



MEMO

TO: Council

DATE: December 11, 2023

FROM: Darcy Dober
Mayor

FILE: COM-02

SUBJECT: Letter to Jennifer Whiteside, Minister of Mental Health and Addictions

Background Information:

- With the weather turning, concerns are rising for the unhoused population in Dawson Creek. The current situation of mental health, addictions, and homelessness is going to become an even more troubling scenario.
- We have a homeless shelter and a warming shelter that many people choose not to use.
- Regional treatment and addiction facilities are a necessity, not an option, to turn the tide of homelessness.

Proposed Motion:

That Mayor and Council send a letter (see draft attached) to the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, Jennifer Whiteside, requesting an update on provincial government actions and the next steps to face mental health and addictions, particularly in the Peace Region.

Respectfully,

Darcy Dober
Mayor

December 7, 2023

Email: MMHA.Minister@gov.bc.ca

Dear Minister Whiteside:

Re: Mental Health and Addictions Help for the City of Dawson Creek

Winter is deepening in Dawson Creek and residents, including members of City Council, are more worried than ever about vulnerable people in our Northern climate.

For months – or years even – the homeless population has been increasing and becoming more visible in the community. We're concerned that old strategies of providing homeless shelter beds and warming spaces – and strategies to handle the opioid crisis such as legalizing the use, handing out safer supplies, and training people in naloxone administration – are off target or simply insufficient for the realities of the situation.

Unfortunately, along with the desire for the well-being of everyone within our community, there's been an outcry from the business and residential communities about consequences for personal safety and maintenance of property. While we don't think mental health and addictions amongst the homeless population are responsible for all of our problems, there are some stories that directly correlate. A business owner I know arrives regularly to open her store in the morning to find someone camped out overnight on her steps, blocking her access to her door and alarm system. Businesses call the City regularly to complain of people camping beside their buildings, littering or piling their belongings to leave for days at a time, and refusing to leave until the RCMP arrives to enforce. With the turning weather, several businesses have reported homeless people lighting fires for warmth right beside a business building. One of our local banks has closed its 24/7 ATM access due to property damage caused by the foyer being used for overnight shelter. One parent made their teenager quit an after-school job because, by the time she left each night, she had to leave in the dark through an untrusted alley. Parents complain of kids under the age of ten being chased and harassed by people they pass on the streets. Other parents report their children picking up needles and drug paraphernalia under park bleachers. Daycare workers watch people take cocaine right outside the playground fence.

We have expectations for ourselves as local government to find opportunities for all of our residents to have safe, healthy, and satisfied lives. As over a hundred people identify as homeless in our community of less than 13,000, we look to the provincial government to share their vision for a path forward, and practical solutions to help vulnerable populations not just survive the night but also, those who are interested, also find their way forward to a better life.

While we've seen the Province take initiatives to improve the system for mental health and addictions in cities such as Vancouver, we need to know when better solutions are coming for us. There is evidence of

broken systems all over our City, and patience, compassion, and belief in our systems are running low as people try to cope.

The government has acknowledged some of these issues and the need for supportive and wrap-around solutions for people trying to fight substance use disorders, and we appreciate that. We request an update on the Province's plans for help, what we can expect, and when it will arrive. We appreciate open conversations, realistic plans, and reported timelines – in essence, things that we can present to our community with accountability.

Sincerely,

Darcy Dober
Mayor
City of Dawson Creek

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