

MLA JULIE GREEN – YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE – IN THE MEDIA

Yellowknife's sobering centre and day shelter to reopen, but to fewer people

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To allow for physical distancing, the day shelter will let in 20 people, and the sobering centre 18

After shutting its doors to all but about 30 people to prevent the spread of COVID-19, Yellowknife's day shelter and sobering centre is reopening — but letting in fewer people.

Starting Monday, the day shelter will let 20 people inside from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. to allow for physical distancing, down from about 60 people pre-COVID-19, said Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green, whose riding is home to the joint facility. The sobering centre will be open to 18 people at a time from 10 a.m. to 8 a.m. (22 hours a day).

A temporary day shelter that was running out of the Salvation Army while the downtown day shelter was locked down will remain open, reads a government press release sent Monday.

"The sobering centre provides a valuable service to people who are homeless and/or live with addictions and I am glad it has returned to its original function," Green wrote on Facebook on Sunday.

Since early April, the joint sobering centre and day shelter downtown has been used as a quarantine centre for about 30 people who are homeless, and has been closed to everyone else. They will now have to do so at the Arnica Inn.

While those inside were given a place to sleep, food, medical services, alcohol and cigarettes, others without a place to go had to find alternative ways to meet their needs.

The NWT Disabilities Council, which runs the sobering centre and day shelter, did not respond to requests for comment before publication.

Over the last month, new spaces have opened to shelter and isolate people in Yellowknife during the pandemic, Green told CBC, but the city has been out of a place for people who are intoxicated to sober up.

"So they were either going to RCMP cells or the hospital and neither of those are really appropriate places for those folks to go when we have a sobering centre facility already established in Yellowknife," she said.

Arnica Inn opens as 'COVID isolation shelter'

People who were in quarantine at the sobering centre and day shelter, and who wish to continue isolating may now be able to do so at the Arnica Inn.

On Monday, it began accepting people who may be at a high risk of serious illness if they contract the novel coronavirus.

"Our first intake is designed to provide a bit of a bridge for folks who are no longer at the day shelter as it reopens in its new format," said Bree Denning, executive director of the Yellowknife Women's Society, which is running the housing program at the Arnica Inn. "Following that we'll be looking at medical intake for people at extremely high risk of severe illness if they do contract COVID[-19]."

As of Monday morning, said Denning, four people had been let into the "COVID isolation shelter" — the working name for the former inn.

The goal is to provide rooms for up to 30 people seeking to isolate themselves, said Denning. The building could accommodate more than that but the organization wants to ensure it has the staff to care for people with high medical needs.

Shelters operating at reduced capacity

But Lydia Bardak, an advocate for people who are homeless, said for the time being, new caps on people allowed inside the city's shelters continue to leave many without a place to sleep.

"Every other municipality has increased their services to homeless people, but we've decreased ours and no one is answering for this," said Bardak. "I have found guys passed out in the street. I have found guys who can't get into the Salvation Army because they're full by 10 o'clock [at night]."

Jason Brinson, the executive director of the Salvation Army said he wasn't aware of anyone seeking shelter being turned away, but said the shelter has lowered the number of people allowed in to accommodate physical distancing.

"We're at a reduced capacity, but we use an overflow area as needed for us to be able to accommodate a reasonable number of people," he said.

Pandemic has 'spurred innovation,' says MLA

Green said one thing she's noticed about the pandemic, is that it's pushed governments and organizations to come up with solutions to social problems quickly.

For example, shelters in the city have been piloting managed alcohol programs where they give people small amounts of alcohol throughout the day to reduce harms caused by their addictions.

"That suddenly came into being after years of talking about whether a managed alcohol program was a good idea or not," said Green.

"The pandemic has spurred innovation and more rapid decision-making, solution-finding, than before the pandemic started."