipalities to qualify for funding to support a Regional EWR Coordinator. This coordinator was responsible for overseeing the activation, notification and other administrative functions associated with these sites, including compiling a consolidated service provider list with key metrics such as occupancy capacity and vacancy levels.

Due to disruptions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, the regional approach to the EWR program has since transitioned to an independent model. While an EWR Coordinator is still appointed, this role is no longer a temporary, regionally hired position. Instead, it is now filled by a member of a non-governmental organization, who is responsible for notifying partners and first responders when activation criteria are met (i.e., when shelters are activated and available).

As of the 2024/2025 winter season, 21 communities across the province have designated EWR shelter beds, including Delta, Nanaimo and Victoria. All 21 communities identify their EWR community leads as service providers such as the Governing Council of the Salvation Army or The Homelessness Service Association of BC. Notably, no local governments are serving as EWR community leads.

In Saanich, the Victoria Native Friendship Centre (VNFC) served as an active EWR site, participating in the regional EWR model, until the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020. From 2021 to 2023, VNFC operated as a seasonal shelter, open nightly from November to March. In November 2023, VNFC transitioned to a year-round nightly shelter, increasing Saanich's shelter bed capacity to a total of 33 mats, including 25 nightly mats, 5 extreme weather mats and 3 emergency mats.

### *Warming Centres*

Separate from the EWR program outlined above, a warming centre is a response measure that can be activated by a local authority when necessary. A warming centre is a temporary, low-barrier drop-in space established as a life-safety measure during periods of extreme cold (based on Assistance to Shelter Act temperature thresholds of -4\* or lower and/or during active winter warnings). Warming centres offer a safe, warm and dry refuge with access to washroom facilities, seating, snacks and refreshments. There are no sleeping areas provided.

The lobbies and common areas of District recreation facilities and Greater Victoria Public Library facilities located in the District are open and available for use during daytime operational hours to provide warming space for those needing it (subject to the codes of conduct and operational requirements for those facilities). Using recreation facilities beyond operational hours is not recommended as the facilities do not have the infrastructure to provide necessary care and services to support unhoused populations and because the use is incompatible with existing programming. A brief review of locations of warming centres in other communities reinforces this perspective on incompatibility in use: warming centres are most often provided through other community building and non-profit spaces that include key fixtures and equipment as well as robust staffing to ensure community impacts are minimized.

### *Critical Difference Between EWR & Warming Centres*

It is critical to emphasize that the BC Housing EWR program is provincially funded and accessible to all municipalities and individuals within the unhoused community, regardless of where they primarily reside. In contrast, warming centres are activated by specific local authorities as part of their emergency planning and response frameworks. These centres are often intended for residents of the local community and are driven by hazard and risk profiles, which are regularly reviewed and maintained as a part of ongoing emergency planning efforts.

### *Public Safety Lifeline Volunteers*

While SEP maintains a volunteer base that can activate and staff a comfort centre for residents temporarily displaced by an EMCR-designated eligible emergency (e.g., Quadra Street evacuation on November 20, 2024), these volunteers are not adequately trained to work in centres that support the unhoused population.

EMCR sets the parameters for where and when Public Safety Lifeline Volunteers (PSLV) can be utilized, ensuring their health and safety. However, EMCR does not provide liability coverage, Worksafe coverage, safety support or funding for PSLV volunteers to work directly in a warming centre with the unhoused population, due to the unique challenges and specialized training required for such roles.

### *Opportunities*

As noted above, one of the best immediate opportunities for the District to add spaces in either category is ongoing work with third-party community organizations.

Staff have been discussing opportunities with two community organizations: Broadview United Church (Broadview, located at 3703 St. Aidan's St.) and the Victoria Native Friendship Centre (VNFC, 231 Regina Ave.).

Broadview is interested in setting up and operating an EWR shelter at its church facility. VNFC is well-established in the District and already provides shelter and emergency shelter spaces. Staff have been in communication with both groups to explore ways the District can assist in establishing a new EWR shelter (in the case of Broadview) or expansion of existing programs (in the case of VNFC).

Staff are seeking direction from Council to continue working with community organizations to deliver additional shelter or warming spaces in the District, including inviting any additional interested organizations to assist in providing solutions. As discussions are in early stages, we are not in a position to report on the full range of implications or needs associated with the opportunities being explored. If this direction is provided by Council, staff will continue this work and report back to Council as necessary and as appropriate in relation to items that would require Council approval or direction, such as funding or location (if required).

Staff are also proposing to continue evaluating opportunities that are internal to the District, including the possible use of facilities and the implications associated with becoming involved in staffing. While this would be an entirely new area for the District (and therefore does not present as a short-term or immediate solution), there are opportunities to learn from other municipalities that have direct experience and lessons learned to share that could inform our understanding of the challenges and possibilities in the broader context of municipal service delivery. While staff have already been in communication with other municipalities, the District would benefit from additional and ongoing sharing of approaches and implications associated with what has already been successful (or not) in other communities.

## **COUNCIL OPTIONS**

1. That Council adopt the recommendation outlined in this staff report.
2. That Council receive this report for information.
3. That Council provide alternate direction to staff.

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Through BC Housing and EMCR, some provincial funding is available to support EWR shelter spaces and/or warming centres as follows:

### BC Housing EWR:

The EWR program funds community-based services to provide additional emergency shelter spaces during extreme winter weather, which poses a threat to the health and safety of individuals who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The program is designed to fund temporary, time-limited additional shelter spaces that can be activated during extreme weather to offer a safe space for anyone who wants to come inside.

If a service provider has a BC Housing approved EWR plan in place and meets the following criteria, the following expenses are eligible for funding:

Criteria:

- Costs incurred due to an Extreme Weather Response;
- Would have not otherwise been incurred; and
- Are identified in the approved nightly budget as part of the service provider's EWR plan.

Eligible Expenses:

- Shelter staff costs including reasonable volunteer recognition or honorarium if shelter staff includes volunteers
- Food costs
- Cleaning and laundry costs
- Client transportation to and from Extreme Weather Shelters (e.g.: bus tickets)
- First Aid Supplies

EMCR Warming Centres:

Local authorities can request incremental reimbursement when Environment and Climate Change Canada issues an Extreme Heat or Cold Emergency, or Heat or Cold warnings, to support a community's response. As a result, local authorities and Indigenous governing bodies may request task numbers for eligible emergency response costs. It is critical to note:

- Costs will not be reimbursed if they are already covered by the BC Housing EWR Program; and
- EMCR will only support the establishment of warming centres if all existing community and BC Housing shelter resources, including EWR, are at capacity.

If the criteria are met, EMCR will issue a task number on a case-by-case basis to ensure the health or safety of vulnerable individuals or families. Approval will cover incremental costs associated with setting up warming centres, including overtime expenses for staff, overtime for community partner organizations, cultural support, and other related costs, as detailed in EMCR's Eligibility Assessment for Extreme Weather Emergencies. The regular wages of any staff are not covered by EMCR to activate a warming center.

Implications to the District of Saanich:

There is no budget associated with the District's support of additional sheltering opportunities. The District could provide a coordinating role through existing staff resources to assist a third-party provider coordinate support through BC Housing. It should be noted, however, that even coordinating next steps does strain existing resource as workplans are full and deployed. The larger urban centres that have been proactive in coordinating homelessness response typically do so through social planners on staff (working in coordination with other internal departments and resources) to advance the work. If Council provides direction to work with the community partners noted above, staff will get a better understanding of resource requirements and responsibilities and can report back to Council regarding future needs and any implications for 2025 budget discussions.

**CONCLUSION**

It is crucial to carefully consider the distinctions and challenges between warming centres and EWR shelter sites to make an informed decision that best supports Saanich's unhoused population during an extreme cold weather emergency. The District faces significant operational challenges in establishing and managing these facilities, notably due to resource limitations, the

need for appropriately trained staff and/or volunteers and the parameters set by provincial frameworks and legislation. Collaborative efforts with community partners may provide a feasible path forward through leveraging existing provincial funding resources, community facilities and experienced service providers to add additional spaces in the District.

Prepared by: Captain Erin Stockill, Emergency Program Officer

Reviewed by: Brock Henson, Deputy Fire Chief/Emergency Program Coordinator

Approved by: Michael Kaye, Fire Chief

**ADMINISTRATOR'S COMMENTS:**

I endorse the recommendation from the Fire Chief.

Brent Reems, Chief Administrative Officer