

## Saskatoon Tribal Council to be lead agency for downtown safety pilot project

Indigenous street teams will work with people on ground, agencies will find housing for people

[David Shield](#) · CBC News · Posted: Sep 16, 2020 12:14 PM CT | Last Updated: September 16



Saskatoon Tribal Council Chief Mark Arcand said he's excited to start work on the new program. (Saskatoon Tribal Council)

Saskatoon city council has voted in favour of starting a new pilot project designed to address homelessness and safety issues downtown and headed by the Saskatoon Tribal Council.

On Wednesday, council voted unanimously to give \$100,000 to the new Interagency Response to Downtown Safety and Well-Being--Sawēyihotān pilot project.

The project will hire Indigenous street teams to work with homeless people who primarily congregate around the downtown core. Then, an STC-led hub will work with agencies from around the city to house and do long-term work with the people.

"People living on the street and living in unfortunate circumstances are people, first and foremost," said STC Tribal Chief Mark Arcand during the council meeting.

"They're human beings, and I think there are a lot of situations that need to occur to make a better place in our city for all people."

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The genesis for the new program came in July, when about 150 people were moved out of the City Centre Inn and Suites and were placed in new housing.

The Saskatoon Tribal Council was heavily involved in the project. When it became clear that the partnership was working, city hall became interested in working more closely with the group.

Chief Arcand said it's important that Indigenous workers be on the ground.

"When you see First Nations people coming to First Nations people for support, it tells us something — that they don't trust the system," he said.

"The system hasn't been too favourable to them. But now, all that's changing, because we're there with our non-First Nations partners."

The provincial government is also providing \$100,000 toward the pilot program. At the council meeting, Minister of Social Services Paul Merriman said large groups of people sleeping in the downtown core is unacceptable.

"We've determined that this can't continue in our city," he said.

"We've heard issues raised by businesses, by organizations, by the general public, the media, and what I think we have here is a very well-balanced response."

Arcand said that there will be continuous follow-up with the people they're helping to make sure they're safe and stable.

He said the goal is to put people in long-term housing, with the help of groups like Saskatoon Housing Initiatives Partnership, Camponi and Cress Housing.

"I don't think shelters are the answer," he said.

"I think [we should be] getting them into a hotel, like we did with the City Centre Inn and Suites, and then putting them into long-term housing, but also having our mental health and addictions team going to visit these clients."

Arcand said he is happy to have a seat at the table.

"For me, I finally feel a little bit of pressure being taken off of the Saskatoon Tribal Council," he said.

"I've never had funding to be directly involved in such a situation that's so meaningful to us and to our organization."

Mayor Charlie Clark said the pilot project won't be a magic solution to the issue, but it's a step in the right direction.

"This will not solve everything," he said.

"These are very complex issues, and I think we need to be clear about that, but we will learn from this in a way we haven't learned before."

The city's contribution to the project will be drawn from the municipal economic enhancement project money provided by the provincial government.

The group will work with community agencies like the Saskatoon Housing Authority, Prairie Harm Reduction and the Saskatoon Food Bank and Learning Centre.

If it's successful, the province is considering rolling out similar programs in North Battleford, Prince Albert and Regina.