

MLA JULIE GREEN – YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE – IN THE MEDIA

YK shelter operator says month-long isolation project worked

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The NWT Disabilities Council says transforming its Yellowknife shelter into a month-long isolation centre for 29 homeless adults provided some big positives.

The council operates a day centre and sobering shelter on 50 Street. On April 3, the facility became an isolation centre for homeless people at heightened risk of Covid-19 for 30 days.

In a report on that 30-day period issued this week, the council says participants made “significant measurable change” in decreasing their substance use. Many subsequently found housing and reconnected with friends and family.

Participants had access to cultural programming, computers, phones, showers, laundry, medical support, and managed distribution of alcohol, tobacco, and self-procured cannabis.

The council said participants enjoyed a reduction in violence and noise, access to healthy meals, being sober, and the sense of community the isolation centre fostered.

“We were able to not only implement but successfully execute a model which showed significant positive health outcomes, helped to alleviate the pressures on external resources and, most importantly, was praised by the individuals who participated in the model,” Denise McKee, executive director of the council, said in an email.

According to the report, four people were sober when they left the program while 21 others had decreased their alcohol consumption and stopped using illegal drugs.

Five people had made housing arrangements with family and friends by the time they left the program, while two found housing in home communities outside Yellowknife. Four people moved into supportive housing at the Arnica Inn building.

Managed alcohol success

The building on 50 Street normally provides a safe, warm space for people without homes to use during the day, and somewhere for intoxicated people to safely spend the night.

Transforming the facility into an isolation centre, and shutting down those regular services, drew some criticism at the time. Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green said losing those services put vulnerable people who weren't part of the isolation program at greater risk.

The council, however, says the 30-day project provided important lessons for future programming.

For example, the decision to keep providing small amounts of alcohol to participants in effect created a trial of a managed alcohol program, which had been recommended in previous studies.

In its report, the council says it believes flexible, individualized plans to give out tobacco and alcohol are critical to the health and wellbeing of homeless adults with addictions in Yellowknife.

"This model of controlled distribution can empower participants to self-direct decreases in consumption while being supported by a cohort of others who provide peer support and motivation," the report states.

The report says on-site medical support and a visiting physician allowed participants to have moments of stability and sobriety where they could address underlying health issues that contributed to their substance use, like mental health disorders and chronic pain.

Young adults appeared to have greater success in re-establishing family connections or making their own housing arrangements while reducing substance use, the report states. The council says this indicates the benefit of having short-term housing options with wrap-around supports for younger homeless adults in Yellowknife.

The report says communal sheltering and socialization are key for many homeless adults. Seventeen people who used the isolation centre said they would not participate in a program where they had to sleep alone, in their own unit.

CERB provides a challenge

The report details at least two challenges the program faced.

After receiving money from the federal Canada Emergency Response Benefit, the report says some participants left the program for unstable housing where there was heavy alcohol and drug consumption.

Meanwhile, uncertainty about whether the program would be extended – and the state of the pandemic – meant participants weren't buying in to the program as much in its final days, the report says.

The council says it would have been better if participants knew from the start about their transition options at the end, like independent housing.

“It is our hope, that as we move forward, that the important lessons we have learned from this innovative model are not lost,” said McKee.