
Vancouver Extreme Weather Response Plan

2011/12

October, 2011

VANCOUVER 2010/2011 EXTREME WEATHER RESPONSE PLAN

Introduction

The Extreme Weather Response program is an initiative that “enables communities to temporarily increase emergency shelter capacity during extreme weather conditions that threaten the safety and health of homeless individuals and families when the existing emergency shelter beds within the community are overwhelmed. The Program funds temporary extra shelter spaces during periods of inclement weather that are severe enough where sleeping outside might threaten [the homeless person’s] health and safety.” Community members, congregations from faith groups and advocates work together to provide safe refuge and hospitality in addition to emergency shelter. The expected outcomes of the EWR program are decreased health and safety risks to homeless people during periods of extreme winter weather, and a reduction of street homelessness during extreme winter weather.

Those involved in the development and implementation of the current Extreme Weather Response Program are:

- Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy
- BC Housing
- City of Vancouver
- 10th Avenue Alliance Church
- Covenant House
- Evelyne Saller Centre
- First Baptist Church
- The Gathering Place
- St. Mark’s Extreme Weather Shelter
- The Salvation Army
- Lookout Emergency Aid Society
- James Pratt, Regional EWR Coordinator
- Irene Jaakson, Vancouver EWR Coordinator

2010/11 Season

A total of 878 people were served by the Vancouver Extreme Weather Response program last year. St. Mark’s Anglican Church saw the highest number of people at just over 300, with First Baptist Church following with approximately 210 individuals. There was no need for any Downtown Eastside Extreme Weather sites to open last year as space was consistently available at the back up locations. Of note is that Salvation Army Belkin House, technically an “overflow location”, did open on the occasions when a homeless individual did not want to access service in the downtown eastside, highlighting the need for shelter spaces outside of this neighbourhood.

For the 2011/12 Season, as in past years, an extreme weather alert will be called when weather conditions are deemed severe enough to present a substantial threat to the life or health of homeless persons. Factors taken into account include:

- Temperatures near zero with rainfall that makes it difficult or impossible for homeless people to remain dry and/or
- Sleet/freezing rain; and/or
- Snow accumulation; and/or
- Sustained high winds; and/or
- Temperatures at or below -2 degrees Celsius

Traditionally, the Sub-Regional Coordinator has called Extreme Weather alerts in consultation with members of the EWR Committee, and decides, again in consultation with the Committee, which facilities will be open on which nights; typically sites open on a rotational basis which allows for on-going capacity during prolonged periods of extreme weather.

Current homeless situation in Vancouver

March 16, 2011 saw a Homeless Count in Metro Vancouver. In Vancouver, the number of homeless people totally 1,605. 145 of this number indicating those who were “unsheltered”, 98 indicating those with “no fixed address” and 1,362 indicating those accessing emergency facilities (although it is critical to know that homeless numbers such as this are invariably undercounts). Compared to the Metro Vancouver Count in 2008, the 2011 findings show that the number of homeless people in Vancouver remains largely the same, but that the number of sheltered homeless has increased substantially (765 in 2008 compared to 1,460 in 2011). While on one level this is welcome news, the fact remains that the *actual* number of homeless people in Vancouver has remain unchanged.

There has been much speculation on where the increased number of sheltered homeless accessed shelter space between 2008 and 2011. It is likely safe to conclude that at least some of these people have found space in the over 300 low barrier spaces made available by Vancouver’s H.E.A.T. shelters. It is concerning to note however that the funding extensions for these three H.E.A.T. sites will end between 2011 and 2013: New Fountain is expected to close permanently later this year, Central will end in 2012, and First United will likely close in 2013.

Satisfaction Surveys

As noted in the final report from the 2010/11 season, a trend of lower numbers was seen across the EWR shelter sites last year, but not until early December. This was likely due to the opening of the Winter Response shelters on December 1, 2010. For instance, one site served ten homeless individuals the last alert of November and served two the first alert of December. Another site served eighteen homeless individuals the last alert of November and seven the first alert of December.

Given this backdrop, and in order to determine the degree to which Extreme Weather Response shelters meet the needs of Vancouver’s homeless population, satisfaction surveys were conducted in the summer of 2011 with individuals who access EWR sites during periods of inclement weather. The surveys were conducted outside the Kitsilano Shower Program on July 16th, and just prior to the evening meal at 10th Avenue Alliance Church on August 22nd. The surveys were qualitative by design, and conducted at only two locations, factors that limit their reliability and broader applicability, however interesting results were nonetheless forthcoming.

Fifteen male and two female respondents completed a survey. Most respondents identified that they used the Extreme Weather shelters primarily when it was cold outside. One respondent stated that “rain is rough”, and only when rain is continuous does he go indoors. Another respondent noted that he and his girlfriend typically stayed under a bridge in the winter, but once in the 2010/11 season his girlfriend had the flu and they accessed the EWR shelter then. Yet another respondent stated that he accessed the shelter when the heater in his car broke down and he was unable to turn it on periodically for warmth.

A large number of the respondents also noted that they accessed the EWR shelters when they felt a need to connect to other people. One respondent stated that the EWR shelter is “nice, safe and warm” and that he “knows a lot of the guys there, it’s familiar”. Two other respondents identified “friendship” and “companionship” as important elements. In one case, a respondent stated that he accessed one of the H.E.A.T. shelters, but found that “it was different”, and that “all his friends were at [the extreme weather site]”. Still another respondent stated that he took great comfort in sleeping in a Church, knowing that a Higher Power was looking over him and protecting him.

Pragmatic reasons were also given as motivation to use the EWR shelter. Food was a major draw, with several respondents noting the importance of the dinner and breakfast meals provided. Showers, where available, were considered critical, as were “good mats”, a clean environment, donated clothes and clean socks.

Staff and/or volunteers were considered, without exception, to be exceedingly helpful, kind and respectful. Others noted that it was an EWR staff person who helped him access a drug treatment program, and other expressed sincere gratitude for a staff helping to access dental care for a severe toothache. It was interesting to learn however, that several respondents would not ask staff/volunteers for assistance accessing services, rather they would ask other homeless participants. It appeared that the respondents knew that staff/volunteers provided “raw charity”, and several respondents stated that they “loved” those that worked or volunteered for the EWR program, it was also understood that the staff/volunteers did not have the lived experience that would make them a resource in the practical, “day to day” sense. Again however, this did not diminish how “kindhearted” the staff/volunteers were.

Another interesting finding was the appreciation for what was experienced as “strict rules”. Several respondents noted their approval for the fact that there was zero tolerance for drugs and violence. This was one of the key reasons that participants did not access the H.E.A.T. shelters, even when there were benefits such as twenty-four hour access. Indeed, the higher barrier nature of the EWR shelters was considered a key difference to shelter sites in the downtown eastside as well, with one respondent stating that he stayed at a [downtown eastside shelter] but “had to get out”.

When asked for thoughts on why the number of people accessing EWR sites have decreased over the last few years, however, the availability of the H.E.A.T. shelters was given as a primary response. A second reason was that people refused to access shelter in the downtown eastside. Respondents suggested that EWR shelters open earlier as a way to ensure people are safe when the weather is dangerously cold and wet, and that if this were in place more people would participate.

Mapping

A new initiative this year is the capacity to access the exact location of each EWR site, as well as all Vancouver shelter locations, via a Google map. The Vancouver Coordinator will have the capacity to identify the extreme weather sites in operation during an alert on the map, so community members wishing to know the location of the site can easily access this information from any computer.

Vancouver Extreme Weather Shelters

In October, 2011, BC Housing announced increased funding for the Extreme Weather Response Program. Salvation Army Belkin House increased the number of beds provided by five, and Catholic Charities officially became an EWR site with 20 beds.

During extreme weather the following facilities may be opened:

10th Avenue Alliance Church (11-10th Avenue West @ Ontario)

Can accommodate up to 25 people. Open 10:00 pm to 7:00 am. Regular shelter Mondays at 6 pm. Contact: Carmen Beugelink

Catholic Charities (828 Cambie Street)

Can accommodate up to 20 men (in emergencies, 6 women could be accommodated as well.) Extreme Weather beds will open at 8 pm and close at 8 am. Over the Christmas holiday week through to New Year's the Extreme Weather beds will be open 24/7. Food, showers and laundry is provided. Contact: On-shift staff

Covenant House (575 Drake St)

Will provide overnight accommodation on folding cots for up to 12 youths (16-24 yrs). Registration between 9:00 and 11:00 pm. An evening hot meal and breakfast are provided. Contact: On-shift Team Leader

Evelyne Saller Centre (320 Alexander Street)

During extreme weather the centre opens between midnight and 7:00 am. The Centre can accommodate up to 40 people. People are provided with a blanket for the night and they receive a light snack before going to sleep and coffee, toast and jam in the morning. Contact: Ernie Leffler

First Baptist Church (969 Burrard St)

During extreme weather the facility opens between 9:00 pm and 7:00 am. Up to 35 people can be sheltered in the gym. People are provided with blankets and mats to sleep on and food and beverages are provided in the evening and in the morning. Contacts: Brad Steyn: 604-683-8441 or Carrie Belanger

The Gathering Place (609 Helmcken St)

During extreme weather the facility opens between midnight and 7:00 am. Up to 40 people can be sheltered in the theatre space at the facility. People are provided with blankets and mats to sleep on and food and beverages are provided in the evening and in the morning. Contacts: Jo-Ann Stevens or Rennie Keats

St. Mark's Extreme Weather Shelter (1805 Larch St)

Operating from St. Mark's Anglican Church, this facility can accommodate up to 25

people. Opens at 9:30 pm-- Intake closes at 11:00 pm. Hot meal on intake. Carts stored inside. Shelter Telephone (after 9:15 pm)

Back up sites:

The Salvation Army Belkin House (555 Homer St.)

Can accommodate 13 men and 7 women. Opens after other shelters full after 11:00 pm. Breakfast is served at 7:30 am. Contact: Rebecca Bell

The Salvation Army Harbour Light (119 East Cordova St.)

Can accommodate up to 50 people. People receive mats, pillows and blankets. Coffee and a snack are provided in the morning. This shelter will only open if there is sufficient overflow from Harbour Light's year-round and CWW shelters. Contact: Don Sikstrom or Kevin Hawkes

Outreach

The Lookout Emergency Aid Society Vancouver Outreach team operating out of the Downtown Housing Centre will broadcast alerts and response locations.

Media

Media inquiries should be directed to Irene Jaakson, Sub-Regional Coordinator (*please note the change in contact number from last year*). Media inquiries on regional EWR issues should be directed to James Pratt, Regional Coordinator.

Notifications

When an Extreme Weather Alert is called, a long list of service providers, health and government agencies will be notified via email and they will be informed of the sites that will be open. A process for making phone contact for evenings, weekends and holidays are in place. Extreme Weather notifications will trigger the Assistance to Shelter Act, and emails noting the alert will specify this fact.

Deactivation

Each EWR facility is encouraged to have a pre-determined plan on how and when they will close. Some facilities in Vancouver have a one or two-day closing process to give their clientele some warning and time to make other arrangements. Facilities are encouraged to inform the Vancouver EWR Coordinator of their plans to close and the reasons for closing as these decisions are made so he can inform other EWR partners as necessary. It is understood that due to different micro-climates and different levels of on-going services for homeless people in different neighbourhoods within Vancouver, some EWR facilities may remain open after others have closed.

Back-up Sub-regional Coordinator

In the absence of the Sub-regional Coordinator, Carrie Belanger will act as back-up or EWR activation, deactivation, reporting and media contact.

Contact information for Carrie Belanger is...

Reporting

Extreme Weather Response sites will submit statistics on EWR shelter usage, number of people turned away, and the number of people brought to shelter by police (both voluntarily and involuntarily).

Evaluation

The Vancouver Extreme Weather Program will be evaluated against the BC Housing EWR Program Principles which include:

- Core services are accessible and client-focused
- Transparent and accountable operations
- A welcoming, safe and secure service environment
- A collaborative and innovative sector environment

The objectives against which the Vancouver EWR Program will be evaluated are:

- Provide extra shelter spaces for people who are homeless during periods of extreme weather which threaten their health and safety

The outcomes against which the Vancouver EWR Program will be evaluated are:

- Reduce health and safety risks to homeless people related to extreme winter weather exposure
- Reduce street homelessness during extreme winter weather

Qualitative and quantitative measurements will be used, as well as neutral indicators:

- Quantitative measurement will report on the number of people use who the EWR services, and the ratio or percentage of Vancouver's homeless population using EWR sites. To this end, Extreme Weather sites will provide information to BC Housing on a daily basis as well as to the Sub-Regional Coordinator.
- Qualitative measurement will report on the changes in individual situations as a result of the EWR program, for instance in the perceived health status of the homeless individuals accessing the program. Further, in the Spring of 2012, the Extreme Weather Committee will meet to assess the 2010/11 season.
- Neutral indicators will include the number of EWR sites and the number of volunteers trained.