

# **REPORT**

## ***COVID-19 At-Risk and Vulnerable Populations Task Force***

**To:** Mayor Cote and Members of Council      **Date:** September 13, 2021

**From:** Lisa Spitale      **File:** 13.2630.09  
Chief Administrative Officer

**Item #:** 2021-331

**Subject:** COVID-19 At-Risk and Vulnerable Populations Task Force Update and Next Steps

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### **RECOMMENDATION**

*THAT Council receive this report for information.*

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### **PURPOSE**

An information report to update Council on the work of the COVID-19 At-Risk and Vulnerable Populations Task Force and the receipt of two recent grants to address the impacts of the pandemic.

### **SUMMARY**

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to challenge all municipalities in British Columbia, and New Westminister is no exception. Unlike previous emergencies, where response efforts were measured in days or weeks, this public health emergency is in its second year, with no definitive end date.

While the pandemic has impacted everyone, it has disproportionately affected at-risk and vulnerable populations, including those who are food insecure, homeless, or living with mental health or substance misuse issues. Concurrently, faith-based and non-profit organizations, in which these populations rely on to meet some or all of their needs, have been impacted too. Many have had to limit access, due to reduced fundraising and volunteerism, while others have closed their doors for periods of time.

In response, and within a week of a public health emergency being called, Council established five working groups (later expanded to seven and referred to as task forces), including the COVID-19 At-Risk and Vulnerable Populations Task Force, whose membership includes about 20 faith-based and non-profit organizations.

The task force is facilitating close working relations between the City and the faith-based and non-profit sector. Through regular meetings, emergent issues are raised, and gaps and needs are identified. City staff and faith-based and non-profit member organizations are also working collaboratively to address issues, gaps and needs, and capitalizing on funding and partnership opportunities. To this end, City staff, with the assistance of the task force, has realized \$365,000 in City funding (amount requested minus grants applied) and \$874,323 in foundation and senior government funding, as well as developing strategic partnerships, including with the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society, the New Westminster Inter-Ministerial Association, and the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning.

Community Planning is resourcing the task force, including chairing and coordinating its meetings; preparing and updating a website portal and all publications; managing all grants, including related to reporting; participating in some of the activities and projects, including the Digital Inclusion Initiative, the Community Action Network and the Seniors Integrated Support Pilot Project; and continuing to monitor the pandemic and respond to it. This is placing significant pressure of staff, particularly given the duration of the pandemic, with a new wave underway.

Currently, about 24% of New Westminster's population 12+ is not fully vaccinated, and there are now breakthrough infections of fully vaccinated people, although extremely rare, and usually not requiring hospitalization. This suggests that new cases are likely to continue to increase as part of a fourth wave, and the percentages may be higher among at-risk and vulnerable populations, some of whom lack adequate shelter, live in overcrowded conditions, and suffer from inadequate nutrition. This speaks to the importance of the work of the task force, and the need for continued action to address the needs of at-risk and vulnerable populations, including post-pandemic.

The task force has funding in place until July 31, 2022, and will continue to identify and apply for new funding, as well as seek out partnerships. The task force will also be making a much smaller request of Council with regard to meeting future pandemic related needs of at-risk and vulnerable populations. To this end, the task force, as part of its budget request form for 2022, will be seeking the following:

- \$90,000 for enhanced outreach, referral and advocacy services from March 1 to December 31, 2022;
- \$16,400 for food security and homelessness coordination services between August 1 and December 31, 2022.

## **BACKGROUND**

On March 17, 2020, the Province of British Columbia declared a Public Health Emergency related to the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 23, 2020, and in response to the pandemic, Council approved the scope of work for five working groups (later expanded to seven and referred to as task forces), including one to address the needs of at-risk and vulnerable populations. The Planning Division was tasked with chairing and coordinating the activities of the task force given its close working relationship with the faith-based and non-profit sector, and its understanding of community needs, including related to the city's at-risk and vulnerable populations.

The task force has the following responsibilities:

- identifying, documenting and communicating the needs of at-risk and vulnerable populations;
- documenting non-profit preparedness, capacity and response levels, and determining resource requirements, including staffing, volunteers and supplies;
- documenting non-profit closures and service reductions, and identifying impacted populations;
- identifying short, medium and longer term responses to ensure that the needs of at-risk and vulnerable populations are being addressed;
- identifying how City staff can be redeployed, taking into consideration risk, to help meet the needs of at-risk and vulnerable populations and to support the faith-based and non-profit sector;
- advocating needs related to at-risk and vulnerable populations to the public, the business community and other levels of government, and applying for funding and grants; and,
- other areas as deemed important to at-risk and vulnerable populations.

## **DISCUSSION**

### ***Task Force Budget Request and Related Activities***

In February 2021, the COVID-19 At-Risk and Vulnerable Populations Task Force made a budget request, which was subsequently approved by Council. This request was to address basic and immediate needs associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, including securing hygiene products, personal protective equipment and portable toilets; enhancing coordination of services for and expanding outreach to the unsheltered; and working with faith-based and non-profit organizations on longer-term strategies to address homelessness. In total, \$407,768 was received, with most of this amount being covered by provincial emergency operations funding in response to the pandemic. Specific actions included:

- Retained an Affordable Housing Planning Analyst for 2021 and 2022. This position which is full-time, is responding to the increased need for emergency, supportive and non-market housing arising from the pandemic and assisting the 15 faith-based and non-profit organizations that have expressed an interest in developing supportive or non-market housing on their sites. This position will also be coordinating the development of a Step-by-Step Guide to Developing Affordable Housing, including information on accessing senior government funding, and working on a new Homelessness Action Strategy, with the latter also involving Community Action Network (CAN) Program graduates and the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning.
- Retaining an Affordable Housing Consultant for 2021/22. This position will provide assistance with regard to faith-based and non-profit inquiries and proposals related to affordable housing. Based on a request for proposals, a proponent will be selected. This position will meet with interested faith-based and non-profit organizations; review land use and zoning considerations; assist in developing a business case and a pro forma; and identify possible funding opportunities, including seed funding.
- Funded two homeless outreach, referral and advocacy positions for 2021/22. Based on a request for proposals, Lookout Housing and Health Society was the successful proponent and has retained the two workers. These workers will directly assist City staff, including in Community Planning, Engineering Operations, Fire, Integrated Services, and Police. They will connect with those who are unsheltered, assess their needs, make appropriate referrals, other mediation services, and provide assistance in accessing services and navigating systems.
- The City, through grants under the Reaching Home and Strengthening Communities Services Programs, has covered the following costs:
  - \$24,400 for coordination services related to food security planning and programming in 2021;
  - \$3,000 for hygiene and sanitation products and personal protective equipment for faith-based and non-profit organizations;
  - \$4,368 for venue rental related to food security programming; and,
  - \$36,000 for rental of portable toilets to meet the hygiene and sanitation needs of the unsheltered.

Regarding rental of portable toilets, \$25,000 of the allocated amount, with Council approval on July 12, 2021, was allocated to the following projects:

- \$15,000 to the Seniors Integrated Support Pilot Project, which includes emergency preparedness and social connectedness initiatives, which is applicable to other seniors independent living residences, and which will address the impacts of COVID-19, including post-pandemic.

- \$10,000 towards the establishment of enhanced personal identification services to assist unsheltered and precariously housed individuals to access the financial assistance and government benefits that they are entitled to receive, including in response to the pandemic. Based on the most recent intake related to the Reaching Home Program, an additional \$10,000 has been realized towards enhanced identification services, and a request for proposals in the amount of \$20,000 will be circulated to non-profit organizations for the provision of these services.

### ***Foundation and Senior Government Grants up until July 31, 2021***

City staff, with the assistance of the task force, has received the following foundation and senior government grants, in the amount of \$213,582, up until July 31, 2021:

#### *Vancouver Foundation COVID-19 Community Response Grants*

In April 2020, the City applied for and received two Vancouver Foundation COVID-19 Community Response grants in support of the following programs:

- \$50,000 for the St. Barnabas Anglican Church Food Cupboard, which distributed 80 pre-packed food hampers on a weekly basis for a 12-week period, as well as the purchase of personal protective equipment for volunteers.
- \$32,500 for the St. Aidan's Presbyterian Grocery Hamper Program, which distributed 50 pre-packed food hampers on a weekly basis for a 12-week period, as well as the purchase of personal protective equipment for volunteers.

#### *Greater Vancouver Food Bank Community Agency Partnership Program*

In April 2020, the City and the Greater Vancouver Food Bank (GVFB), under its Community Agency Partnership Program, established a Food Hamper Program. This program, located on the lower floor of Holy Trinity Community Hall and distributing over 300 hampers per week, was for families and individuals who usually attended the New Westminster Food Bank Program but for reasons related to COVID-19, such as being disabled, elderly, immune compromised or symptomatic, could not or were not comfortable attending in person. In September 2020, the GVFB donated an industrial-sized refrigeration unit to facilitate the storage of additional perishable food items.

#### *Reaching Home Program Grants*

Starting in November 2020, the City applied for and received three grants under the Reaching Home Program, including:

- \$30,962, which was distributed to the Elizabeth Fry Society, the Lower Mainland Purpose Society and the Union Gospel Mission for the purchase of basic and essential supplies for the unsheltered and precariously housed, including

backpacks, blankets, food gift cards, hygiene products, jackets and rain ponchos, shoes, socks, and underwear. Of this amount, \$9,000 was allocated to cover the rental cost of three portable toilets for a three-month period.

- \$100,120 and \$68,798, which, combined, covered the period from December 1, 2020 to July 31, 2021, and funded the following activities:
  - Supported five food security and resource hubs serving all areas of the city, and feeding about 750 people on a weekly basis.
  - Provided groceries, with a value of \$55 per delivery, to 300 people and hot meals to 572 people who were disabled, elderly, immune compromised or symptomatic, and could not or were not comfortable accessing a food security program.
  - Provided 200 basic needs hampers, with a value of \$25 per hamper, to tenants of Dunwood Place, Legion Manor, Rotary Tower, and two co-ops on Quayside Drive.
  - Provided 487 pasta takeaway lunches which helped address the lack of food security programming on Sundays.
  - Provided 1,716 meal cards to those who were unsheltered or precariously housed.
  - Established a permaculture garden at St. Aidan's Presbyterian Church. From April to July 2021, 165 kg of produce was distributed to three of the five hubs.
  - Established, in partnership with the City's Parks Department, a program in which produce grown in the City's greenhouses was distributed to the five hubs. In June and July 2021, over 600 kg of produce was harvested and distributed.
  - Supported additional staffing needs and enhanced remuneration rates for the hubs located at St. Aidan's Presbyterian and St. Barnabas Anglican Churches.
  - Offered First Aid training to 24 volunteers and Food Safe certification to 25 volunteers, which supported enhanced and expanded food security programming.
  - Provided 109 shopping buggies to people who are disabled and elderly, enabling them to more easily transport groceries.
  - Purchased 1,650 'Everybody Needs to Eat' shopping bags, which were used for the basic needs hampers and the July 2021 Grocery Challenge.
  - Instituted laundry and shower programs, with 200 packages of laundry soap and 120 shower comfort backpacks being distributed. Allocated funding for a new laundry program in which vulnerable people will be provided access to laundromats and detergent at no charge.
  - Purchased 12 canopy tents to keep volunteers dry and to distribute food outdoors.
  - Secured three community notice boards to raise awareness about the hubs and their operating hours.

During the eight-month period, 10,349 people were served (total numbers and not distinct individuals).

### ***Foundation and Senior Government Grants from August 1, 2021 to July 31, 2022***

#### *Reaching Home Program Grant*

The City received a grant in the amount of \$145,860 under the Reaching Home Program. This grant will continue to fund the activities and projects as cited under intakes two and three of the Reaching Home Program as outlined earlier, with all funding to be expended by March 31, 2022.

#### *Strengthening Communities Services Program Grant*

The City received a grant in the amount of \$446,083 under the Strengthening Communities Services Program. This grant will fund the following activities and projects, which are organized according to the four areas of eligibility, with all funding to be expended by July 31, 2022.

- To improve the health and safety of persons who are experiencing homelessness.
  - *Digital Inclusion Initiative* - City, Douglas College and Purpose Society (\$8,000)

This project is a partnership between the City, Douglas College and Purpose Society and is intended to move at-risk and vulnerable populations from digital exclusion to inclusion. It will enhance access to the Internet, through the installation of portable antennas and Wi-Fi boosters; expand the reach of the Digital Inclusion Hub, which offers one-on-one support and training; and increase charging capacity through the installation of public charging infrastructure.

- *Maida Duncan Drop-In Centre - Enhanced Social Support, Advocacy and Case Management Interventions* - Elizabeth Fry Society (\$50,000)

The centre is funded by a grant from the City and BC Housing, totaling about \$40,000 per year. It is the only drop-in service for women in the city and has an annual operating budget of about \$120,000, with the society underwriting all unfunded costs. Given the pandemic, demand for service has spiked, with about 275 visits per month. This funding will enable the centre to meet the increasing demand, while reducing the financial burden on the society.

- *Newcomer Feeding the Homeless Pilot Project - MOSAIC (\$52,492)*

The project will establish a hot meal program that connects newcomers, who are experiencing social isolation and who are in need of training and work experience, with those who are unsheltered and precariously housed. It will provide volunteer recruitment, program coordination, and skill development and training, as well cover the cost of venues, food, packaging, and delivery.

- To reduce community concerns about public health and safety in neighbourhoods related to homelessness.

- *Health Contact Centre Liaison and Outreach Initiative - Purpose Society (\$50,000)*

The centre incorporates an overdose prevention site and other harm reduction services. This funding will expand community outreach capacity, including facilitating liaison with business and resident associations; addressing potential business and resident concerns related to public drug use and discarded needles and other drug paraphernalia; and raising awareness about the centre and the services offered among those using illicit drugs.

- *I's on the Street Program Expanded Scope and Pilot Project - New Westminster Homelessness Coalition Society (\$127,812)*

The program is an award winning street cleaning service which offers employment and work experience to those dealing with homelessness and mental health issues, while contributing to the general upkeep of the neighbourhood in which it operates. The funding will expand the program in the Downtown, reintroduce it in the Uptown, and pilot it in Sapperton.

- *Vulnerable Persons Liaison Officer Enhanced Outreach Initiative - New Westminster Police Department (\$10,000)*

The City has designated a constable as a vulnerable person liaison officer, with the intent of forging a conciliatory and problem-solving approach to addressing social issues, including homelessness. This funding will be used to develop relations and trust through the purchase and distribution of food items, including meal vouchers, hygiene products, new socks and underwear, and other essentials.

- To improve coordination related to health and service provision related to food insecurity and homelessness.



- *Homelessness Coordination Services* - New Westminster Homelessness Coalition Society (\$17,999)

The Coalition includes representation from over 20 faith-based and non-profit organizations with a mandate to directly or indirectly address homelessness. This funding will provide 21 hours per week for five months of coordination services to work closely with the COVID-19 At-Risk and Vulnerable Populations Task Force; to facilitate responses to homelessness involving faith-based and non-profit organizations; and to coordinate food security planning and programming.

- To increase capacity to work with persons who are experiencing homelessness and Indigenous organizations towards culturally-safe and trauma-informed responses.

- *Advanced Care Planning for the Homeless* - New West Hospice Society (\$27,000)

This project will retain the services of a health care professional, who with a local outreach worker, will prepare advanced care plans for those who are unsheltered or precariously housed. More specifically, it will document their health and personal care wishes, and record and store this information for future reference.

- *Community Action Network Planning Framework* - City and BC Poverty Reduction Coalition (\$20,000)

The City and the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition established a partnership to increase the involvement of people with lived and living experience of homelessness and poverty in civic planning, policy development, and decision-making processes. To date, this has included the staging a seven-session Community Action Network Leadership Training Program. This project will fund a second program intake and engage and compensate program graduates as part of the development of the City's Homelessness Action Strategy.

- *Urban Indigenous Away from Home Training Program* - Lookout Housing and Health Society (\$77,008)

The project, which is a partnership between Lookout, the Musqueam First Nation and the Spirit of the Children Society, will offer a training program which aims to develop understanding, increase capacity and promote positive partnerships, as well as cultivating meaningful relationships and trust, between social service providers and urban Indigenous homeless persons.

### ***Task Force Website and Publications***

City staff, with the assistance of the task force, developed a website portal to facilitate information dissemination. It also prepared and is regularly updating a number of publications to inform faith-based and non-profit member organizations, and to assist at-risk and vulnerable populations. These publications include:

- Financial Supports Listing
- Food Resources Calendar
- Survival Guide
- Tennant Support and Resources Bulletin
- Trusted Links and Resources regarding the COVID-19 Pandemic Bulletin

To facilitate access, City staff coordinated the inclusion of the publications as part of food hampers; distributed to non-market housing developments, and worked with faith-based and non-profit member organizations to provide hard copies to their clients and guests.

These publications can be found at the following link:

<https://www.newwestcity.ca/services/public-safety/covid-19/community-resources>

### **ANALYSIS**

#### ***Task Force Update***

The COVID-19 At-Risk and Vulnerable Populations Task Force is facilitating close working relations between the City and the faith-based and non-profit sector. Through regular task force meetings, emergent issues are raised, and gaps and needs are identified. City staff and faith-based and non-profit member organizations are also working collaboratively to address issues, gaps and needs, and capitalizing on funding and partnership opportunities. To this end, City staff, with the assistance of the task force, has realized \$365,000 in City funding (amount requested minus grants applied) and \$874,323 in foundation and senior government funding, as well as developing strategic partnerships, including with the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society, the New Westminster Inter-Ministerial Association, and the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning.

The task force, as evidenced by the cited activities and projects funded to date and to come, has and will continue to make a significant contribution in meeting the needs of at-risk and vulnerable populations, who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. It has enabled these population groups to access financial assistance and government benefits, much of it pandemic related; attend drop-in, food security and meal programs; connect with formal and informal support networks through digital inclusion initiatives; gain the assistance of outreach or support workers; meet their hygiene and sanitation needs, including through the provision of portable toilets; and

receive blankets, boots, coats and other essentials to protect against the elements. As such, the task force, through its efforts, has contributed to enhanced health outcomes, including reduced virus transmission; provided hope; and likely saved lives.

### ***Staffing Update***

Community Planning is resourcing the task force, including chairing and coordinating its meetings; preparing and updating the website portal and all publications; managing all grants, including related to reporting; participating in some of the activities and projects, including the Digital Inclusion Initiative, the Community Action Network and the Seniors Integrated Support Pilot Project; and continuing to monitor the pandemic and respond to it. This is placing significant pressure of staff, particularly given the duration of the pandemic, with a new wave underway.

In addition, Community Planning is very involved in City efforts to realize additional emergency shelter capacity and new supportive and non-market housing, while commencing work on several significant policy initiatives, including the Affordable Housing and Homelessness Action Strategies. Community Planning also continues to address the overdose epidemic, through its ongoing liaison with the Health Contact Centre and participation on the Overdose Community Action Team, as well as its potential work related to Broken Drug Policies.

Currently, Community Planning comprises four full-time, permanent staff, with one member providing data analysis and statistical support to the Division, Department and Corporation. Recently, a two-year Planning Analyst was retained, and given the current workload; the continuing demands related to affordable housing and the overdose epidemic; and the pausing of community planning and policy work to address the ongoing pandemic, it will be important to make this position permanent.

### ***Pandemic Update***

During the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, New Westminster recorded a high of 151 new cases during the week of April 4 to 10, 2021. In the ensuing months, cases steadily decreased to single digit weekly counts in July 2021, including a low of new cases during the week of July 18 to 24, 2021.

Since this low count was recorded, New Westminster cases have increased as part of a fourth wave, reaching 31 new cases during the week of August 8 to 14, 2021. This increase is consistent with most of the rest of British Columbia, and despite 87% of New Westminster's population 12+ having received one dose and 76% have received two doses. Of note, these percentages are the second highest rate of vaccination out of Fraser Health's 13 local health areas.

Of concern, 24% of the population 12+ is not fully vaccinated, and there are now breakthrough infections of fully vaccinated people, although extremely rare, and usually not requiring hospitalization. This suggests that new cases are likely to increase, and

the percentages may be higher among at-risk and vulnerable populations, some of whom lack adequate shelter, live in overcrowded conditions, and suffer from inadequate nutrition. This speaks to the importance of the work of the task force, and the need for continued action to address the needs of at-risk and vulnerable populations, including post-pandemic.

### ***Task Force Request for 2022***

The task force has funding in place until July 31, 2022, and will continue to identify and apply for new funding, as well as seek out partnerships. The task force will also be making a much smaller request of Council with regard to meeting future needs of at-risk and vulnerable populations. To this end, the task force, as part of its budget request form for 2022, will be seeking the following:

- \$90,000 for enhanced outreach referral and advocacy services from March 1 to December 31, 2022;
- \$16,400 for food security and homelessness coordination services between August 1 and December 31, 2022.

As noted, City staff, with the assistance of the task force, will identify and apply for foundation and senior government funding to defray some or all of the above costs.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The task force will be making a financial request as part of the deliberations related to the 2022 Operating Budget. At this time, this request will be limited to enhanced outreach, referral and advocacy and coordination services related to food security and homelessness planning and programming. As part of the 2023 Operating Budget, Development Services will likely be making a request to make the two-year Planning Analyst position permanent.

### **INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON**

Development Services is working very closely with Purchasing and Finance with regard to managing the grants received. It is also working with other Departments on specific issues related to the pandemic.

### **OPTIONS**

There are two options for Council consideration:

1. That Council receive this report for information.
2. That Council provide alternative direction.

Staff recommends option 1.

**APPROVALS**

This report was prepared by:  
John Stark, Supervisor of Community Planning

This report was reviewed by:  
Emilie K. Adin, Director of Development Services

This report was approved by:  
Lisa Spitale, Chief Administrative Officer