



SOCIAL SERVICES DIVISION

REPORT TO:	WARDEN AND LAMBTON COUNTY COUNCIL
DEPARTMENT:	Homelessness Prevention and Children's Services
PREPARED BY:	Melissa Fitzpatrick, Manager Ian Hanney, Supervisor
REVIEWED BY:	Valerie Colasanti, General Manager Ronald G. Van Horne, Chief Administrative Officer
MEETING DATE:	November 24, 2021
INFORMATION ITEM:	Homelessness System Response to COVID-19

BACKGROUND

Further to information reports received by Council throughout 2021, this report provides an overview and update on the Homelessness System Response to the effects of the pandemic on homelessness in Lambton County, as well as the plans for the winter months. COVID-19 has presented the citizens of Lambton County with an unprecedented challenge in meeting basic needs including housing. As a result, there has been extraordinary strain put upon many of the social services delivered by the County of Lambton and our community partner agencies. In particular, there has been a marked increase in the number of individuals presenting as experiencing homelessness or precariously housed.

Typically there are approximately 60 emergency shelter beds amongst youth, adult, and family spaces available for use in Lambton County. While this emergency housing system can often be near capacity, in the past there were few instances of needing to use overflow shelter space. Overflow shelter spaces are created by utilizing local motel and hotel beds. Despite consistent system-wide diversion efforts, the number of individuals accessing emergency housing solutions in Lambton reached a peak of 260 during the pandemic in the winter of 2021.

Emergency housing should be seen as the last resort in the housing continuum and as a temporary solution. Investments in more upstream and affordable housing solutions are a pointed goal in the County's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan (2014-2023). The drastic 400% increase in the number of individuals presenting as homeless due to COVID-19 in Lambton County has led to an increased need for overflow shelter space and for upstream solutions that seek to prevent individuals from experiencing homelessness and progress those that do along the housing continuum.

Through ongoing partnerships with local hotel and motel owners, individuals that have no other option for housing can potentially utilize overflow spaces to receive emergency housing. Concurrently, through a host of strategies, people experiencing homelessness in Lambton County are now more easily connected to permanent housing and supports. The Homelessness Response Plan below outlines the various contingencies our homelessness system of care has employed to limit the effects of COVID-19 on those individuals experiencing homelessness, and progress our system towards the goals outlined in the County's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan (2014-2023) while the community recovers from the pandemic. These contingencies seek to prevent households from experiencing homelessness and support households in acquiring and maintaining more permanent housing when these experiences are unavoidable.

DISCUSSION

Over the course of 18 months, housing and homelessness initiatives and intervention efforts have resulted in, amongst other things, the following assistance:

- Over 1,000 unique individuals have been supported through emergency housing;
- 1,800 instances of diversion services;
- 370 successful instances where households were diverted away from the shelter system;
- 183 households moved into more permanent housing; and
- 95 households approved for a short term rent supplement.

Prevention

In close partnership with local service providers, particularly the Inn of the Good Shepherd, County-wide diversion services have been implemented across access points for emergency shelter. Diversion programs help individuals and families seeking shelter to identify immediate alternate housing arrangements and, if necessary, connect them with services and financial assistance to help them return to permanent housing. In conjunction with local rental and utility arrears programs, this system-wide diversion initiative has led to significant results in maintaining existing tenancies and preventing households from entering the far more costly emergency shelter system. Since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been over 1,800 instances of diversion services offered and over 370 successful instances where a household was diverted away from emergency housing.

Emergency Housing

In order to support the drastically increased need for emergency housing and to ensure required isolation for households during the pandemic, in close partnership with the Inn of the Good Shepherd, Lambton County has expanded its capacity for emergency shelter overflow during the pandemic. This includes a staff-supported overflow location where on-site housing-centric and life stabilization supports are offered to households. Since the beginning of the pandemic, over 1,000 unique individuals have been supported through emergency housing solutions.

Through several targeted and specifically promoted vaccination clinics conducted alongside Lambton Public Health and The Inn of the Good Shepherd, vaccination rates among those experiencing homelessness has increased drastically. While maintaining the capacity to isolate individuals that were COVID-19 positive or deemed close-contacts of positive cases, the priority within the emergency housing system has resultantly shifted towards reducing overall numbers in shelter.

To address this priority, the County of Lambton is in the process of opening a temporary congregate care site that will have the capacity for 25-30 beds. This temporary congregate care site will serve as a location to offer a far more affordable form of emergency housing than overflow spaces, where social service staff can offer on-site housing-centric and life stabilization supports. Importantly, this site will only be a temporary intervention to address the heightened need created by the pandemic, and not a permanent increase in the number of shelter beds for our community. Such a permanent increase in total shelter beds would serve to entrench our homelessness system of care further downstream in more costly solutions than the upstream preventative roadmap outlined in the County's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan (2014-2023). Further to the new temporary congregate care site, existing overflow spaces are currently being converted into double-capacity rooms so as to maximize existing funding and capacities.

Not every household chooses to access the emergency housing solutions available within Lambton County. For both these households and those in overflow emergency housing, regular shared community-level outreach is provided through partnered efforts between the County of Lambton's Social Service Division and both Lambton Public Health and the North Lambton Community Health Centre teams. Through this outreach, households are better connected to primary care services, are offered harm reduction tools and services, and can receive supports at the street-level.

Progression along the Housing Continuum

Significant efforts are being made across the homelessness prevention system in supporting households experiencing homelessness to move into more permanent housing. Since the beginning of the pandemic, through extensive shared efforts with many community service providers, Lambton has moved 183 households experiencing homelessness into more permanent housing. Developments since the pandemic to meet the increased need for these supports include the introduction of an integrated team that includes staff from the Homelessness Prevention and Children's Service department, the Ontario Works department, the Sarnia Lambton Native Friendship Centre, and the Inn of the Good Shepherd. Our Community Support Workers work in close concert with a 2SLGBTQ+ Housing Worker and Indigenous Housing Worker from the Inn of the Good Shepherd and Native Friendship Centre respectively, in order to connect individuals to market rental units and support these households in sustaining their tenancies.

With such a scarcity of available affordable market rent units in Lambton County, this integrated team leverages the capacity of the Landlord Engagement Support Worker, part of the Homelessness Prevention team, to elicit units from and maintain relationships with local property managers in order to support households exiting homelessness. In order to

address the gap between a typical household's shelter portion of their social assistance and elevated market rental rates, all available demand-side solutions are leveraged by this team to enable housing placements. This includes a portion of Lambton County's Canada Ontario Housing Benefits (COHB) and a County-developed and municipally funded short-term rent supplement called Rental Assistance Program (RAP). Since the beginning of the pandemic 95 households have been assisted through RAP to secure or maintain permanent housing.

In addition, due to the strong local partnerships with such service providers as the Canadian Mental Health Association, regular referrals and case-sharing is conducted with local service providers that can assist households to progress into more permanent housing, receive financial support to pay rent, and receive supports to maintain their housing. Other typical outflow opportunities leveraged to exit households from homelessness include transitional housing for adults at the Good Shepherd Lodge's Transitional Housing program, and for youth Ohana's Landing Youth Transitional Housing program supported by Sarnia-Lambton Rebound.

System Coordination

The County of Lambton continues to lead efforts to coordinate local housing and homelessness services through chairing such tables as the Lambton Community Advisory Board and the Housing and Homelessness Advisory Committee. Through close consultation and regular touch-points with members of such tables, the County of Lambton has recently led such activities as a 2021 iteration of homelessness enumeration, the introduction of a system-wide common intake and standardized common assessment, implementation of the federally-developed Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) across all emergency shelter access points, and continued enhancement of the Lambton County By-Name List. These coordination efforts have contributed significantly to the ability of the housing and homelessness system of care to introduce Coordinated Access, strengthen local understanding of real-time trends of households experiencing homelessness, in addition to better facilitating referrals and matching to appropriate services.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There is no financial impact on the County Budget as a result of this report. To date, the impacts of COVID -19 on the homelessness system have been addressed using the Social Service Relief Funds from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing and the Federal Government under the Reaching Home Agreement. In addition to this, existing staff from the Social Services Division have been reallocated to assist in the delivery of homelessness prevention programs and the operation of the overflow shelter.

The County of Lambton will continue to express the requirement for additional Provincial and Federal funding as it is expected it will take many months to see levels of homelessness decrease from the 400% increase experienced over the last 18 months. If additional funds are not received there will be a significant impact on the 2022 County

budget. It is anticipated an additional 1.5 million dollars will be required to provide these services for 2022.

CONSULTATIONS

Consultations have taken place with members of the County of Lambton Housing and Homelessness Advisory Committee, the General Manager, Social Services, internal Social Services Division staff, and numerous social service agencies in the community.

STRATEGIC PLAN

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

- Advocating in a manner that raises the profile of the County and its needs in order to secure improved government supports, funding, grants, and other resources.
- Developing programs and initiatives that address poverty reduction and promote social belonging.
- Planning for and responding to the ever-changing needs of an aging population, homelessness and retaining young people in the community while supporting their transition to being employed community members and future leaders.
- Actively pursuing joint opportunities with community partners that contribute to the well-being of the Lambton Community.

CONCLUSION

The County of Lambton continues to use evolving best-practices, leverage community partnerships and strategic investments to minimize the impact of COVID-19 on individuals experiencing homelessness in our community. A substantial amount of work, internally in the Social Services Division and by community partners, has allowed the County of Lambton to address the 400% increase in level of need while simultaneously making marked gains towards the long-term goals outlined in the County's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan (2014-2023). Continued system pressures are expected for many more months and staff will continue to advocate for additional provincial and federal dollars to address needs in the coming months.