

REPORT

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

To: Mayor Johnstone and Members of Council in Regular Meeting **Date:** February 10, 2025

From: Lisa Spitale, Chief Administrative Officer (Project Sponsor) **File:** EDMS #2639129-v2

Lisa Leblanc, Director of Engineering and Deputy CAO (Project Sponsor)

Jackie Teed, Director of Planning and Development (Project Sponsor) **Item #:** 2025-50

Subject: **Crises Response Pilot Project: the Five-Year Prevention, Support and Transition Services Plan and the Ten-Year Supportive Housing and Wrap-Around Services Plan**

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. THAT staff be directed to inform resident, business and community groups regarding the best practice principles that guide the Five-Year Prevention, Support and Transition Services Plan and the Ten-Year Supportive Housing and Wrap-Around Services Plan.*
 - 2. THAT staff be directed to work with resident, business and community groups to advocate for the actions as recommended in the 2025 Crises Response Roadmap.*
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PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is threefold:

- To inform the community of two City plans – the Five-Year Prevention, Support and Transition Services Plan and the Ten-Year Supportive Housing and Wrap-Around Services Plan – developed to help address the three concurrent and inter-related crises of homelessness, mental health and substance use.
- To inform the community of a priority set of recommendations from the two plans which

form the 2025 Crises Response Roadmap.

3. To seek Council endorsement for staff to inform the community regarding the recommendations from the two plans and the advocacy actions in the 2025 Crises Response Roadmap.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of New Westminster (City) has developed two plans to help address the three concurrent and inter-related crises of homelessness, mental health and substance use. Both plans advocate for additional Provincial funding and resources. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, the City wishes to partner with the Province by facilitating and expediting City processes where required.

At the January 13, 2025 Closed meeting, Council approved the following recommendations:

1. THAT the Five-Year Prevention, Support and Transition Services Plan be endorsed.
2. THAT the Ten-Year Supportive Housing and Wrap-Around Services Plan be endorsed.
3. THAT staff prepare Memorandums of Understanding with BC Housing, the Ministry of Health, the Fraser Health Authority and the First Nations Health Authority based on the recommendations from the two plans.

The Five-Year Prevention, Support and Transition Services Plan identifies shorter-term recommendations for the Provincial Government that are aimed at addressing the immediate needs of people experiencing the three crises with the goal of stabilizing their lives.

These shorter-term actions work in concert with the Ten-Year Supportive Housing and Wrap-Around Services Plan, which identifies longer-term and sustainable actions. These longer-term actions focus on securing funding from BC Housing to construct permanent, purpose-designed supportive housing that would be equitably distributed in neighbourhoods throughout the city.

The City believes that by bringing people inside and by addressing their diverse needs, it will both enhance health and social outcomes for those experiencing the three crises and reduce impacts on residents and businesses associated with the three crises.

Eight recommendations from both plans act as a Roadmap for 2025. Four actions advocate for Provincial funding for prevention, support and transition services; and four actions advocate for Provincial funding for the construction of new, permanent, purpose-designed supportive housing and complex care units, and 24/7 shelter beds.

BACKGROUND

Three Concurrent and Inter-related Crises

All municipalities are facing increasing homelessness, and New Westminster is no exception. The March 2023 Point-in-Time Homeless Count found 57 unsheltered and 146 sheltered homeless people in New Westminster. Combined, there were 203 unsheltered and sheltered homeless people, which represented a 65% increase between 2020 and 2023. Regarding the sheltered homeless number, it is misleading as it is significantly bolstered by the nightly shelter, which operates between 8:00 p.m. and 8:00 a.m. On the night of the count, 63 people were using the nightly shelter. As such, the daytime unsheltered homeless population was at least 120 people in 2023.

Of importance, the count found that there is a significant over-representation of self-identified Indigenous people amongst the homeless in New Westminster. While Indigenous people represent about 3.1% of the population in New Westminster, they represented 43% of the unsheltered and 12% of the sheltered homeless population.

Mental health and substance use issues, especially amongst the homeless, were already prevalent prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, they were significantly aggravated as a result of public health and social service closures and restrictions, and a shift to on-line assistance and support. Research indicates that isolation and loneliness worsened, which, in turn, exacerbated pre-existing mental health issues and increased substance use (Maretzki, Geiger and Buxton, August 2022). Regarding substance use, the ongoing toxic drug crisis has resulted in increasing numbers of overdose deaths, and also contributed to homelessness and other social issues.

Crises Response Pilot Project

As part of the 2024 Budget, Council approved a two-year pilot project to help address the three concurrent and inter-related crises of homelessness, mental health and substance use. The Crises Response Pilot Project is comprised of three inter-Departmental staff teams: the Operations Support Team, the Crises Response Team, and the Policy and Advocacy Team. This report focuses on the work on the Policy and Advocacy Team.

The mandate of the Policy and Advocacy Team is to recommend longer-term and sustainable strategies to address the three concurrent and inter-related crises of homelessness, mental health and substance use.

Two plans have been developed to provide guidance to the Provincial Government on actions that the City advocates is needed to help address the three concurrent and inter-related crises:

- the Five-Year Prevention, Support and Transition Services Plan (Attachment A); and
- the Ten-Year Supportive Housing and Wrap-Around Services Plan (Attachment B).

Provincial Housing Order and Interim Housing Needs Report

In July 2024, the Provincial Government issued a Housing Target Order for New Westminster. The Order is one of the legislative changes implemented with the goal of addressing the housing crisis. The City is required to approve the occupancy of 4,432 net new housing units over five years from August 1, 2024 to July 31, 2029.

The Provincial Government also required the City to create an Interim Housing Needs Report based on the 5- and 20-year housing needs and the Provincial methodology. This methodology differs from that used for the Housing Order and identifies a higher housing need. The City undertook additional analysis, building on the Provincial methodology, to specifically identify housing estimates for those most in need. The City's Interim Housing Needs Report, which was endorsed by Council in December 2024, outlines a need for 58 24/7 shelter beds and 352 supportive housing units in the next five years.

The purpose of the Interim Housing Needs Report is to strengthen understanding of current and future housing needs and to ensure that local plans, policies and development decisions are based on recent evidence. This report was also used as the basis for the creation of the Ten-Year Supportive Housing and Wrap-Around Services Plan as attached in this report.

Figure 1. Housing Continuum (see definitions of each housing type in Attachment C)



Prevention, Support and Transition Services

Prevention, support and transition services are essential to reducing the number of people falling into homelessness, decreasing the time that people are homeless and supporting people while homeless, including preparing them to transition out of homelessness.

- Prevention services include rent bank loans, rent subsidies, service navigation, taxation clinics, tenant mediation and tenant protections, as well as access to food security programs and other assistance and support which help cover costs related to daily living.
- Support services include drop-in and resource centres, emergency shelters, food and meal programs, identification and navigation assistance, and outreach and referral

support. These services are essential to life safety, particularly during the winter months, and through case management and targeted support can reduce the time that people are homeless.

- Transition services include employment readiness programs, life skills training, mental health counselling and substance use treatment which prepare people for more independent living situations, including supportive and non-market housing, and enable them to maintain this housing over time.

By bringing people inside and addressing their diverse needs, this reduces impacts on residents and businesses associated with the three crises, including related to sheltering, open burning, human waste and discarded belongings.

Permanent Supportive Housing as a Best Practice

Permanent supportive housing is housing that includes embedded services as well as wrap-around supports that assist residents to maintain their tenancies and foster positive health and wellbeing. These units serve a variety of groups, including families with children with extra support needs, people with disabilities, people requiring mental health and substance use supports, and people transitioning out of the correctional system. These units are also designed to serve people transitioning out of homelessness. These latter units are the focus of the Ten-Year Supportive Housing and Wrap-Around Services Plan. Research has demonstrated that housing stability is significantly improved by permanent supportive housing, as some people experiencing homelessness benefit from ongoing support in order to remain housed and to improve their health and wellbeing.

Best practice components of permanent, purpose-designed supportive housing include the following:

- *Permanence and Affordability* – housing is secure and rents are affordable, which provides stability and allows residents to rebuild connections, improve their health and wellbeing, and work towards self-identified goals.
- *Purpose-Designed* – designing buildings for their intended use and with their intended occupants in mind can maximize benefits for residents, foster community within the building, and facilitate cohesion with neighbours and the broader community.
- *Embedded Services and Wrap-around Supports* – services and resources that are included as part of the housing – such as meal programs, peer support programs and 24/7 on-site support staff – and individualized wrap-around supports help residents to maintain their housing and work towards self-identified goals.
- *Community-Building Initiatives* – opportunities for socializing and community-building through design and/or programming reduces isolation and fosters community both within and outside the housing.

More information on permanent, purpose-designed supportive housing as a sustainable approach to addressing homelessness, including examples of local supportive housing buildings, is included in Attachment D.

2025 CRISES RESPONSE ROADMAP

Two plans have been developed to provide guidance to the Provincial Government on actions that the City advocates is needed to help address the three concurrent and inter-related crises of homelessness, mental health and substance use:

- the Five-Year Prevention, Support and Transition Services Plan (Attachment A); and
- the Ten-Year Supportive Housing and Wrap-Around Services Plan (Attachment B).

Recognizing the urgency of the situation, select recommendations from the two plans have been prioritized for 2025.

Eight recommendations are brought forward and will act as a Roadmap for 2025. Four actions advocate for Provincial funding for prevention, support and transition services; and four actions advocate for Provincial funding for the construction of new, permanent, purpose-designed supportive housing and complex care units, and 24/7 shelter beds.

The City wishes to partner with the Provincial Government to deliver projects and services by facilitating and expediting City processes where required. Recommendations advocate for Provincial funding and, as such, the City hopes that these recommendations will help inform Memorandums of Understanding with BC Housing, the Ministry of Health, the Fraser Health Authority and the First Nations Health Authority.

The 2025 Crises Response Roadmap will also inform and align City Department work plans as several Departments are actively working on the Crises Response Pilot Project. Alignment amongst City Departments demonstrates the City's commitment to facilitating and expediting processes given the urgent actions needed to address homelessness, mental health and substance use.

From the Five-Year Prevention, Support and Transition Services Plan (Attachment A)

First Priority – Advocate to BC Housing on the need for additional seasonal and temporary emergency shelter capacity, including 24/7, citywide. The City will facilitate processes for service providers to expedite shelter capacity where required.

Second Priority – Facilitate strategic partnerships with faith-based, non-profit and Provincial organizations and teams to address needs and gaps, including related to coverage, hours, referrals, services and staffing, and undertake joint planning and advocacy activities.

Third Priority – Advocate to BC Housing, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, and other applicable Provincial bodies for the need to fund a Health Connect and Resource Centre outside the Downtown and on a site accessible

by public transit. This facility will address the needs of the daytime unhoused population and provide access to an array of services, including health and wellness, hygiene and sanitation, housing and tenant support, leisure and meal programming, and navigation assistance and referral. It will also enable enhanced communication and collaboration amongst service providers, which will facilitate service coordination and efficiencies. The City will facilitate processes to support expedited project delivery.

Fourth Priority – Advocate to the Ministry of Health and the Fraser Health Authority for the incorporation of indoor inhalation services at the Overdose Prevention Site in the Downtown. This will include conducting a Building Code analysis to determine if it is structurally feasible to incorporate such services, and a cost estimate as to Building Code upgrades, including to ventilation and air exchange systems. If it is determined to be feasible and if funding is realized, the City will expedite building permit inspections to support program delivery. If it is not feasible, the City will work with the Fraser Health Authority and the non-profit operator to explore an alternative location to provide these important harm reduction services.

From the Ten-Year Supportive Housing and Wrap-Around Services Plan (Attachment B)

First Priority – Support expedited construction of 602 Agnes Street (formerly 68 Sixth Street). This 52-unit permanent, purpose-designed supportive housing development will provide housing for locally unhoused people in the Downtown. The City will continue to prioritize building inspections and site servicing requirements to expedite the occupancy of this building, which is scheduled for spring 2026.

Second Priority – Advocate to BC Housing to prioritize funding to construct trauma-informed and culturally-safe Indigenous housing. The approach, including design, program and supports, will be based on engagement with First Nations, Indigenous-led organizations and housing providers, and Indigenous people with lived and living experience of the three crises. The City will facilitate engagement by providing capacity funding to First Nations and Indigenous organizations.

Third Priority – Advocate to BC Housing to prioritize funding for a permanent 24/7 shelter with in-house supports outside the Downtown and on a site accessible by public transit. The City will facilitate processes to support expedited project delivery.

Fourth Priority – Advocate to BC Housing, the Ministry of Health and the Fraser Health Authority to prioritize the funding for 20 complex care units within the construction of new purpose-designed supportive housing developments. The complex care housing program consists of enhanced health, cultural and social supports delivered within permanent supportive housing to residents who have support needs that cannot be met through the wrap-around services that are typically offered in these settings. The City will facilitate processes to support expedited project delivery.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON

The Crises Response Pilot Project is a high priority Council initiative which involves several departments working on the three inter-departmental teams. The 2025 Crises Response Roadmap will inform and align City department work plans. Alignment amongst City departments demonstrates the City's commitment to facilitating and expediting processes given the urgent actions needed to address homelessness, mental health and substance use.

OPTIONS

There are three options for Council's consideration.

Option 1 – THAT staff be directed to inform resident, business and community groups regarding the best practice principles that guide the Five-Year Prevention, Support and Transition Services Plan and the Ten-Year Supportive Housing and Wrap-Around Services Plan.

Option 2 – THAT staff be directed to work with resident, business and community groups to advocate for the actions as recommended in the 2025 Crises Response Roadmap.

Option 3 – Provide staff with further direction.

Staff recommend Options #1 and #2.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A – The Five-Year Prevention, Support and Transition Services Plan

Attachment B – The Ten-Year Supportive Housing and Wrap-Around Services Plan

Attachment C – Housing Continuum Definitions

Attachment D – Permanent Supportive Housing as part of an Evidence-Based Approach to Addressing Homelessness

Attachment E – Rationale for a Health Connect and Resource Centre

APPROVALS

This covering report was prepared by:

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Brad Davie, Deputy Fire Chief

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