

MLA JULIE GREEN – YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE – IN THE MEDIA

Isolation at sobering centre helping people curb alcohol use, organizers say **By: Hilary Bird**

CBC News – April 21 - 2020

Link: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/yellowknife-shelter-isolation-program-working-1.5539118>

NWT Disabilities Council says three people who were in the isolation program were able to find housing

While MLAs and advocates have spoken out against the NWT Disabilities Council for closing its day-shelter services, the council says its new quarantine program has helped more than 20 people decrease their alcohol and drug use.

Twenty-nine people who are homeless in Yellowknife began a quarantine period at the sobering centre and day shelter on April 3, as a precaution against COVID-19. They were to remain there, day and night, for a minimum of 30 days. Participants are provided with food, medical services, alcohol and cigarettes.

During the quarantine, the facility is closed to the rest of the city's homeless population. Within the first 10 days of isolation, three younger adults left the program after finding independent housing and proving they could stay sober. One participant had to leave the program because of a family emergency.

In an email Monday to the CBC, Denise McKee, executive director of the NWT Disabilities Council, the organization that runs the shelter, said that although the program was initially designed to protect the homeless community and others from infection, it had proven to be successful in unexpected ways.

Documents shared by McKee state that all of the 25 people currently in isolation have decreased their alcohol consumption, some drastically. Ten have stopped consuming hard drugs.

The documents also state there have been no incidents of violence during the program.

"Knowing that they have a permanent place to stay has decreased stress and improved well-being, with the adults living at our centre becoming engaged in productive activities during the

day (e.g. cooking, sewing, art, games etc.) and maintaining positive social connections," the NWT Disabilities Council said in the document.

Alcohol consumption, drug use down

Mckee provided CBC with statistics of participant alcohol and drug use before entering the program and their current use while in the program.

One participant apparently drank roughly five or more bottles of Private Stock malt liquor or a 1.75 L bottle of vodka every day before the program. According to the statistics, that person drinks only two mickey's of vodka a day, or roughly 750 ml of alcohol, while in isolation.

Another person who would previously drink six to eight bottles of Private Stock a day while using crack cocaine, now only drinks one bottle and no longer uses illegal drugs.

'Nowhere to go'

The downside of the new isolation program is that those who are homeless and not among the 25 people currently quarantined are now without a place to warm up, use the bathroom, shower, do laundry, access the internet, hang out or have a bite to eat. The Salvation Army in Yellowknife has opened as a place for people to go to during the day but can only serve a limited number of people.

Advocates and several MLA's have been critical of the change saying it leaves many of the city's homeless, who are not in the isolation program, vulnerable.

Most of the people now in the program, don't want to leave, the disabilities council says. Seventeen of the 25 remaining participants say they want to stay for another 30 days. Six more say they'll stay if they aren't able to get independent housing and if the pandemic situation doesn't change.

The council says it's been approached by five people who aren't currently in the program, who are interested in "checking in" for 30 days.

Homeless now 'more vulnerable'

But homeless advocate Lydia Bardak says she still has a major issue with the repurposing of the shelter.

"Who is providing service for the 40 people with nowhere to go? Where can people go? It's not even wandering the mall of the library because those places are closed," Bardak said.

"We have dramatically reduced what's available to people on the streets. That, in fact, makes them more vulnerable."

In the document it submitted to the CBC, the council acknowledged that many in the public are critical of the program.

"Visibility of low-income adults in the downtown core continues to be interpreted by the public as a homelessness issue, despite many of these persons being housed. Messaging needs to address that visibility of people outside is not indication of service failure," the document says.

Yellowknife MLA, Julie Green brought a motion to the Standing Committee on Accountability last week that would have requested the council reopen regular day shelter services. That motion has yet to be debated by MLA's but Green says she's had discussions with staff at the Department of Health and Social Services and is now prepared to wait for the outcome of a meeting between the shelter, NGOs and the territorial government on Tuesday.

"I think they know what the issue is and they are prepared to re-evaluate the use of the centre ... so at this point I am prepared to wait and see what they come up with," Green said in an email Monday.

The NWT Disabilities Council did not respond to a request for an interview Monday.