

SAINT JOHN • Following the closure of the temporary emergency shelter at Stone Church last month, the City of Saint John is now asking the province to do more when it comes to responding to what is called an "alarming situation" of homelessness in the city.

The temporary emergency shelter opened at the end of January, facilitated by Saint John Harbour MLA Arlene Dunn. Only intended to be open for five weeks, it closed on Feb. 28. The provincial government did not provide funding for the shelter, but a spokesperson for the Department of Social Development said the department did provide personal protective equipment and COVID-19 test kits.

According to Coun. David Hickey, the shelter consistently served up to 14 people throughout its duration.

"The Monday that it closed, Tuesday they were turned away. That's pretty significant," Hickey said.

There are currently 117 individuals in Saint John experiencing homelessness, according to the Human Development Council's By-Names List. Of those, there are 85 who are chronically homeless, meaning they've been homeless for at least six months.

Breaking those numbers down further, Chris Gorman, systems planner with the Human Development Council, said there are currently 39 people booked into emergency shelter beds. Approximately 22 to 27 individuals are sleeping rough, Gorman said.

The closure of the Stone Church shelter left a gap in the community, Gorman said, when it came to providing a safe and warm location for individuals, but noted more shelter space in the city is not necessarily the solution.

"Just like in Fredericton and Moncton, there is a cohort of individuals who are experiencing such severe levels of mental health and substance use disorders that we don't currently have adequate resources to address their needs," Gorman said. "These are very complex cases."

In a letter, signed by Saint John Mayor Donna Reardon and addressed to Social Development Minister Bruce Fitch, the city asked the provincial government to consider looking into resources, programs and interventions like addiction and mental health support.

According to the letter, there are a number of individuals experiencing homelessness in Saint John who can't access shelters because they've been barred for violating shelter rules. These violations include uttering threats, assault and stealing, the letter said.

"These individuals are involved in a vicious and repetitive cycle of short interactions between shelters, health care and law enforcement professionals, where they are released to the public without basic shelter availability," the letter continued.

The letter also indicated that emergency shelters in Saint John are having a hard time recruiting and training staff.

Addressing council on Monday, Saint John city manager John Collin said there's a misperception that the city needs more shelters.

"Our existing shelters have room to expand. They could put more beds in. What they are lacking is staff," Collin said.

In the letter, the city requested the province to help with the staff shortage through wage subsidies, grants, tax relief, counselling and on-site supports.

Gorman said it's supportive housing, more so than adding shelter space, that will be key to ending homelessness in Saint John. But he acknowledged there are no quick fixes.

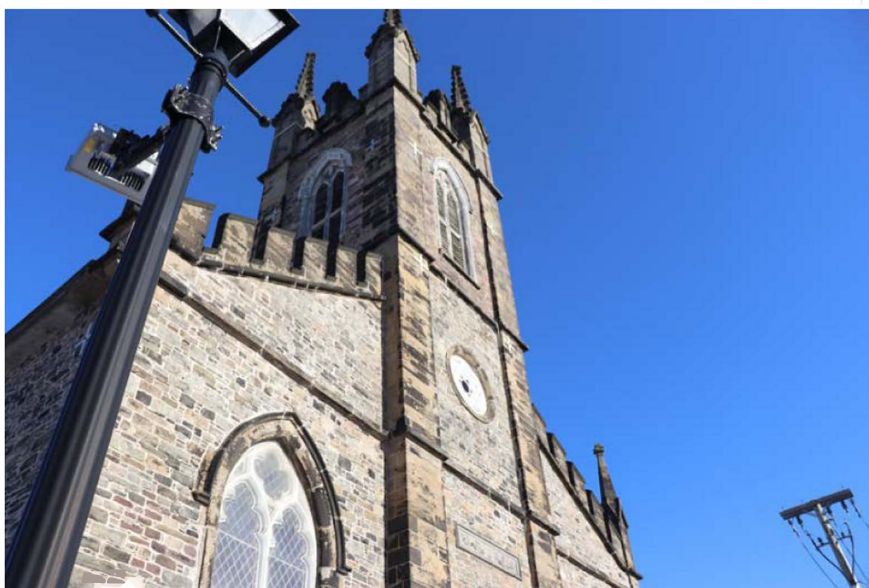
"Last year we housed 90 individuals off the By-Names List, but we also averaged about 15 newly identified people each month, so while we need to be housing focused, we also need to curb those becoming newly homeless."

In an email, Department of Social Development spokesperson Rebecca Howland said Minister Bruce Fitch had received the letter from the city and "welcomes the opportunity to meet with people to discuss the needs in their communities."

The province invests approximately \$5 million per year to address homelessness, Howland said, adding the province has recently begun focusing more on providing wrap-around supports and housing subsidies for permanent housing options.

"The department will continue to support shelters when needed, but we want our focus to remain on providing long-term, permanent solutions to end homelessness, such as wrap-around supports and rent supplements," Howland said.

- With files from Matthew Daigle



A temporary emergency shelter housed at Stone Church closed last month.
Photo: Telegraph-Journal Archive