

Day shelter to get extended hours

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The territory's health minister says the Safe Harbour Day Shelter will soon be open 12 hours per day, closing a gap in its hours of service that forced people onto city streets.

The change in hours is one that's long been sought. For two hours in the morning, the lunch hour and two hours in the evening, the overnight men's and women's, and day shelters are closed.

Changing the hours was one of the recommendations of a plan released two weeks ago at city hall, developed after an April workshop on homelessness issues.

"It hasn't come into effect but we've entered into negotiations and we're moving towards 12 hours a day," Health and Social Services Minister Glen Abernethy said last week about the change. "We're hoping it comes into effect really soon, we just have to work out the details with our provider."

The provider in this case is the NWT Disabilities Council, which is contracted by the department to operate the day shelter.

The council's executive director, Denise McKee, did not return a request for comment by press time.

Funding for the expanded hours will come from the department's existing budget, he said.

The Department of Health and Social Services was unable to say how much the extended hours would cost.

It comes as the GNWT also renews its contract with the Disabilities Council for the shelter on 49 Street.

Abernethy said the shelter will remain in its current location across the street from the downtown liquor store.

"I've made a commitment to move the day shelter based on concerns raised by the community, but we couldn't afford not to have a day shelter," he said in an interview.

"We've been there once before. We know it leads to additional problems. So we've renewed the contract while we search for a new location."

He said the shelter needs to remain downtown, though that's caused difficulty in securing a new venue.

"It's not something a lot of people are willing to make their property available to, so we have to go out and do more pounding the pavement and encourage people to consider renting to us for this purpose," Abernethy said.

The minister, answering questions last week from Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green, said the GNWT is also looking for a site for a sobering centre in the city.

"There has been some suggestion that we try to utilize one building for both the sobering centre and the day shelter; there would have to be separate entrances," he said Thursday. "That might prove to be a way to control some of our spending, but we have to be aware that we may not be able to find a location that can meet both those needs."

The estimated cost of a sobering centre wasn't included in the homelessness report.

Green heralded that report in a speech Thursday, praising cabinet and Mayor Mark Heyck for their work on tackling issues around homelessness and addictions.

"We've gone from being baffled by the problem to embracing it, and that's a tremendous accomplishment," she said.