

## RESPONDING TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ALBERTA'S HOMELESS SERVING SECTORS

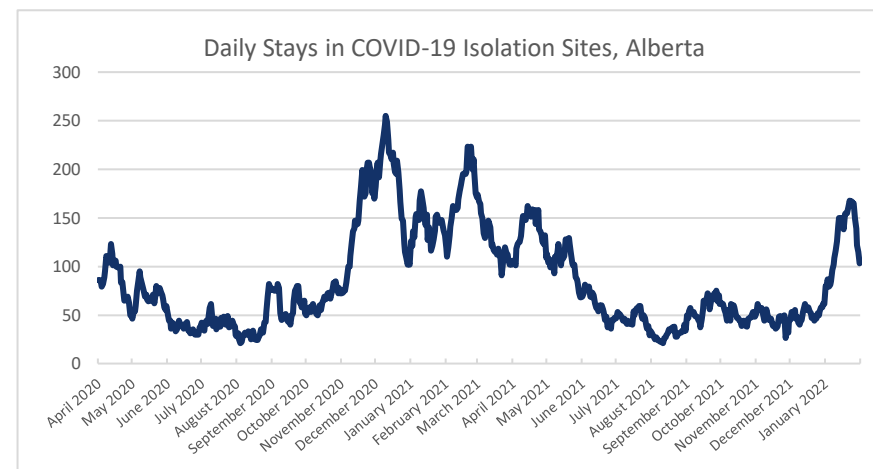
Instructions to self-isolate after testing positive for COVID-19 are challenging for people to follow if they are experiencing homelessness. But for this population, the need to self-isolate may be greater than for any other.

Physical distancing and self-isolation are two of the key responses asked of citizens during a pandemic. For people experiencing homelessness, these instructions are difficult to follow. The sleeping arrangements in homeless shelters, for example, are typically crowded, and the dining and washroom facilities are shared. Someone testing positive for COVID-19 has few options when it comes to trying to self-isolate. This is particularly important because [as researchers at The School of Public Policy have shown](#), there is a considerable amount of movement of people between different shelters and between shelters and the community. The potential for a virus to spread is exacerbated by people being unable to isolate following infection.

In March 2020, when it became clear that the Coronavirus was spreading, the Alberta Ministry of Community and Social Services sought recommendations from members of Alberta's homeless serving sector, on how best to respond. Isolation sites to be used by people experiencing homelessness were developed and implemented. Isolation sites were established in twelve communities (Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, Medicine Hat, Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Drayton Valley, Lac La Biche, Peace River, Slave Lake, and Wetaskawin) though not all were opened at the same time. Some of these sites remain in operation today.

**COVID-19 Isolation Sites enable people experiencing homelessness and Coronavirus symptoms to self-isolate in ways not otherwise available to them.**

The sites provide a safe, medically supported, isolated space that makes it possible to lower the risk of transmission of the virus among people experiencing homelessness and those with whom they might come in contact.



Source: Emergency Shelter Daily Occupancy, [Government of Alberta Open Data](#).

The figure reports the number of people making use of COVID-19 isolation sites in Alberta over the period of April 1, 2020 to January 31, 2022. On an average night, 85 people used these facilities. The busiest day was December 10, 2020, when 255 people were self-isolating. A report prepared by [The Alex](#) on one isolation site in Calgary, indicates that an average of 2.5 new clients entered that facility each night, stayed in their designated isolation space for the time required by the in-house medical staff, and then exited. Three-quarters of people stayed in isolation for the full amount of time that was deemed appropriate. In 11 months ending February 2022, that facility assisted 1,862 people with some having to isolate more than once. Far more than this were assisted province wide.

The isolation sites were established to slow the spread of COVID-19 among a population that is generally in poor health and so at a risk of serious outcomes and costly treatments. Deeper analysis of these data would identify the cost savings to the health system, the benefits of maintaining these facilities to deal with endemic viruses like influenza, and the direct benefits to people experiencing homelessness during a pandemic.