

Safer Streets for All: Housing and Shelter for the Homeless

“Homelessness and crime aren’t the same thing, but in Winnipeg, right now, they’re feeding on one another. . . . We need the strength of compassion to face stubborn problems like homelessness head on, even if it isn’t officially in the City’s jurisdiction.” -- Scott Gillingham

CHALLENGES TO FACE

- Homeless counts regularly confirm that at least 1,500 homeless people live on the streets of Winnipeg – and most experts believe that many hundreds more do not show up on those counts or live marginally on the very edge of homelessness. Homeless people are less likely to rely on conventional shelters in the 2020s than in the past, owing to fears related to COVID, fear of crime and anti-addiction policies in some shelters
- Scott believes the City must enforce the law; transit shelters are meant to shelter transit riders, not to serve as on-street homes. Emergency circumstances may force the City to clear a park, river or transit encampment. However, in Winnipeg as in other cities, a long-term approach that houses the homeless is compassionate but also sensible policy. Moving homeless people out of one transit shelter or park space to another won’t solve the problem; it will only move it to the next neighbourhood.
- Federal rapid housing funds are expected to flow through to 2026 – however, Winnipeg needs to select partners and sites quickly to access these funds.

Scott Gillingham’s Solutions

QUALIFIED ADVICE ON HOMELESS & STREET SAFETY POLICIES.

- ✓ As Mayor, Scott Gillingham will appoint a Senior Advisor on Homelessness and Street Safety within the Mayor’s Office from existing budgets to help the Mayor and Council take action on homelessness, street safety, mental health and addictions policy issues. The Advisor will be available to help community organizations and agencies secure federal, provincial or third-party funding where appropriate.

MORE SAFE SHELTER OPTIONS FOR THE HOMELESS

- ✓ Scott will support more alternative shelter options for homeless and at-risk people by extend the City’s 24/7 Safe Space Grant, created with Scott’s support in 2020 on the recommendation of the 2019 Illicit Drug Task Force. The program already funds Ka Ni Kanichihk’s ‘Velma’s House’ facility for at-risk Indigenous women, and the WE 24/7 drop-in site for homeless people in the West End. Additional funding will add more service capacity at existing sites, and support a completely new 24/7 site to help homeless people in the North End. Staff at all these sites help people at-risk to transition to permanent help or shelter wherever possible.

MORE SUPPORTIVE HOUSING FOR THE HOMELESS

- ✓ Other Canadian cities are fighting homelessness by building modular homes (approx. 300 square feet) for homeless and at-risk people. The faster homeless people get into longer-term housing of any kind, the faster they can connect regularly with provincial and non-profit services to help them transition out of addiction or other challenges.
- ✓ To build on the progress of programs in other cities, Scott will copy modular 'rapid housing' programs in Toronto, Vancouver and Surrey. Scott would secure Council pre-approval for six modular housing sites on city-owned or purchased land, sufficient to provide 270 units of safe housing. Through his and other councillors' work on the 2022 budget, the City already engaged temporary staff to help non-profits and indigenous groups access federal funds and build 136 units on a similar model.
- ✓ Under Scott's proposed copy of Toronto's approach, Winnipeg would waive permit costs, property tax and land costs while pre-approving zoning for modular construction on all six designated city-owned or acquired sites. Provincial programs would then be engaged for "wrap-around" social services to each site, while ownership and operation of each completed site would be transferred to non-profits and indigenous housing organizations through an RFP process.
- ✓ In other cities, this approach typically means completion of new supportive housing for the homeless within 8-12 months of site approval. Proposed sites will be selected for minimal conflicts to outflank potential legal delays, and Council will conduct the selection in committee-of-the-whole to maximize transparency. 270 new units represents a realistic construction pipeline if federal funding continues at current levels to 2026, and it is a larger per-capita than Toronto's current program goal.

EXTREME WEATHER & EMERGENCY SHELTER POLICIES

Winnipeg works with the End Homelessness Coalition to provide emergency shelter in public buildings during extreme weather periods. However, Winnipeg is one of the only major cities in Canada without a clear, public and predictable emergency public buildings shelter policy to save lives of homeless people - and other people at-risk - in extreme weather periods. As Mayor, Scott will ask the Standing Policy Committee on Protection, Community Services and Parks to:

- ✓ Review other city policies in Canada and recommend an interim extreme weather shelter policy for Winnipeg's public buildings before December 1st, 2022, and a permanent policy before May 1, 2023; and
- ✓ Review existing City of Winnipeg department protocols for emergency removal of any homeless encampment alongside recent City of Toronto Ombudsman recommendations on this issue and recommend updates to Winnipeg's protocols where appropriate.