
Subject: Bridge Housing Design Phase Operations
Report to: Public Health and Social Services Committee
Report date: Tuesday, December 7, 2021

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 needs and multiple barriers.
- Occupancy of the Bridge Housing project was originally anticipated for December 31, 2021, but due to delays with construction, a 4 week extension request has been submitted to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing to allow for occupancy to begin the last week of January 2022.
- Policies and programming to optimize the outcomes of Bridge Housing are under development, as there are limited similar programs operating from which we can glean best practices, and none in an Ontario context.

Financial Considerations

The plan to secure ongoing funding to operate the Bridge Housing facility were shared with Committee and Council in Confidential Report COM-C 30-2020. The report identified that Homelessness Services would advocate to the provincial government to try to secure on-going operating funding for the facility. However, if funding was not secured, the operating dollars would have to be found within the existing budget. At this time Homelessness Services has not been successful in securing the desired additional \$1.2 million annual provincial funding required to operate the facility. As such, reductions to the current homelessness prevention programs, specifically the Housing Stability Plan and Niagara Emergency Energy Fund, totaling \$1.2 million has been included in the 2022 proposed operating budget. These reductions will be accomplished through policy revisions to these programs, consistent with similar changes across the

province to focus limited resources more to the needs of chronically homeless individuals.

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, addiction 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, primary health care, securing identification and income, and case management as individuals continue to access the supports needed 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.

Homelessness Services and Niagara Region Housing (NRH) has commenced community engagement work for this site offering several local drop in times to review drawings and have discussions with staff about this new facility. This offer was made to all residents and businesses in the surrounding neighborhood of the Bridge Housing project. As part of these engagement sessions, an offer was made to attendees to volunteer to sit on the Development Committee of NRH as community representatives. As the community representatives on this committee, the volunteers support the neighbourhood in bringing forward concerns and questions for the Region and NRH to

respond. Through the engagement process two members of the neighbourhood have joined the Development Committee and are actively working with Homelessness Services and NRH.

Policies and programming to optimize the outcomes of Bridge Housing are under development, as there are limited similar programs operating from which staff can glean best practices, and none in an Ontario context. Given the limited best practice experience to draw upon, the Region has engaged Iain De Jong and OrgCode (a company with extensive expertise in homelessness program design) to work in partnership with Homelessness Services in the development of programming, policies and procedures leveraging their experience and knowledge of similar operations outside of Ontario. In addition, OrgCode is assisting in designing the data requirements to support regular evaluation of the programming to ensure evidence-informed practices are developed/implemented and improved upon. This continuous improvement process and supporting data will ensure that the scope of work, policies and procedures and program expectations reflect the requirements necessary for continued success when the Region seeks a community operator after the design phase.

A transition plan for current operations in Welland, at the temporary housing focused shelter, are underway, with operations for that facility to come to an end on December 31, 2021. The isolation shelter at that site, along with the five Welland shelter beds will remain in operation until March 31, 2022.

Recruitment

Staff worked 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. Positions were posted for the Bridge Housing facility with nearly 200 applicants. Interviews took place in early November and successful candidates will be notified in the coming days.

Alternatives Reviewed

In Report COM 20-2021, Community Services provided information on the decision to directly operate this facility rather than undertake a request for proposal and have the design phase offered by a third party provider. Niagara Region will issue an RFP for the ongoing operations in approximately two years when the design phase and evaluation work is complete.

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
- COM 20- 2021 Bridge Housing Design Phase Operations

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