

A sobering day at centre



After the ribbon cutting for the new Sobering/Day Centre on 50 Street on Monday morning, Industry, Tourism and Investment Minister Wally Schumann, rear left, chats inside the facility with Homelessness Minister Alfred Moses as clients go about their business.

James O'Connor/NISL photos

New combined Sobering/Day Centre officially opens in new location on 50 Street; workers in neighbouring block say they feel unsafe and will beef up security measures

by **Brendan Burke**
Northern News Services

Eric and Louisa were two of the first clients at the \$1.46 million Sobering/Day Centre.

"Compared to the last few places, it's more spacious, cleaner. I find the people are calmer, just a better feeling in the building," said Eric, who didn't wish to give his last name.

"You can do laundry. You can take a shower. You can take a nap," said Louisa, who also withheld her surname.

"Me being homeless ... it's easier for me to go there and use the phone; send out applications for housing. I don't drink so it's easier for me – hard, but easier."

Yellowknife's new Sobering/Day Centre officially opened its doors Monday morning, although it actually started operation on Friday.

And there was friction between neighbours almost right from the start.

That included April Desjarlais, landlord of the Finn Hansen Building, and an early skeptic of the location of the new centre.

"On the first day of the centre being open, we had to lock our doors. It was absolute mayhem," Desjarlais told Yellowknifer, recalling fights and an individual who'd passed out in her building's foyer.

While Desjarlais said she understands the "serious" need for a sobering centre and shelter in the downtown core – where homelessness is concentrated – she still "can't wrap her head around," a sobering centre being "30 feet from a liquor store."

Desjarlais said her staff retrieved five bottles that had been thrown onto her property on Friday alone.

"If they're going to run that centre the same way they ran the old day shelter, it's not going to work," she said.

Desjarlais said her staff and tenants – feeling unsafe since last week – will adopt new measures to face the "realities" next door. She's looking

into installing a buzzer system and cameras, a new fence and may make changes to the building's lighting. She said the adjustments stand to cost her "thousands and thousands."

On Monday, Health Minister Glen Abernethy addressed concerns voiced by neighbours of the new centre.

"We want to make sure people in the neighbourhood are safe – the clients, the staff. But also our neighbours," he told *Yellowknifer*.

Abernethy said a newly established phone line will field reports of troubling conduct.

But the number isn't being made public at this time.

'Things likely will happen'

"It's intended for direct neighbours communication. We would be happy to share the number with anyone in the vicinity who wishes to provide feedback, however it is not intended for lodging all issues surrounding downtown homelessness/intoxication," stated Lisa Giovanetto, a GNWT spokesperson, in an email.

"Things likely will happen. If you see them ... let us know so we can start addressing them early, to get over these stumbling blocks, these growing pains," said Abernethy.

On Monday morning, a ceremony was held in the fenced-in gravel patio area outside the centre, which features a few picnic tables. And a security camera.

Abernethy and Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green – flanked by Homelessness Minister Alfred Moses and Mayor Mark Heyck – handled ribbon-cutting honours outside of the 50 Street location before welcoming guests inside.

The centre, which sits between the Finn Hansen Building and the Northern Lites Motel, combines the services of a day shelter and sobering centre under one roof.

Monday's launch followed the closing of the former day shelter, Safe Harbour, which had been operating on 49 Street since 2014.



ABOVE: Mayor Mark Heyck, left, shakes hands with Housing and Homelessness Minister Alfred Moses, as Health and Social Services Minister Glen Abernethy and Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green look on.

RIGHT: The security station displays from closed circuit cameras inside and outside the centre.

BELOW RIGHT: Some of the beds inside the new Sobering/Day Centre.



The city's sobering centre had been operating out of the Salvation Army since October.

For many, Monday's unveiling meant a first look at the renovated building

Louis Nutaradlaluk, a Yellowknife who benefits from the centre, also praised the overall look and feel of the building – but questioned its location.

"The liquor store is right there. It's easier access," said Nutaradlaluk. "I think it's more problematic now."