

Winter Emergency Response (Late Night Café)

Submitted by

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Title of submission

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Purpose

Winter Emergency Response (WER) is intended to mitigate risk for individuals that are vulnerable to serious, critical, or potentially fatal health impacts as a result of extreme cold weather exposure. In addition to offering protection from the elements, WER provides a reliable safety net that can help guests begin to shift from survival mode into planning for the future. Securing sustainable core operational funding will allow us to explore ways to support this shift by, for example, offering onsite professional addictions and mental health support.

The WER aligns with Key Area 1: Homeless Population in the City's Social Sustainability Plan and, specifically, the near-term strategies "identify and develop essential community and organization partnerships, relationships and priorities" and "cold weather options, policy/procedures" (p. 23). As well as aligning with Goal 2, Strategy B in the City's draft 2022 – 25 Strategic Plan, "Reduce accessibility and affordability barriers to housing, programming, and transportation services". While WER is not a long term solution, it is an in-term solution to keep individuals experiencing homelessness safe during extreme weather. It also offers the opportunity to build connection, relationship, and trust with the guests which is crucial for letting them know they are valued community members and that there is a caring support network available for them.

Description of project

WER is a collaborative initiative with representation from 11 community organizations. We operate a Late Night Café from November 1 – April 1 whenever the temperature is colder than -20 degrees Celsius with the wind chill. Last year the Late Night Café was open for 31 nights based on a -25 degree Celsius threshold. Guest and service provider feedback has indicated a need to lower the threshold to -20. Therefore, we are preparing to be open 50 nights this year. The Café is hosted in donated space at the Congregational Christian Fellowship Church from 7 pm – 7 am. A warm meal is provided in the evening and to-go snacks are provided in the morning. Guests can also access transportation to and from the Café. Its operations require two part-time, trained Coordinators contracted to manage the volunteers, arrange transportation, coordinate food, and ensure the Café is a safe and healthy space.

We are requesting a five year commitment from the City to ensure we can continue to operate until the City and/or community has time to develop and implement a long-term homelessness plan. We are working on securing core operational funding from another source as well. However, these processes are simultaneous; therefore, if the City approves our proposal and we secure the other funding as well, we would notify the City and would hope to have a conversation about reallocating the funding to other priorities, i.e.: mental Health.

Financial impact

We are requesting a total of \$138 750 over 5 years (\$27 750/year) for operating expenses (initial start-up funding is not required). This budget includes \$25 000/year for two part-time coordinators. It is necessary to have two part time coordinators to comply with the number of work hours permitted by labour standards during any cold stretches and to avoid burnout. The additional \$2 750/year is for utility expenses, additional food expense for being open more nights and in anticipation of having more guests, and cleaning supplies.

Food expenses up to \$4 500 are covered for the 2022/23 year by a grant that the Rotary holds on our behalf. Transportation expenses of \$1000 are donated by Engage Church. The Congregational Christian Fellowship donates the space for the Late Night Café and their kitchen for food preparation. This contribution is worth approximately \$10 000 a year. Furthermore, the insurance is offered in kind and our volunteer Café Supervisors save us approximately \$24 000 (conservatively) a year in wages based on an average wage of \$20/hr. The total annual cost to run the Late Night Café based on being open 50 nights is \$67 250 per year.

Community benefit

There is growing concern about the prevalence of homelessness in our City and an increasing call to action. The community concern is proportionate to the increase of individuals experiencing homelessness resulting from undue hardships incurred because of COVID and the current inflation rate. Supporting the WER is an opportunity for the City to address this need in partnership with the community and without having to bear the full fiscal and operational responsibility; creating a balance between financial and social accountability to community members and tax-payers. Securing a five year commitment to core funding while leveraging community assets will foster the WER's sustainability without over-burdening any one organization. It also provides the opportunity for WER to put time and effort into exploring the potential of providing professional addiction and mental health supports at the Café. Grants for this type of work are more accessible than funding for the core operations of the WER and offering this type of service could help guests envision and achieve their desired future.

Ultimately, supporting the WER is a way to activate City Council's commitment to "...ensuring all residents at all stages of life feel a sense of belonging and are encouraged to grow forward together." and to "...grow our city within our means in a fiscally responsible way and actively engage our residents as we set the direction for our City" (p. 2, Draft 2022 – 25 City of Spruce Grove Strategic Plan)