



SOCIAL SERVICES DIVISION

REPORT TO:	WARDEN AND LAMBTON COUNTY COUNCIL
DEPARTMENT:	HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION AND SOCIAL PLANNING
PREPARED BY:	Ian Hanney, Manager
REVIEWED BY:	Melissa Fitzpatrick, General Manager Stéphane Thiffeault, Chief Administrative Officer
MEETING DATE:	April 2, 2026
INFORMATION ITEM:	Overflow Shelter Update

BACKGROUND

At the July 5, 2023 meeting, County Council established shelter as part of its number one priority.

#3: Bradley/White: That County Council publicly endorse making affordable housing and shelter the number one priority of County Council.

Carried.

At the May 7, 2025 meeting, County Council reaffirmed shelter as part of its number one priority, notably adding supportive housing.

#8: McRoberts/Cook: That County Council publicly endorse making affordable and supportive housing and shelter the number one priority of County Council.

Carried.

On November 5, 2025, in [a report entitled “Out of the Cold Overflow Shelter”](#), County Council received an overview of shelter demand, partnerships and contingencies related to shelter operations, and the Overflow Shelter closure outlook. The report explained that a projected timeline for the closure of the Overflow Shelter was uncertain as that timeline must be evaluated based on several evolving factors, some of which are outside of the County’s control. Subject to the community need for shelter spaces, the County committed to the goal of reviewing the Overflow Shelter closure in the spring of 2026. This report seeks to provide County Council with that review, using current shelter demand and local homelessness data.

DISCUSSION

Available shelter beds, and very strong local housing outcomes are the primary reasons for the very low number of encampments in the County of Lambton. While the County remains committed to closing the Overflow Shelter as soon as feasible, timing for that closure must be guided by local demand for emergency shelter services in order to avoid increased encampments locally. The County monitors this demand closely and continues to frequently receive referrals from the community, including Sarnia Police Services, social service partners, and member municipalities, inquiring about available shelter beds. Accordingly, the Overflow Shelter program has continued to see steady demand. This demand for and utilization of the Overflow Shelter allows Divisional staff to more easily facilitate permanent housing placements and reduces the rates of unsheltered homelessness in Lambton County, with fewer than 20 individuals identified as being unsheltered on any given night.

Current Service Demand

There continues to be elevated demand for shelter services, with a modest decrease in recent weeks. The Overflow Shelter program has had an average occupancy rate of 80% since the last report in November. This demand was very high across the several instances of particularly cold weather in the winter, and modestly lower in February 2026. In recent weeks, it is typical to have approximately 10 male beds available between the Overflow Shelter and the Good Shepherds Lodge.

Since fall 2025, the By-Name List has experienced record high inflow, with approximately 60 individuals being added per month. In late 2025 and early 2026, on average, more than one individual has newly experienced homelessness¹ every day in Lambton County. Most of these individuals are Sarnia residents, and demand for shelter services during this period has been significantly higher than in previous years, including during peak pandemic levels.

Below is an illustration for February 2026, where 58 individuals entered homelessness in Lambton County. However, within that same month, 19 households progressed into permanent housing from homelessness. In addition, 11 young children also progressed into permanent housing from homelessness. This data is reflective of the highly dynamic nature of local homelessness rates, including extremely high demand for services, alongside strong local housing outcomes.

¹ This refers to any type of homelessness, not specifically unsheltered homelessness.

LAMBTON'S MONTHLY Homelessness Data

Total Homelessness (Individuals per Month)

305 Dec. **325** Jan. **339*** Feb.

+ **58**
entered homelessness

- Those who became newly homeless or re-entered our system after some time

- **25**
exited homelessness

- Those who lost contact with our system

19
gained housing

- Those who were supported into housing through local programs

*This includes everyone in shelters, transitional housing, living unsheltered, or precariously housed (e.g., couch surfing), tracked through a [comprehensive, real-time list](#). It is compiled using HIFIS, in strong collaboration with local agencies, and verified by information known to Social Services through our delivery of Ontario Works.

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Housing Outcomes

Moving individuals from homelessness into permanent housing remains difficult due to barriers such as high cost of rents, low vacancy rates, documentation gaps, complex needs, and upfront costs. For individuals receiving Ontario Works, the maximum shelter allowance of \$390 per month is far below typical one-bedroom rents of over \$1,300, creating a gap that requires subsidies. Landlord hesitancy toward tenants with low income, credit issues, or housing instability further limits options and prolongs experiences of homelessness.

Despite these challenges, all available resources are being used to move people, especially shelter residents, into permanent housing. Between November 2025, when 30 individuals were in the Overflow Shelter, and the end of February 2026, the homelessness prevention team secured housing for more than 100 individuals experiencing homelessness, totaling over three times the original occupancy of the Overflow Shelter. This level of production is exceptionally strong compared to many comparator communities; it is a record high for Lambton County, and it has been facilitated largely using private market housing and scatter site supports. For many experiencing chronic homelessness and regularly relying on shelter services, fixed site supportive housing with intensive supports is required to achieve permanent stable housing, however, this is currently not available in our community.

Impacts of Early Closure

Ensuring adequate emergency housing capacity is necessary to avoid the level of significant encampments experienced in many other Ontario communities, including their negative impacts on neighbourhoods, increased burden on various local services, and significantly increased harm to individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Drastically heightened numbers of encampments across the province are why many communities and most service system managers are expanding emergency housing programming, despite its high cost. Comparatively, the County's existing emergency housing programming is experiencing a steady inflow and outflow of individuals, indicating that the County emergency housing capacity is adequate to meet current demand.

Closing the Overflow Shelter would increase unsheltered homelessness, with more than 20 individuals likely moving into encampments across Sarnia. This would place added strain on police, EMS, by-law enforcement, hospitals, and outreach services, while worsening health outcomes and stability for those affected, most of whom are Sarnia residents.

It would also reduce the ability of local member municipalities to enforce encampment protocols due to the loss of approximately half of available shelter beds. Beyond human impacts, unsheltered homelessness significantly increases municipal costs, including healthcare, emergency services, policing, and enforcement, further straining local budgets.

Contingencies and Site Usage

Since opening, the Overflow Shelter has responded to strong public and municipal demand for increased capacity. County staff have implemented [numerous mitigation strategies](#) and multidisciplinary partnerships to improve operations and reduce community impacts. Moreover, as of November 3, 2025, co-located day programming ended with the launch of the HART Hub, significantly reducing traffic at the site.

The County of Lambton, The Inn of the Good Shepherd, Sarnia Police Services, and the Emmanuel Presbyterian Church continue to meet regularly with representatives from the surrounding Melrose Community Group to offer updates and respond to evolving concerns. County of Lambton outreach teams and third-party security services have supported adherence to new site restrictions and monitored nearby activity during the transition.

Steps taken to reduce traffic on site, in addition to extensive mitigation strategies, have led to positive outcomes. There is concurrence from recent meetings with the Melrose Community Group that traffic and related incidents surrounding the Overflow Shelter have decreased since our last report in early November. This shared understanding between the community group, security, and the shelter provider (The Inn of the Good Shepherd), is strongly supported by data.

Site visits by clients are closely tracked through the delivery of our social services. There has been a reduction of client visits by more than 50% since closing the day programming

in November 2025. As reported below, overall site visits are also a fraction of their totals since before November 2025. This data shows that there has been a dramatic reduction in emergency services to the site, or even events tagged as associated with the site along the entire Exmouth St corridor.

- Since November 2025, there has been a reduction in Sarnia Police Service occurrences tagged to the site by more than 80%. Of those recent occurrences, the majority are pro-active patrols.
- This trend is also reflected in Lambton EMS data that demonstrates a notable decrease in calls regarding behavioral concerns, including those related to alcohol or drugs. There was a further 30% reduction in such calls in the first quarter of 2026, compared to the last quarter of 2025. This follows a 60% reduction in the first three quarters of 2025 compared to 2024.

This shows a meaningful and ongoing reduction in overall presence and use of emergency services at this site. The EMS CHIC team also frequently conducts proactive engagement at the Overflow Shelter, to reduce harm for clients, and reduce reliance on emergency services.

Closure

The timeline to close the Overflow Shelter is uncertain and depends on several factors, many of which are beyond the County's control, particularly demand for shelter services. The County has and will continue to take steps toward closure, including ending day programming and pursuing affordable and supportive housing options. Supportive housing projects that provide high needs support at a level not currently available in the community are needed to truly address the homelessness crisis.

While the Overflow Shelter remains necessary, the County is committed to closing it as soon as it is feasible and responsible to do so. Although full closure is not recommended at this time, current utilization rates do see an average of 10 male beds being under-utilized between the Overflow Shelter and the Good Shepherd's Lodge, supporting a reduced capacity at the Overflow Shelter from 35 to 25 beds. This step has been taken proactively to reduce Overflow Shelter operations based on shelter demand. Staff will continue to monitor usage closely and report to Council on a bi-monthly basis any changes affecting capacity.

Further, staff continue to assess potential alternative locations to replace the Overflow Shelter operation. One potential alternative location has been identified, in partnership with the Inn of the Good Shepherd. Preliminary discussions are focused on assessing feasibility, including operational requirements and associated costs, in collaboration with the organization's executive leadership and board. If the location is deemed viable, staff will report back to Council accordingly.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Not Applicable

CONSULTATIONS

Consultations have taken place with the Inn of the Good Shepherd, Sarnia Police Services, Manager, Lambton County Emergency Medical Services, Manager, Homelessness Prevention and Social Planning, Manager, Housing Services, General Manager, Social Services, County Solicitor/Deputy Clerk, and the C.A.O.

STRATEGIC PLAN

Delivering emergency housing is in keeping with the County's Mission to promote an enhanced quality of life through the provision of responsive and efficient services accomplished by working with municipal and community partners.

The activities of the Division support the Community Development Area of Effort #3 in the County of Lambton's Strategic Plan, specifically:

- Strengthening the County's advocacy and lobbying efforts with other levels of government to raise the profile of the County and its needs to secure improved senior government supports, funding, grants, and other resources to meet emerging infrastructure and service needs;
- Consulting with the community and stakeholders on ways to increase housing options and affordability, and innovative programs and initiatives that focus on poverty reduction and promote social belonging;
- Supporting the development of a variety of affordable housing to meet demand;
- Implementing, monitoring and updating community health and wellness-related plans and priorities, including, but not limited to, the *Housing and Homelessness Plan*, *Community Safety & Well-Being Plan*, the Long-Term Care division's mission, vision, and values, *Age Friendly Community Planning* framework, Lambton Public Health's strategic priorities, *Lambton Drug & Alcohol Strategy*, *Lambton EMS Master Plan*, and *Child Care and Early Years 5-Year Service System Plan*; and
- Advocating for, and supporting access to, mental health and addiction services.

CONCLUSION

The County of Lambton and the Inn of the Good Shepherd have implemented extensive mitigation measures for the Overflow Shelter operations, in addition to site use changes that have resulted in a substantial decrease in traffic and related incidents surrounding the Overflow Shelter.

The County remains firmly committed to closing the Overflow Shelter program at the earliest responsible opportunity. The timeline for this closure is dependent largely on local demand for emergency shelter services. The County continues to monitor this demand closely and will provide bi-monthly reports to council regarding shelter demand. Recent overall demand for homelessness services is at record highs, despite concurrent markedly high housing outcomes. Within this elevated overall system demand, recent shelter demand has modestly decreased, resulting in a recent reduction in capacity at the Overflow Shelter from 35 to 25 beds. Staff will report to Council on any alternative sites for emergency housing that are assessed as potentially viable.