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**Subject: Bridge Housing Design Phase Operations**  
**Report to: Public Health and Social Services Committee**  
**Report date: Tuesday, July 13, 2021**

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## **Recommendations**

1. That this report **BE RECEIVED** for information.

## **Key Facts**

- The purpose of this report is to provide an update to Council with regard to the planning for the new Bridge Housing facility.
- Bridge Housing is a leading edge, short term supportive housing program addressing the needs of clients who are chronically homeless and present with complex and multiple barriers.
- The facility is planned to include recuperative beds as part of the offering to support homeless individuals who require additional health care, but do not require hospitalization. The Region continues to work with a number of partners to determine who will operate or direct the work of these beds.
- Policies and procedures to optimize the outcomes of bridge housing remain in development with limited similar programs operating, and none in an Ontario context. Homelessness Services has been piloting many of the policies and concepts as part of the pilot project currently operating, with encouraging housing outcomes to date. OrgCode has offered to partner with the Region in the development of programming, policies and procedures, as well as evaluation methods to ensure best practices are developed/implemented and create the program expectations for this facility going forward.
- After a presentation with funded agencies, it was requested that the Region operate the asset during the design phase period. Once satisfied that programming, policies and procedures for Bridge Housing are established, and an operational plan and linkages are developed the recuperative beds, the Region will then procure an operator, and transition the operations to a third party supportive housing provider.

## **Financial Considerations**

The annual estimate to operate the bridge housing asset is \$1 million. This estimate was provided in Confidential report COM-C 30-2020 NRH. As directed by council, Community Services has been advocating, and identifying the need for operating dollars to our upper tier government funders, and will continue to do so, in order to receive on-going and sustainable funding for this asset. It should be noted that several other municipalities, also leveraging one-time COVID funding to purchase properties for supportive housing, are making similar requests to the Provincial government for operating dollars. However, funding has not been secured at the time of writing this report. The 2021 budget was approved with planned base budget reductions to homelessness prevention programs and included a one-time allocation back to the homelessness program as the facility is not expected to be operational until December 31, 2021. If funding is not secured, the 2022 budget will continue to reflect the base budget reductions to prevention programs in order to operate the bridge housing asset as this is considered to be more impactful to the Region's objective to reduce chronic homelessness. The reductions will be made through program redesign and policy revisions. This includes revisions to the policies around housing stability plan and Niagara emergency energy fund programs, similar to other municipal counterparts.

## **Analysis**

Bridge Housing is identified as a newer model of service intended for a population of chronically homeless clients with multiple and/or complex needs. Many of the clients participating in the current bridge housing pilot are living with mental illness, addictions and chronic health issues. This cohort of homeless clients are often identified as "hard to serve" or "service resistant". These individual adults are more likely to be overlooked, or under-served in any broader effort to assist homeless individuals to achieving permanent housing as there is little in the way of resources that would meet their needs. Bridge housing will provide a more appropriate service option for this group of people, known currently to consume a considerable volume of shelter services/bed days and community resources while "stuck" in a state of homelessness.

Bridge housing is an intensive support program, with shorter-term accommodation that closes the gap for chronically homeless individuals as they continue in their journey towards permanent housing. Clients are supported in a manner that addresses their complex needs, in an environment that allows for individually designed programming to assist them in achieving their housing goals. Staff will be on site 24/7 and will be dedicated to accelerating the securing of housing with supports or supportive housing

for the individual while concurrently providing intensive supports to allow people to live in a self-contained unit, much like they will experience when they move out of bridge housing. Service offerings will include mental health and addictions programming, securing identification and income, and case management as they continue to access the supports they need to ensure housing success,. Connecting participants to community-based resources including primary health care, trusteeships, peer support groups, socio-recreational activities, and life-skill training will support individuals as they prepare to move in to their permanent housing.

Community Services has been piloting elements of this program at the Housing Focused shelter pilot offered during the pandemic, supported with provincial COVID funding. To date this program has had 127 intakes, with 43 successful exits to permanent housing. The program has experienced 53 exits due to clients self discharging or being unsuccessful in the program. This demonstrates the continued need to redesign programming, policy and procedures, through a continuous improvement approach, to achieve maximum outcomes for this client group.

Based on the work currently being performed at the pilot, staff considered taking on the direct operations of the bridge housing project, to allow for time to further develop the programming, policy and procedures necessary to operate a successful program. At this juncture, staff determined that input from the homeless serving agencies of Niagara was integral to the decision to move forward with temporary direct operations during the design phase of the this program. Staff invited all funded agencies to a meeting to discuss the next steps of the Bridge Housing project and to receive their input on the temporarily continue with direct operations post pandemic, as the owners of the design phase. At the end of the presentation, and question and answer session, agencies were asked to vote anonymously on their support of the Region operating the facility for the design period. Community agencies were all in favour of the Region continuing this work with the exception of one.

With the support of the Community and the commitment and expertise of the Homeless staff, work has already begun on the necessary project planning, start up policies, procedures and human resources efforts to be prepared to commence operations in December of 2021.

This initial work also includes working with Reach Niagara and local health care providers including NHS, Niagara's Ontario Health team and the Niagara Falls CHC to confirm needs and develop program design for the recuperative beds within the same facility.

Homelessness Services is excited to share that Iain De Jong, CEO OrgCode has worked extensively with the Homelessness team during this initial work. As part of their interest in this Bridge Housing project, OrgCode has indicated a desire to partner with the Region on the development of programming, policy and procedures for operations, eligibility criteria and discharge from the program. In addition, the intent of OrgCode is once the work is complete, is to ensure that the final program will be identified as a Canadian best practice model and available to all interested jurisdictions. As part of the work to ensure the program is successful, OrgCode has offered support in the evaluation process during and at the conclusion of the design phase.

Staff are working collaboratively with Human Resources to establish a staffing model, job descriptions and job ratings for the new facility. All positions will be temporary, reflective of the temporary nature of these operations. Once more, the learnings of what expertise, training and certification of staff/positions will be shared with any future operator.

The design phase is anticipated to be complete after one to two years, at which time the Region will undertake a procurement process to establish a contract with a third party provider to assume the operations (similar to how the Region provides shelter and other supportive housing services). It is anticipated, the scope of work provided during the procurement process, will reflect the expected best practices, performance targets, policies and procedures established during the design phase to ensure that the continued operations reflect the success and unique opportunity of Bridge Housing in Niagara.

### **Alternatives Reviewed**

Staff did consider moving immediately to a public procurement process to award the operations of the Bridge Housing program to a third party provider. However, as there was concern that the program and performance expectations are not completely confirmed, that most local providers indicated that they preferred temporary Regional operations, and that there is an opportunity to receive a high level of expertise during the design phase, staff are not recommending moving immediately to find a third party operator. It is important to be clear, however, that staff are not recommending that the facility is directly operated beyond the Design phase.

### **Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities**

The Bridge Housing Program is a homelessness system service that supports the Council Priority of a Healthy and Vibrant Community and contributes to Council's direction to develop and implement an affordable housing strategy.

### **Other Pertinent Reports**

- Confidential COM-C 30-2020 NRH

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