

To: Safety and Facilities Services Committee

From: Adam Grant, Commissioner,
Safety and Facilities Services Department

Report Number: SF-25-34

Date of Report: June 4, 2025

Date of Meeting: June 9, 2025

Subject: Implementation of Safe Havens at Oshawa Fire Stations

Ward: All Wards

File: 03-05

1.0 Purpose

The purpose of this report is to respond to the following direction of City Council on November 25, 2024:

“That based on report SF-24-48 dated November 13, 2024, concerning Areas of Safe Haven at Fire Halls for Women and Girls Experiencing Violence that staff explore and report back on the requirements and external resources needed for establishing designated safe haven areas at Fire Halls 1, 3, 5, and 6 in Oshawa to support women and girls experiencing violence; and,

That staff report back on the implementation of safe-surrender boxes at the aforementioned fire halls as a compassionate, anonymous and secure option for mothers in crisis who are unable to care for their newborns and/or small children.”

2.0 Recommendation

That the Safety and Facilities Services Committee recommend to City Council:

That based on Report SF-25-34 dated June 9, 2025, staff be directed to undertake minor vestibule retrofitting as set out in said Report to implement Safe Havens at Fire Stations 1, 3, 5 and 6.

3.0 Input From Other Sources

1. Legislative Services
2. Finance Services
3. Facilities Management Services

4.0 Analysis

4.1 Background

Safe Havens are designated, secure areas within public buildings where individuals in crisis can go to seek immediate safety and support. Serving as emergency refuges for individuals in crisis, including survivors of domestic violence, at-risk youth, and others requiring immediate safe space access. Safe Havens provide temporary refuge while connecting individuals with emergency services or community resources.

Fire stations are well-suited for this role due to their 24/7 staffing, accessible locations, and public trust in first responders. In the broader emergency response framework, fire stations offering Safe Havens act as frontline extensions of social safety nets. Models of Safe Havens have been implemented in cities across Canada, including Winnipeg, Manitoba; Vancouver, British Columbia; Calgary, Alberta; and Toronto, Ontario, where fire stations, libraries, and transit hubs are designated as emergency access points for youth and other vulnerable populations in crisis.

Additionally, safe-surrender boxes are secure, temperature-controlled compartments where parents can anonymously leave unwanted newborns. They are usually installed in a conspicuous location at hospitals and allow safe transfer to authorities. A silent alarm alerts staff, ensuring the baby receives immediate care.

4.2 Safe Haven Benefits

Establishing Safe Havens at fire stations would offer the following advantages:

- **Improved Safety for Vulnerable Populations:** Survivors of domestic violence, individuals experiencing homelessness, or those in mental health crises would have immediate access to a secure location and trained responders. With intimate partner violence (IPV) declared an epidemic in many Ontario municipalities, including Oshawa, this service is both timely and necessary.
- **Increased Access to Support Services:** Fire crews, while not acting as counselors, can provide secure shelter, notify emergency services, and connect individuals with local victims or crisis support agencies, bridging a critical gap between crisis and care.
- **Community Trust and Visibility:** Clear Safe Haven signage, lighting, and accessibility features make it easy for those in distress to identify help. Public awareness of these spaces fosters confidence in the City's commitment to safety and well-being.
- **Multi-Agency Collaboration:** Safe Havens aligns with broader regional strategies on gender-based violence, housing insecurity, and mental health intervention, enhancing fire services' role in proactive community protection.

4.3 Safe Surrender Boxes

While the concept of safe-surrender boxes aligns with the City's commitment to supporting vulnerable individuals in crisis, these units represent highly specialized infrastructure that requires further review. Due to their unique nature and technical requirements, including secure design, environmental controls, and discreet access—staff require additional time to conduct a comprehensive assessment of feasibility at each fire station. At present, only one fire station across Durham Region has a safe-surrender box, highlighting the rarity and complexity of such installations. As part of this assessment, architectural input is required to determine potential structural modifications and integration with existing fire hall layouts. Staff will continue research and engage in stakeholder consultation and will report back to the Safety and Facilities Committee at a later date.

4.4 Community Consultation

A collaborative approach will be taken involving:

- Durham Region Police Services
- Victim Services of Durham Region
- Durham Mental Health Services
- Local shelters and crisis organizations
- Indigenous and newcomer support groups
- Oshawa Accessibility Advisory Committee

Feedback from these community partners will inform the design, operational protocols, and outreach strategies to ensure Safe Havens and safe-surrender boxes are inclusive, accessible, and effective. Consultations will assist in gathering diverse perspectives, with a focus on cultural sensitivity and trauma-informed care. A public awareness campaign will also be developed to promote Safe Haven locations and their purpose.

4.5 Minor Vestibule Retrofitting of Stations 1, 3, 5, and 6

Implementing Safe Havens at Oshawa's fire stations offers a compassionate and proactive approach to supporting residents in crisis, including women and girls.

Stations 1, 3, 5 and 6 have existing space to accommodate Safe Haven features that would require limited renovations estimated at \$4,000.

Renovations to implement Safe Haven spaces would include:

- Installing secure access-controlled rooms or vestibules
- Emergency alert buttons or direct intercom systems to alert fire personnel
- Signage indicating Safe Haven designation

Advantages:

- Immediate implementation with lower capital investment
- Fast deployment in high-need areas, leveraging strategically located fire stations to ensure Safe Haven coverage citywide
- Strong mobilization across Oshawa by ensuring Safe Haven coverage from north to south, to maximize geographic reach with minimal investment

Disadvantages:

- Relies on existing infrastructure, limiting opportunity for customized facility design

Timeline:

- Planning/design: Q3 2025
- Retrofitting: Q3 2025
- Training and signage: Q3 2025

5.0 Financial Implications

Costs may be eligible for provincial or federal safety and social services grants. Staff will explore funding opportunities as part of implementation planning. The minor retrofitting of Fire Stations 1, 3, 5 and 6, project costs are estimated as outlined in Section 4.5 and can be accommodated within the existing 2025 operating budget.

6.0 Relationship to the Oshawa Strategic Plan

This report responds to the Oshawa Strategic Plan Priority Area “Care: Safe and Sustainable Environment” with the goal to collaborate and advocate for effective services, programs, and community safety and well-being support.



Stephen Barkwell, Fire Chief,
Fire Services



Randy Garey, Director
Facilities Management Services



Adam Grant, Commissioner,
Safety and Facilities Services Department