

The logo for the City of Edmonton, featuring the word "Edmonton" in white text on a dark blue rectangular background.A thin vertical blue line on the left side of the page, extending from the top of the text area to the bottom.

# **City of Edmonton Emergency Shelter Best Practices Guide 2024**

Last updated: July 22, 2024  
Affordable Housing & Homelessness,  
Social Development, Community Services

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## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the traditional land on which Edmonton sits, the Territory of the Treaty 6 First Nations and the homelands of the Métis people. We would like to acknowledge and thank the diverse Indigenous peoples whose ancestors' footsteps have marked this territory for centuries such as: Cree, Dene, Saulteaux, Nakota Sioux, Blackfoot, as well as the Métis and the Inuit.

## A Note on Language

Administration's goal is to use respectful, dignified, and accurate language when discussing a person or family's housing situation. Administration uses the term homelessness to describe a lack of housing in order to align with a standardised definition and participate in local, provincial and national benchmarking activities that track progress on the issue. However, we recognize that individuals who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness may prefer different language and will treat preferred terms as interchangeable to respect individual choice.

*Administration's intention to use person-first language and to characterise houselessness, homelessness, or unhoused as a temporary condition that does not define an individual's identity.*

Individuals accessing emergency shelters services can be referred to by a number of titles, including "client", "participant", "guest", etc. The majority of shelter sites in Edmonton refer to persons accessing the site as "guest", so this Guide will also refer to those individuals as "guests".

## Participants

The City of Edmonton thanks individuals from the following governments, organisations and groups who participated in the engagement to update the City of Edmonton's 2021 Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards into the 2024 Emergency Shelter Best Practices Guide that it is today:

- Alberta Health Services
- Al Rashid Mosque
- Canadian Shelter Transformation Network
- Catholic Social Services
- Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations
- Edmonton Police Services
- Enterprise 203 Holdings LP O'Chiese First Nation
- E4C (Women's Emergency Accommodation Centre)
- Homeward Trust Edmonton

- Hope Mission
- Indigenous Housing Collective, End Poverty Edmonton
- Interfaith Housing Coalition
- Mustard Seed
- NiGiNan Housing Ventures
- Native Counseling Services of Alberta and Enoch WÎHCIHAW  
MASKOKAMIK SOCIETY
- Sage Seniors Association
- Salvation Army
- WIN House
- Women's Advisory Voice of Edmonton Committee
- Youth Agency Collaboration
- Youth Empowerment and Support Services
- 24/7 Crisis Diversion Monthly Meeting, REACH Edmonton
- City of Edmonton staff

## Executive Summary

The City of Edmonton's Emergency Shelter Best Practices Guide is an update to the City of Edmonton's Minimum Emergency Shelter Standard.

Engagement feedback provided clear direction that the City should move from a "Standard" to a "Best Practices Guide" in recognition of the City's close proximity to the local shelter response while at the same time acknowledging that the City lacks authority or responsibility over shelter development and operations. The City's role in emergency shelters is clarified in Objective Three of the City of Edmonton Housing and Homelessness Services Plan.<sup>1</sup> "The City supports the development of Community Plan interim housing program targets and continuous improvement of emergency shelter services" and it offers the following actions to achieve this objective:

*There is a difference between how many people should be in a shelter during "normal" conditions and emergency conditions*

*3.3 In collaboration with the Government of Alberta and relevant service providers, update the City of Edmonton's Minimum Emergency Shelter Standards every three years as a best practice tool to help emergency shelter providers identify and adopt recommended improvements for the delivery of emergency shelter services*

*3.4 Continue to work with Government of Alberta and community stakeholders to proactively identify solutions for potential system capacity limitations, such as with day/emergency shelter services and bridge housing*

This Guide is designed to be aspirational in nature; providing advice and guidance to existing and future emergency shelters to improve the shelter experience for guests. The City of Edmonton recognizes that funding and available resources may limit a shelter site's ability to achieve all elements.

Beyond the change in title, there are a number of updates to the Guide from the previous Standard that will support the continuous improvement activities of shelter service providers. Primarily:

- The introduction of a Service Approach section, designed to help shelter operators identify who they are going to serve in response to the changing demographics of shelter users and increasing complexity of need present in chronically homeless populations. This approach will help shelters design and plan their infrastructure and operations with the target guests in mind, improving suitability and access and adopting a systems approach to consider service gaps that may not be met by other shelters.

<sup>1</sup> City of Edmonton Housing and Homelessness Services Plan

- The introduction of a Core Operations section which contains components of what were previously referred to as “Operational Standards and Service Delivery Standards”. This section highlights the day-to-day operations and programming all emergency shelters should strive towards regardless of the population being served, in order to provide continuity of service across shelters.
- The replacement of “Specialized Program Requirements” with a Services and Programming Section, which highlights the unique needs of certain populations accessing shelter and programmatic supports shelter providers should consider in their service delivery, noting that this section should be applied using an intersectional lens as people carry multiple identities.

The goal of this Guide is to help end homelessness in our community by outlining best practices and evidence based interventions that emergency shelters in Edmonton can adopt and test. This furthers our community's shared commitment to improving accessibility and advancing operations that are housing and diversion focused; supporting individuals to resolve their homelessness in order to live safer, healthier lives. The Guide was created through literature reviews, jurisdictional scans, a review by the Canadian Shelter Transformation Network, and through extensive feedback from Edmonton emergency shelter providers and vulnerable sector organisations. The Guide can be used by funders and other key stakeholders in Edmonton to inform discussions about the role and evaluation of emergency shelters in ending homelessness in Edmonton. Much of the best practices around infrastructure, accessibility, and designing shelters to be diversion and housing focused remain the same; with this in mind, moving forward Administration will review and update this document as required to support the needs of the sector based on emerging research and systems changes.

The Guide operates under guiding principles that encompass best practices for emergency shelter operators. The Guide is designed to ensure that services and connections to social support systems are client-centred, trauma informed, and are delivered in a way that reduces harm for both individuals experiencing homelessness and the surrounding community, with the aim of increasing positive outflows into permanent housing.

A complete list of terms and definitions can be found on page 29.

## System Dependencies

Under the Homeward Trust System Planning Framework, emergency accommodations help address homelessness by supporting or facilitating inflow activities (interventions aimed at prevention by reducing entries into homelessness) and outflow activities (strategies to facilitate successful exits from temporary housing programs into stable, permanent housing). Draft recommendation nine of the 2024 Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness also calls on the homeless serving system of care to “Increase access to and the quality of shelter services.”<sup>2</sup>

Emergency shelters act as an essential intervention to provide immediate supports for shelter and basic needs, and provide a physical location and entry point to access services. Individuals diverted from shelters may decrease inflow into chronic homelessness. Although these accommodations do not address the root causes of homelessness, they serve an important function in preventing the immediate risk of unsheltered homelessness. Though shelters as services do not provide outflow directly, outflow service providers (e.g. housing workers, housing teams) may be able to locate and provide services to individuals utilising shelter services.

Since the first version of the Minimum Emergency Shelter Standard was released in 2021, there has been significant change in the homeless serving system of care. There is a greater diversity of shelters, from their locations, to the programs offered, to sizes and amenities. As a result, there are now more shelter options for individuals to choose from. The breadth of emergency shelter guests has also shifted. There are now more women, refugees/newcomers, and a larger spread of ages (both older and younger) accessing emergency shelter services. The complexity of those individuals is also increasing, with greater numbers of individuals with brain injuries, mental health concerns, and medical needs.

A number of sector challenges that existed in 2021 when the Minimum Emergency Shelter Standard was released still pose a challenge. This includes some individuals experiencing homelessness noting that they do not see staying outside as a preference, but as a better option than staying in a

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<sup>2</sup> May 21, 2024 Community and Public Services Committee Meeting, report CS01853.

shelter<sup>3</sup>. The ongoing housing bottleneck, with insufficient affordable and supportive housing, also continues to impact how successful housing programs and activities that are located in shelters can be.

As shelters become more diverse and specialised to address the unique barriers faced by marginalised individuals, the system must work to find ways to honour the intersectionality and individual experiences of people interfacing with the homelessness serving system of care and acknowledge there will always be a need for emergency walk-up low-barrier shelters. While there are themes and common barriers, the work must remain person-centred and as always, trauma-informed and accessible to people regardless of their age, ability, race, or gender and sexual identity. This updated document identifies some of the core building design and layout, site operations and amenities for any shelter to work towards having. It also highlights emerging areas of specialisation and the unique services offered in different shelter models.

A consistent recommendation during the engagement was to improve system navigation within shelters to ensure appropriate referrals are made to other shelters or to the wrap-around supports that individuals may need to be quickly rehoused or diverted from entrenchment and chronic homelessness.

Another recommendation that stood out is the need for training and supports for the staff working in shelters, across all positions. This will benefit not only the individuals using the shelter services, it may also support the well-being of staff and improve retention in the sector.

Shelters cannot be everything for everyone. Therefore, it is recommended that shelters work through an assessment to determine the model of shelter needed based on the population served. This may influence decisions around the location and size needed for a shelter to achieve successful outcomes for the population served as well as creating a safe and healthy work environment for the staff. Ultimately, the mission of shelters, regardless of approach, is to end homelessness and to support the re-housing of guests.

Finally, it is incumbent on all orders of government to work internally and collaboratively to ensure coordination within and between levels of

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<sup>3</sup> Staying Outside is Not a Preference: Homelessness in Edmonton.



government and reduce bureaucratic barriers to shelter access. For example, youth homelessness intersects with two or more different provincial ministries. Newcomer funding and policies are largely dictated by the federal government. And in examples of trying to open emergency shelter spaces, it was observed that projects can be delayed when different levels of government have different grants and timelines for a single project.

## Scope of the Guide

The City of Edmonton Emergency Shelter Best Practices Guide is geared towards providing guidance for Seasonal and Year-Round<sup>4</sup> emergency shelter sites. Sites that only operate on an ad hoc basis (for example during an extreme cold weather event) or other housing types (such as bridge housing or permanent supportive housing) are not within the scope of this Guide.

## Guiding Principles

1. Promote inclusion and welcome all who need services regardless of age, gender identity, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, cognitive or physical abilities.
2. Maintain a housing and diversion focused approach to shelter service delivery, recognizing that stable housing is the primary need shared by all people experiencing homelessness, and that other health and social challenges can be better addressed once housing is secured.
3. Shelters should respect and support a client's self-determination, including their choice and autonomy to access services and programming. Shelter staff should support guests, model positive behaviours, and steer away from using control or exercising authority to influence guest actions or decisions.
4. Provide service delivery grounded in appropriate and comprehensive training (such as anti-racist and trauma-informed training), that prioritises the client's safety, choice, and control, including consideration of specific Indigenous historical trauma.
5. In recognition of the over-representation of Indigenous peoples experiencing homelessness, recognize and respond to the needs

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<sup>4</sup> Edmonton's Zoning Bylaw (20001), defines Emergency Shelters as either seasonal (where the primary purpose is to provide accommodations not continuously throughout the year for people requiring shelter for a temporary duration) or year-round (where the primary purpose is to provide ongoing accommodations for people requiring shelter for a temporary duration)

Indigenous guests with culturally appropriate and Indigenous specific operations and supports.

6. Respect clients' cultural and spiritual identities and, if requested, connect them with pathways to access appropriate services inclusive of their cultural and spiritual needs.
7. Provide on-site programming and integrated supports tailored to the site's specific shelter focus, ensuring alignment to the needs of the shelter's guests.
8. Provide program and system navigation support, while also collaborating with other service providers and stakeholders across the homeless-serving, health, and justice sectors to make appropriate referrals and develop case management plans for clients that lead to the best outcome. This includes, but is not limited to: income and employment support programs, mental health, addictions and recovery services, and Federal Government programs.
9. Communicate information about the facility and operations in a way that is accessible, transparent, and clear about behavioural responsibilities and banning/restriction processes for guests and staff alike.
10. Develop relationships with the community where the facility is situated and establish open and transparent communications channels with neighbours.

## Service Approach

Emergency shelters cannot be everything to everyone. Focused and intentional service and programming analysis and planning should take place at each shelter site. This includes identifying the type of shelter site they would like to be, who would best benefit from that shelter approach, what outcomes they are hoping to achieve, and where in the city to locate. This will inform the services and programming offered, ensuring a housing focused approach that maximises the rate at which people are re-housed.

Any analysis should involve key shelter partners, including shelter guests, staff, and community partners. Insights from these groups provide important perspectives that enhance the relevance and effectiveness of services and programs. This involvement can be accomplished in many ways, such as a community advisory board that includes guest and partner representatives.

Shelter sites should be consistently striving toward continuous improvement, evaluation, and the adjustment of services and programming as the needs of guests change over time. This work can focus on achieving a number of outcomes, but ultimately should be concentrated on the following measures:

- ↑ The number of individuals securing permanent housing from shelter.
- ↑ The number of individuals being diverted to temporary housing options that are more suitable for their circumstances.
- ↓ The average length of stay for regular shelter clients.

This ensures that shelters can provide the right high-quality support over time. A component of this could include an anonymous feedback mechanism for guests to voice concerns about safety, discrimination, or any other issues and/or a complaint and appeal process<sup>5</sup>.

This approach is in alignment with the the Best Practices Guide:

- Shelter Space Considerations - Building and space layout approaches to improve the safety and comfort of guests.
- Core Operations - Operational elements that all shelters can strive towards, providing a consistent service experience for shelter clients.
- Services and Programming - Once a shelter approach is identified, population specific programming and services can be identified.

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<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Based, Gender-Sensitive National Standards for Emergency Shelters Across Canada and Toronto Shelter Standards

## Shelter Space Considerations

Building and space layout approaches that all shelters can strive to achieve, to increase the safety and comfort of guests.

### Built Form Considerations

When planning for the physical space that the shelter site will occupy, emergency shelters should strive to:

- Focus on safety - Site safety should be paramount, taking into account both guest and staff safety considerations. Suggestions include:
  - Undergoing a Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) analysis to provide information for optimising the site layout and an operational approach for site safety. Includes consultation with local law enforcement and community safety experts for comprehensive safety planning.
  - Investing in a comprehensive camera system can allow for staff to monitor internal and external communal areas.
- Be accessible - Accessibility, centred around a universal design approach should be the goal for every shelter site<sup>6</sup>, with particular focus on elderly guests' needs.
  - Shelter sites should conduct periodic accessibility audits to identify and address potential barriers.
  - Accessibility features should respect traditional Indigenous practices and healing methods.
- Accommodate flexibility - The needs of shelter guests may change over time and shelter sites should be designed to be flexible in their layout to accommodate changes over time.
  - Examples include: the use of modular furniture, creating movable partitions to allow for space reconfiguration depending on needs and occupancy levels, the use of multi-purpose rooms that can serve various functions (such as meetings, activities, or overflow sleeping areas).
- Have a de-institutionalized design - A de-institutionalised or trauma-informed design approach can provide support to individuals

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<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Based, Gender-Sensitive National Standards for Emergency Shelters Across Canada

who have undergone traumatic experiences and can make a shelter space feel warm and welcoming<sup>7</sup>.

- Design should focus on a predictable lay-out, with minimal sharp corners and rounded walls, and a bright space with plenty of windows.
- Use of biophilic design (e.g. indoor plants or natural materials)
- Use a diverse colour palette on the walls and integrate Indigenous art, colours, and symbols into the design.
- Support health and hygiene - provide access to showers and hygiene services, as well as actions to ensure the health and hygiene of other guests, such as pest management processes (e.g. offering delousing supports, having a hot box room for bed bug mitigation).
- Allow for healthy sleep hygiene - Sleep hygiene is critical for an individual's overall physical and mental health. Includes providing daytime sleeping areas, using enhanced materials to prevent noise transfer between spaces, the use of white noise machines, and lighting in sleeping areas that can be dimmed or adjusted.
- Provide dedicated spaces - this includes providing:
  - Day spaces for clients, separate from sleeping quarters, where guests are able to go during cleaning times and to remain on-site when not sleeping.
  - Dedicated spaces for communal meals, programming work (including community partner space), and staff offices.
  - A decompression space - spaces that are quiet, offer some privacy, are soundproofed, and equipped with comfortable seating and calming decor. These spaces provide an opportunity for guests to self-regulate following challenging circumstances in a supportive environment.
- Provide storage options - Emergency shelters should ensure guests have safe and secure storage options for their belongings. Some examples of storage solutions include:
  - Lockers or trunks<sup>8</sup>: A 24/7 storage solution that allows an individual to safely lock up and access their own clothing, shoes, hygiene products, and other small personal items.

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<sup>7</sup> Person-Centred and Trauma-Informed Considerations in a Housing-Focused Shelter and BC Housing Shelter Design Guidelines

<sup>8</sup> Toronto Shelter Standards

- Amnesty totes or safe keeping boxes<sup>9</sup>: A storage system that allows guests to store items prohibited from shelter that might otherwise prevent them from being able to access services. These items can be stored in opaque bags for the guest to check-out upon leaving the shelter.
- Locked storage room<sup>10</sup>: Larger storage space with a “check in - check out” system for guests who have large amounts of personal items that do not fit in a locker or trunk.
- Secure bike facility<sup>11</sup>: Bicycles are a common mode of transport for individuals experiencing homelessness; a locked bike facility should be designed to prevent theft.
- Medication storage: Offer options for the secure storage of guests medication<sup>12</sup>, including refrigerated storage if needed.

### Guest Experience

Maintaining an excellent guest experience at a shelter can include offering:

- Guest amenities - these can include providing:
  - Secure phone charging stations or access to power outlets.
  - Access to computers to use for job searches, education, and staying connected with family and support networks.
  - Basic hygiene and toiletry products, including: towels, soap, shampoo, toothbrush, toothpaste, shaving products, menstrual hygiene and incontinence products, as appropriate.
- Sacred spaces - the religious and spiritual needs of clients should be considered with space for prayer, meditation, or other activities. This includes dedicated spaces for traditional healing practices and ceremonies, ensuring privacy and respect for cultural practices.
  - Respect traditional tobacco use by providing separate areas for ceremonial tobacco practices
- Smoking area - a private and thoughtfully placed smoking area should be provided, with weather protection (such as a canopy). Should be located away from main entrances and communal areas.
- Inclusive spaces - consider the needs of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, such as gender-neutral restrooms and private changing areas.

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<sup>9</sup> Person-Centred and Trauma-Informed Considerations in a Housing-Focused Shelter

<sup>10</sup> County of Simcoe Homelessness Service Standards -Emergency Shelter

<sup>11</sup> BC Housing Shelter Design Guidelines

<sup>12</sup> Person-Centred and Trauma-Informed Considerations in a Housing-Focused Shelter

## Core Operations

This section outlines some of the longstanding and emerging best practices in the day-to-day operations of shelters. These are elements that all shelters can strive towards, regardless of the population they may be specialising in or the programmatic elements of a shelter. When shelters have consistent core operations, guests can rely on certain conditions being in place regardless of which shelter they may access.

### Hours of Operation

Emergency shelters operators should provide 24/7 support to guests and not require them to leave the property for operational purposes, such as converting a space from sleeping services to meal services or to perform cleaning activities (this could be achieved through dedicated day spaces or other spaces for guests to move to during cleaning times). In a 24/7 model, admission can occur at any time of day as capacity allows.

### Welcoming

Emergency shelters should be welcoming places for all guests<sup>13</sup>, accepting and respecting the inherent dignity, diversity, experiences and abilities of all individuals<sup>14</sup>. Some welcoming elements to consider:

- Guests have a wide range of faiths, genders, sexual orientations, ages, nationalities, cultures, and ethnic heritages. Ensure shelter spaces, programming, and services are respectful to these unique identities.
- Offer shelter materials (e.g. the shelter policies) in other languages and offer access to translation services to shelter guests will enable guests to access all of the shelter site spaces, programming and services.

### Stabilisation

A shelter site should provide a space where guests can collect themselves and have immediate needs stabilised<sup>15</sup>. Stabilisation will be different for each guest, sometimes all that is needed is a hot meal, while others will require a number of different supports. Shelter sites may not be able to offer the full

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<sup>13</sup> County of Simcoe Homelessness Service Standards -Emergency Shelter

<sup>14</sup> Toronto Shelter Standards

<sup>15</sup> Person-Centred and Trauma-Informed Considerations in a Housing-Focused Shelter

range of stabilisation supports, but should be in a position to refer guests to stabilisation supports offered off-site. Stabilisation supports can include:

- Medical supports - Many individuals experiencing homelessness face health challenges<sup>16</sup>. On-site medical supports and access to medically trained staff (e.g. Nurse Practitioner, Registered Nurse), available at all times of the day, can address any immediate medical concerns that do not require a visit to the hospital.
- Pharmacy supports - Connections to needed medication can support a guest in stabilising their medical conditions.
- Nutrition supports - Providing nutritious meals and snacks fuels a guest for service and programming conversations.
- Spiritual or cultural supports - Access to spiritual or cultural supports<sup>17</sup> and connections can assist a guest to be mentally ready for service and programming interactions. Can include access to traditional healers to address the immediate needs of Indigenous guests.
- Other supports - This could include mental health supports, a quiet place to sleep, or other supports as needed.

### Laundry Services

Guests looking to launder their clothes should be provided with drop-off laundry services or access to self-service laundry options. A policy to regulate self-service machines - operating hours, sign up sheets, time for servicing and cleaning - should be posted where guests can read and understand it.

### Policies

Shelters should have clear policies that are publicly posted (both printed on site and posted online), communicated verbally to guests during admission, and shared with other shelters, sector agencies, and other sector actors (e.g. the Government of Alberta). Policy development and reviews should engage community partners and shelter guests to ensure cultural relevance and sensitivity<sup>18</sup>. Shelters should ensure development of the following policies:

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<sup>16</sup> Staying Outside is Not a Preference: Homelessness in Edmonton

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Based, Gender-Sensitive National Standards for Emergency Shelters Across Canada

<sup>18</sup> Person-Centred and Trauma-Informed Considerations in a Housing-Focused Shelter, Human Rights Based, Gender-Sensitive National Standards for Emergency Shelters Across Canada, and Toronto Shelter Standards



### Admissions and Diversion Policy

- During the admissions process, emergency shelter operators should:
  - Determine if the guest is suited for the programs and services offered at the shelter they are seeking to access;
  - Provide a referral and arrange for transport for guests who are best suited to a different shelter or, if possible, divert to housing, based on their needs or to natural supports, such as safe family reunification;
  - Share with the guest clear expectations about the conditions for shelter use, orient guests to the space, and assign a bed.
- The admissions process must demonstrate a clear pathway to intake for shelter guests and that guests can voluntarily participate in other specialised programs that support their pursuit of housing.
- The Admissions Policy should include:
  - Behavioural expectations, including a commitment to be respectful of staff and other shelter guests;
  - Items that are prohibited from entering shelter and options for storage of personal items;
- Admission decisions should not be made based on a guest's substance use<sup>19</sup>; guests should be welcome to use emergency shelter services as long as they are safely mobile and can adhere to the behavioural expectations in place.
- Admissions staff should also be trained to undertake an acute health crisis check at intake, particularly during extreme weather events<sup>20</sup>. This will help to identify guests who may require medical assistance for hypothermia/frostbite, heat exhaustion/heat stroke, or breathing issues due to wildfire smoke.
- Admission policies should include anti-discrimination elements.
- Personal information collected by a shelter should be protected and shelter guests should have access to any information gathered<sup>21</sup>.

### Service Restriction Policy

- Decisions on restriction to access, (sometimes called banning or barring), will be made based on a clearly defined policy and consistent set of procedures that is publicly posted for guests and staff. Banning or barring should be minimised unless individuals pose a safety threat to staff or other participants. A clear process for pursuing the removal

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<sup>19</sup> County of Simcoe Homelessness Service Standards -Emergency Shelter

<sup>20</sup> Emergency Response: A homeless-centred plan for keeping Winnipeggers safer

<sup>21</sup> Toronto Shelter Standards

or reconsideration of bans, with a focus on rehabilitation, not punishment, should also be articulated, with clear expectations communicated<sup>22</sup>.

#### Storage Policy

- A storage policy should note what can and cannot be stored, how often a person can access their items if stored in a locked storage room, and how long an item will be stored before it is discarded.
- Storage rules should be posted publicly, with storage records kept by operators. Shelters should not confiscate or ban items from being stored unless they pose a life-safety risk to staff and other guests.
- The storage policy should also cover the storage of guest's medication (narcotic and non-narcotic) including, but not limited to: its management, issuance, administration, secure storage, disposal and who is authorised by the service provider to access service user medications and provide medication-related assistance<sup>23</sup>.

#### **Intake**

Once guests have been admitted to shelter, a more comprehensive intake should be completed within one to three days. While guests may not be able to do a full intake on the same day as seeking admission (often reasonably seeking to have their basic needs met first), a more comprehensive intake should be completed with guests in order to quickly connect them to a program that will facilitate their rapid exit from shelter, either through diversion or into housing. Shelters should avoid the use of lengthy line ups or queues for beds.

Guests should be oriented to the shelter, given a walkthrough of the site, provided an overview of programs and services, and informed of the shelter rules and procedures (e.g. the emergency procedures, in case of a fire)<sup>24</sup>.

#### **System Navigation**

As shelters are not able to offer all services and programs on site, shelter sites should provide system navigation supports. This will involve a shelter site ensuring they stay up-to-date on what services and programs are offered at other sites and how best to connect guests to supports and programs not

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<sup>22</sup> Person-Centred and Trauma-Informed Considerations in a Housing-Focused Shelter

<sup>23</sup> County of Simcoe Homelessness Service Standards -Emergency Shelter

<sup>24</sup> Person-Centred and Trauma-Informed Considerations in a Housing-Focused Shelter and Standards for Serving People Experiencing Homelessness in Shelters Throughout Newfoundland and Labrador

offered on site. Dedicated system navigation staff is recommended, otherwise ensuring shelter staff have appropriate training to support guests access the programs and services they need is key for guest success. Guests who are newcomers and/or refugees will require specific navigation assistance for programs that may be in a language not their own and cross federal, provincial, and municipal jurisdictions<sup>25</sup>.

### **Diversion and Housing First Programs**

Emergency shelters should have integrated diversion and housing programs for shelter guests that are linked to Coordinated Access Housing Services, the primary pathway for housing support in Edmonton, if appropriate. It should be the goal of these programs to help move individuals out of shelter and into safe housing quickly<sup>26</sup>. Emergency shelters can track their success in this area by measuring housing outcomes (increased) and guests' length of stay in shelter (decreased), and frequently reviewing intake information to identify individuals who are chronically in shelter. Chronic shelter users should be targeted for more enhanced housing support.

An embedded housing program should look to have guests:

- Engaged with a housing worker within 48 hours of entering an emergency shelter;
- Develop a housing plan within one week of entering shelter; and
- Referred to coordinated access or an appropriate housing program, if the site's housing program is not the correct fit.

Diversion aims to respond to the individual's housing crisis while trying to avoid entry into the shelter system. Diversion seeks to quickly identify and connect individuals with alternative, safe housing options in community that can help them avoid literal homelessness altogether. Diversion approaches are problem-solving with the individual seeking shelter, rapid mediation with external parties (family members, friends, landlord, etc.), transfer of knowledge of other available resources, and/or use of flexible funding to resolve a situation that is primarily financial<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> The State of Immigration and Settlement in Edmonton - Annual Report 2021

<sup>26</sup> County of Simcoe Homelessness Service Standards -Emergency Shelter

<sup>27</sup> Person-Centred and Trauma-Informed Considerations in a Housing-Focused Shelter

### Beds and Sleeping Considerations

- If a site provides communal sleeping arrangements or private or semi-private spaces will be determined by their shelter scope analysis. For example, shelters that operate seasonally to address overflow needs during extreme weather conditions will need infrastructure that can be stored the remainder of the year, whereas permanent shelters should have dignified sleeping spaces including beds off the floors. Operators should make reasonable efforts to accommodate client sleeping location preference, utilising a GBA+ lens.
- Shelters should have clear rules around intimate partner accommodations, with designated sleeping areas if offered.
- Offering a range of bed options is preferred. Some elements to consider include:
  - A normal height bed may be more appropriate for lower mobility guests who have trouble accessing a low bed.
  - A low bed with bed rails may be more appropriate for guests impaired by substance abuse.
- In a congregate setting, ensure dividers or pony walls are between the beds/mats<sup>28</sup> or a minimum of two metres between beds is optimal.
- Fresh bedding should be provided to guests.

### Nutrition

Nutritional needs are dependent on individual client needs, and food provision is an essential health service that should be included in shelter. Food services that offer guests nutritious meal and snack options at all times of the day are preferred, as a way to increase accessibility for guests who may try to access shelter outside of pre-set meal times. Emergency shelters should also take into account potential food needs of guests<sup>29</sup>, such as:

- Food allergies/intolerances.
- Religious, spiritual, and/or cultural requirements (e.g. offering flexible meals during Ramadan).
- Accommodating vegetarian/vegan guests.
- Health requirements, e.g. for guests who have underlying health conditions like diabetes.

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<sup>28</sup> Toronto Shelter Standards

<sup>29</sup> Person-Centred and Trauma-Informed Considerations in a Housing-Focused Shelter and Toronto Shelter Standards

### Security Personnel and Safety Planning

- Shelter operators need to determine if dedicated security personnel are right for a specific shelter site. Stakeholder engagement and some research<sup>30</sup> has indicated that security guards may be less beneficial for the prevention of shelter violence.
- Some shelters may prefer to handle security activities through internal staff, who have been given appropriate training (e.g. de-escalation, trauma informed, first-aid, etc. training). If external security personnel are contracted, emergency shelters should ensure that those staff are properly trained and are familiar with the shelter approach being delivered at that site.
- Staff and guest safety are one of the key elements that an emergency shelter should be planning for. This includes:
  - Ensuring staff have the appropriate training to deal with complex guests.
  - Policies and procedures are in place for an appropriate response to if a situation is becoming escalated.
  - Providing an adequate space for guests to self-regulate and “cool down” away from other shelter guests.
  - Posting and communication clear shelter expectations.
  - Providing a clear process for guests to provide feedback on safety issues or concerns.
- These activities will assist in promoting a more supportive and balanced work environment, which can lead to better staff retention.

### Training

Ensuring comprehensive training of shelter staff will help to ensure that services and programming are robust, the shelter site is welcoming, and the shelter site is safe<sup>31</sup>. Shelter related training can include, but is not limited to:

- Trauma informed care<sup>32</sup> training, de-escalation training, cultural awareness, Indigenous cultural practice, suicide intervention, First Aid CPR, anti-oppressive training, FOIP training, documentation and documentation management training, and mental health first aid.

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<sup>30</sup> The Shelter Safety Study: An examination of violence and service restrictions in Toronto’s shelter system

<sup>31</sup> County of Simcoe Homelessness Service Standards -Emergency Shelter

<sup>32</sup> See Person-Centred and Trauma-Informed Considerations in a Housing-Focused Shelter

### **Pets, Partners, Family Members, and Other Policies**

Depending on the shelter programming and approach, a site may be unable to accommodate pets, partners, or multigenerational family members. In that case a clear policy should be developed and a site should be prepared to refer a guest to an appropriate shelter and arrange transportation.

### **Neighborhood Considerations**

Shelter operators should strive to be a good neighbour in the neighbourhood that their site is located<sup>33</sup>. This work can include:

- Engaging with the neighbourhood before a site opens.
- In-person connections with direct neighbours.
- Developing a conflict resolution process and establishing a dedicated contact point for neighbourhood residents and businesses to connect with if any issues arise.
- Making other community connections, such as to newcomer communities and Indigenous communities in the area.

### **Applicable Laws**

This Guide is meant to supplement, not to displace, any applicable laws, statutes, regulations, bylaws, policies and equivalents thereto. Operators shall adhere to all applicable laws, statutes, regulations, bylaws, policies, and equivalents thereto, including (without limitation) those outlined in the Government of Alberta's Homeless Shelter Accommodation Expectations.

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<sup>33</sup> Toronto Shelter Standards

## Services and Programming

Homeward Trust Edmonton's By Names List<sup>34</sup> identifies that Edmontonians experiencing homelessness have a specific demographic make-up that is unique to that population. This includes:

- 58 per cent who identify as Indigenous
- 47 per cent who identify as woman
- 16 per cent who are youth under the age of 24
- 28% who are 45 years or older

In recognition of the historical and emerging specialised or “population specific” shelters that operate in Edmonton, this section acknowledges the programs and services that make different shelters unique while at the same time offering knowledge and innovation-sharing opportunities for other shelters and actors in the homeless serving system of care. The knowledge transfer of programs and services offered by different shelters across the homeless serving system of care will result in:

- Referrals to the appropriate services and programming needed.
- Reducing the feeling of getting “the runaround” or a “closed door”.
- Potential collaborations, partnerships, or the adoption of programs and services that may benefit the population being served.

Services and programming should be linked to the shelter's core function, to support guests with diversion and re-housing. Ensuring shelters guests have meaningful participation in their programming or service decisions shows respect for their autonomy, dignity, agency, and self determination<sup>35</sup>.

### Women

Enumerations in shelters, research studies, and engagement feedback consistently show growing rates of women experiencing homelessness. Traditionally seen as “hidden homelessness” where women were more likely to be couch surfing or provisionally accommodated, the sector has noted women experiencing homelessness are becoming more visible and seeking support from the shelter system. Some family and domestic violence shelters have had to adapt their rooms to accommodate more single women, while others have adapted to accommodate more families as the local system

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<sup>34</sup> <https://homewardtrust.ca/data-analytics-reporting/>, Accessed July 22, 2024.

<sup>35</sup> Human Rights Based, Gender-Sensitive National Standards for Emergency Shelters Across Canada and Standards for Serving People Experiencing Homelessness in Shelters Throughout Newfoundland and Labrador

responds and adjusts to emerging trends and needs and actions from other providers in the sector.

Gender based violence is a unique barrier faced by women, where violence and the risk of mortality become essential considerations in a woman's housing journey. Therefore, programming that offers safety planning<sup>36</sup> and ensures the confidentiality of the physical location of shelters is essential. Other shelters for women whose primary concern is homelessness, not gender based violence, now have more options to choose from.

Strangulation and other forms of gender based violence may result in brain injury and is traumatic which means that a shelter specialising in women experiencing homelessness and families experiencing family violence should be offered stabilisation and health services, including mental health support for the acute trauma and possibly complex, chronic trauma.

All women's shelters can include diversion and housing-focused services and programs. The Home Star<sup>37</sup> assessment tool has been adopted to improve the housing outcomes for guests.

Additional supports can include programs that support economic empowerment, such as job training and financial literacy courses and programs that provide culturally relevant healing practices and support systems specifically for Indigenous women.

## Youth

Since the 2021 Shelter Standard came out, strategic work was done by the youth-serving sector to develop a youth-oriented response for vulnerable people under 25. The Youth Agency Collaboration is a group of approximately 30 local youth-serving agencies that have come together to form a holistic safety net for youth.<sup>38</sup> Youth become homeless for different reasons than adults and there is a particularly strong link between being in foster care and chronic homelessness in adulthood. Youth also face unique barriers to resolving their homelessness including not being appropriate for the traditional adult shelter system, not being unable to rent an apartment on

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<sup>36</sup> See Strategies for Safety: Considerations for Individuals Experiencing Family Violence

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.outcomesstar.org.uk/using-the-star/see-the-stars/home-star/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://mapsab.ca/yac/>, accessed July 10, 2024.



their own, challenges accessing employment with a living wage and just generally needing more support through these formative developmental years.

Diversion, and family reunification when it is safe, is important as a foundational program to youth-serving shelters. It is essential that operators make appropriate referrals to youth programs and services for those who cannot be appropriately supported in adult-focused emergency shelters.

Programming can include mentorship programs, age-appropriate mental health services, recreational programming, educational support services to help youth achieve their academic and career goals, and links to post-secondary education opportunities, such as bursaries or scholarships. Shelters should keep in mind the unique service requirements of youth who are transitioning into the adult system and consider offering accommodation options (such as designated spaces, separate from single adult guests).

### **First Nations, Metis and Inuit Peoples**

The City of Edmonton recognizes that the systemic removal or exclusion from housing/community due to systemic racism of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples in vulnerable populations requires a culturally-specific approach<sup>39</sup> to program delivery and support services wherever possible. Many shelters across Canada continue to function within colonial frameworks and intersect with other systems, like the child welfare system, splitting families and erecting obstacles in creating pathways to healing and reconnection of families and communities disrupted by colonial process and institutions<sup>40</sup>.

When possible, operators should be majority Indigenous-owned and operated. Non-Indigenous operators wanting to support First Nations, Métis, or Inuit peoples should partner directly with Indigenous organisations and individuals to ensure that program delivery and engagement is culturally competent.

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<sup>39</sup> In this context, “culturally-specific” recognizes that Indigeneity is not monolithic. In other words, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit groups will offer unique cultural programming specific to their community.

<sup>40</sup> Human Rights Based, Gender-Sensitive National Standards for Emergency Shelters Across Canada

Programing considerations include:

- Conducting spiritual ceremonies, including smudging, sacred fire, and other teachings and protocols that can restore and support cultural healing from the effects of historical trauma;
- Involving Elders in the planning and implementation of support services (e.g. Elders counselling/guidance);
- Access to translation services to support personalised service delivery;
- Diversion efforts that seek to connect people to their families and home communities, wherever they may be;
- Deploy cultural reconnection programs, including language revitalization and traditional skills workshops;
- Partner with Indigenous organisations to co-create programs that are culturally relevant and community-driven; and
- Ensure that programs incorporate the voices and needs of Indigenous 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals.

### Newcomers

Engagement with shelter providers and policy experts noted that rates of refugee and newcomer homelessness are growing. Research also shows that non-citizen shelter users were more likely to face chronic homelessness<sup>41</sup>.

In particular, affordable housing development has not kept pace with international or inter-provincial immigration rates to urban centres like Edmonton. As a result, there is more competition for the most affordable rentals, and some of the most marginalised people are seeking support at entry-points like emergency shelters.

Newcomers, and particularly individuals with language barriers and undocumented status, face extraordinary barriers to accessing services. Keeping in line with findings around intersectionality, newcomer youth face especially unique barriers and are particularly vulnerable to becoming disenfranchised and exposed to predatory individuals and communities such as street gangs.

Services and programs that could improve the experiences and outcomes of newcomers using the shelter system include access to:

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<sup>41</sup> Homelessness data snapshot: Analysis of chronic homelessness among shelter users in Canada 2017 - 2021

- Orientation sessions that cover rights, responsibilities, and resources available to newcomers. Can also include informing newcomers about the Indigenous history and culture of the region;
- Translator services;
- A variety of cultural supports, from multicultural health brokers to religious leaders like Imams; and
- Sacred space for meditation or prayer.

### Seniors

Engagement feedback and news headlines<sup>42</sup> note the growing number of seniors at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. Seniors face more complex health issues and are more vulnerable to communicable diseases. Physical accessibility to spaces becomes particularly paramount as seniors face increased rates of mobility concerns and as a result, are more likely to use mobility aids. Companionship with pets is a particular barrier for this population.

These challenges lay in the built form category, ensuring that there are enough accessible washrooms for people with disabilities and ensuring there are beds off the floor that are easier to get in and out of. In terms of programming, having integrated health supports appears to be especially important when working with seniors, as well as being able to share health information across systems.

Engagement revealed that the impact of the affordable housing crisis is felt strongly in this population as seniors are not able to move through programs at the same rate they once were. Guests are staying longer and finding permanent options for individuals over 55 is becoming more difficult. Seniors with lived experience are reporting to front line staff that the mainstream shelter system is not able to meet their physical needs.

Programming should address social isolation, such as community-building activities and peer support groups. When developing programming, shelter sites should ensure all programs and services are accessible, keeping in mind the physical and cognitive needs of senior guests. Programming should also include traditional Indigenous elder roles and wisdom-sharing sessions.

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<sup>42</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-seniors-homeless-shelter-1.7217059>, accessed July 10, 2024.

### People with Disabilities or Health Needs

People with disabilities and complex health needs may feel that their needs cannot be supported in the general shelter system. As with seniors, these challenges often lie in built form considerations, ensuring that people with mobility aids for their physical disabilities are able to use the space. Private spaces or isolation spaces for individuals who are immunocompromised may reduce the risk of someone falling ill with a communicable disease. Other examples of accommodations beyond the built form space include:

- Materials in braille or access to American Sign Language translators;
- Wayfinding with symbols rather than text;
- Charging stations that are strong enough and accessible for power chairs or scooters; and
- Not requiring someone with disabilities or illness to leave for the day, even during cleaning.

### Mental Health and Addictions Programs

Operators will assist clients in obtaining appropriate mental health and addictions support services, which includes respecting client choice to access/not access services from the full range of the addiction recovery spectrum. Where possible, programs should be offered on-site; in the event that is not possible, clear referral pathways and connections should be established and tracked. This program should include:

- Clear protocols for guests that explain what substances are prohibited from being used on site and corresponding storage options;
- Provision of medical and disposable sharps containers;
- Links to resources that reduce the spread of communicable diseases as it relates to substance use, including the provision of clean and safe injection equipment or information on where to obtain it;
- Information for guests on where Supervised Consumption Services and harm reduction programming can be accessed, if not on site;
- Staff training in overdose prevention and a clear protocol on how to respond to an overdose with provision of the appropriate tools;
- Referral pathways with warm hand-offs to appropriate support services when facility services are inadequate or unavailable; and
- Culturally specific mental health and addiction support, incorporating traditional healing methods.

## 2SLGBTQIA+

Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse people are disproportionately impacted by violence and trauma linked to precarious living situations<sup>43</sup>. 2SLGBTQIA+ shelter guests may also hide their gender and sexual orientation identities in shelters to avoid further victimisation<sup>44</sup>. Operators will establish clear policies that reflect inclusiveness of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals to ensure safer spaces for non-binary gendered people in Emergency Shelters, as recommended in the LGBTQ2S Youth and Housing Shelter Guidelines<sup>45</sup>. Operators are required to respect and accept the self-defined sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression of an individual, including their pronoun.

Shelters should focus attention on inclusivity, particularly for marginalised groups such as Two-Spirit, IndigiQueer, and Indigenous 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals. When shelters undertake their shelter analysis, they should include cultural competency and sensitivity into that analysis, to ensure that the needs of these groups are adequately addressed. Shelter staff should ask all clients for their gender identity rather than assume<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> Human Rights Based, Gender-Sensitive National Standards for Emergency Shelters Across Canada

<sup>44</sup> The Shelter Safety Study: An examination of violence and service restrictions in Toronto's shelter system

<sup>45</sup> LGBTQ2S Youth and Housing Shelter Guidelines

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<sup>46</sup> Toronto Shelter Standards

## Terms and Definitions

**Anti-Racism:** Anti-racism can be defined as the active, ongoing strategy and process that seeks to identify and eliminate racism by changing systems, institutions, policies, and attitudes that perpetuate racism. For the purposes of this report, 'racialized' will refer to those who experience the impacts of systemic racism and includes Indigenous Peoples, Black, and People of Colour. (Anti-Racism Strategy Report, Community and Public Services Committee, February 14, 2022 - CS00872)

**Gender Based Analysis Plus (GBA+):** An analytical tool often used with the intention of advancing gender equality. The "plus" in the name highlights that Gender-based Analysis goes beyond gender, and includes the examination of a range of factors such as age, education, race, language, geography, culture, and income. GBA+ is used to assess the potential impacts of policies, programs or initiatives on diverse groups of citizens, taking into account gender and other factors. (Gender-Based Analysis Plus Report, City of Edmonton, Financial and Corporate Services, April 4, 2017 - CR\_4189).

**Harm Reduction:** A client-centred approach that seeks to reduce the health and social harms associated with addiction and substance use (Harm Reduction, Canadian Mental Health Association of Ontario, 2021.)

**Housing Focused Shelter:** A housing focused shelter aims to make homelessness as brief as possible while returning people to permanent accommodation. From the moment an individual or family pursues shelter, there are efforts to ensure a safe and appropriate exit from shelter. Housing focused shelter does not operate other programming that can interfere with ensuring stays are short- term with a return to housing rapidly. (Housing Focused Shelter, OrgCode Consulting Inc. in partnership with the Canadian Shelter Transformation Network and Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, March 2019.)

**Low Barrier Shelter:** Low barrier shelters ensure that every reasonable barrier to shelter access (and by extension housing access) has been removed. (Housing Focused Shelter, OrgCode Consulting Inc. in partnership with the Canadian Shelter Transformation Network and Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, March 2019)

**Trauma-Informed Care:** Services are provided in ways that recognize the need for physical and emotional safety, as well as choice and control in decisions affecting one's treatment. Trauma-informed service delivery creates an environment where service users do not experience further traumatization or re-traumatization. (Trauma-Informed Care - Overview, Community Mental Health Action Plan, 2021.)

**Unsheltered:** This includes people who lack housing and are not accessing emergency shelters or accommodation, except during extreme weather conditions. In most cases, people are staying in places that are not designed for or fit for human habitation. (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, Canadian Definition of Homelessness, 2017.)

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