

CARE BUS PROJECT

April 2025 – March 2026 Report

Submission Date: April 8, 2025

Submitted To: Ontario Health

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Summary

The Care Bus keeps people safe and out of the extreme cold during hours of operation from 1:30 PM to 9:30 PM daily, with expanded hours (9:30 AM to 9:30 PM) offered for the months of January and February and during extreme cold weather alerts (-25°C). The Care Bus transports people throughout the city to the services they require, which include warming centers, emergency shelters, food distribution, medical services, social services, and businesses.

While clients are on the Care Bus, they can access supplies they may need, including food, water, warm clothing, harm reduction supplies, wound care kits, personal protective equipment, and care/hygiene supplies. Clients also have access to Harm Reduction Outreach Workers who provide health education, referrals to community services, triaging of basic health needs, therapeutic listening, and emergency/crisis response, as appropriate. The service is free, anonymous, and available to anyone that needs it, making it one of the lowest-barrier services in the City of Thunder Bay.

From April 1, 2025, to March 31, 2026, the Care Bus had a total of 13,590 interactions with clients.

Care Bus Project Activities

Operations:

- The Care Bus operated for 153 days from April 1, 2025 to March 31, 2026. This included 67 days with expanded hours of operations due to extreme cold weather.

Client Services:

- From April 1, 2025, to March 31, 2026, the Care Bus had interactions with 13,590 clients (averaging approximately 89 clients per day). This included a total of 11,266 riders using the Care Bus for transportation and 2,324 people accessing services at the door of the Care Bus at various locations throughout the city.

Locations:

- The busiest pickup and drop-off locations were warming centers, emergency shelters, businesses/shopping centers, healthcare centres, and bus terminals / bus stops.

Services Offered:

- 154 one-on-one education sessions were offered which focused on topics such as: information about local services and resources, harm reduction, overdose prevention, basic health care, and basic wound care
- 383 successful referrals and connections to local services which often involved staff going into the facility with the client to advocate as needed and ensure they are successfully admitted
 - 51 connections to hospital
 - 107 connections to emergency shelters
 - 113 connections to withdrawal management services (detox)
 - 64 connections to the safer sobering site
 - 25 connections to health care services
 - 23 connections to social services
- 3,478 connections to hot meals (primarily Dew Drop Inn for lunch and Salvation Army Soup Van for dinner)
- 761 therapeutic listening sessions
- 62 basic wound care supports
- 29 first aid responses (including 16 cold weather first aid responses)
- 324 times the bus was used as a safer space for people who have used substances
- 6 overdose response and lives saved by Care Bus staff in community
- 14 emergency responses (called 911 and supported client until emergency services arrived)

Supplies Distributed:

- 12,270 snack bags
- 2,078 meals
- 7,844 winter clothing accessories (hats, mitts, socks, scarves)
- 243 winter clothing items (jackets, thermals, sweaters)
- 1,827 hand warmers
- 261 emergency supplies (blankets, tarps)
- 589 personal care/hygiene products
- 303 Naloxone kits
- 458 safer injection supply kits
- 2,032 safer smoking supply kits
- 459 safer meth kits
- 56 safer snorting kits

- 94 safer sex kits
- 493 wound care kits

Client and Harm Reduction Outreach Worker Testimonials

"I use the Care Bus to get away from loneliness and depression and get warmth and snacks" (Care Bus Rider).

"The Care Bus has made cold days tolerable. It's given me something to do other than chase drugs" (Care Bus Rider).

"I like the workers. They're always kind, nice and no surprises - as in it's the same, very caring people" (Care Bus Rider).

"It makes the job more rewarding when connecting to services and telling (riders) about detox, food services and being able to actually bring them there and making that connection". (Harm Reduction Outreach Worker).

"Thanks for providing the service once again this year. We truly value it and genuinely wish that hours were longer and that the resource was available for additional months (weather can still be challenging in spring and fall here in Tbay!)" (Nicole Moffett, TBRHSC).

"We really appreciated having the Care Bus available. It's a great service that we utilized often throughout the winter. It made a meaningful difference for many of our clients by helping them stay warm, safe, and connected to essential supports. The Care Bus staff were always respectful and supportive in their interactions" (DSSAB Outreach Team).

Care Bus Season Improvements and Successes

Focus on Safety: This season, the Care Bus Project continued to focus on improving safety and accessibility for frontline staff and riders. There was a wheelchair ramp on the bus used for the majority of operations this winter, which greatly improved accessibility for riders that use wheelchairs and walkers, and made entering and exiting the bus in icy and snowy conditions much safer for staff and riders. Other improvements focusing on staff and client safety this winter included: deescalating potentially violent situations training and First Aid training for frontline staff, ensuring there were always three frontline staff on the bus for each shift (rather than the minimum requirement of two), ongoing group and individual debriefing with frontline staff, and developing safety plans for clients that did not follow the Care Bus rules.

Building Relationships: The mobile nature of the Care Bus makes it an ideal environment for developing and nurturing relationships with clients and community organizations. The project prioritizes building relationships, notably building trust with clients by meeting them where they are at, building relationships with Care Bus partners (Ontario Native Women's Association, Lutheran Community Care Centre, Team DEK), as well as building connections with regular Care Bus stops in community (Dew Drop Inn, Salvation Army, Shelter House, PACE, Elevate NWO, Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre, St. Joseph's Care Group, Grace Place, Thunder Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre). The Care Bus Project also included a volunteer component for the first time this winter, with volunteers making snack bags and sandwiches once a week. On a broader scale, the Care Bus also increases general community awareness about housing and health challenges faced in the winter by people in Thunder Bay by offering a highly-visible hub of support.

Extended Hours for January and February and Extreme Cold Weather: This winter, the Care Bus was able to secure funding to run extended hours (9:30am – 9:30pm) everyday during the months of January and February 2026, as well as on extreme cold weather days where the temperature dropped below - 25°C. The Care Bus ran extended hours for 67 days this winter, seeing an average of 110 clients during a 12-hour day. During extreme cold weather, the Care Bus was often operating at capacity, with all seats occupied by riders (29-35 people depending on the number of wheelchairs and walkers).

Connection to Services and Events: An ongoing quality improvement goal of the Care Bus is to connect clients to appropriate health care and wrap-around services in community. This season saw improved relationships and connection to hot meal services (Elevate NWO for breakfast, Dew Drop Inn for lunch, and Salvation Army Soup Truck for dinners daily). There was also an increase in connections to beds at withdrawal management and the safer sobering site this season.

	2023/2024 Season Totals	2024 / 2025 Season Totals	2025/2026 Season Totals
Connection to a Hot Meal	1,363	2,039	3,030
Total Connections	90	385	335
Hospital	11	89	40
Emergency Shelter	21	181	103
Withdrawal Management	18	66	106
Safer Sobering Site	n/a	n/a	64
Health Services	3	23	22