
Subject: Housing and Homelessness Action Plan Update 2021

Report to: Public Health and Social Services Committee

Report date: Tuesday, April 5, 2022

Recommendations

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

Key Facts

- The purpose of this report is to update Council and the Ministry, as legislatively required, on progress completed in 2021, related to Niagara's Housing and Homelessness Action Plan (HHAP).
- Consolidated Municipal Service Managers are required to report to the public and Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing by June 30 each year with respect to efforts of the previous year. This report serves to meet the legal requirement for 2021.
- The HHAP provides a complete vision for aligning activities to address current and future need in Niagara related to affordable housing and homelessness.
- By the end of December 2021, 61% progress had been made toward finishing all 75 actions in the updated HHAP.

Financial Considerations

The resources required to facilitate the management of the Housing and Homelessness Action Plan (HHAP) are provided within the approved annual budget.

Analysis

The purpose of this report is to update Council and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH) on progress achieved in 2021, related to Niagara's updated HHAP. Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSM) are required by legislation to report to the public and MMAH by June 30 each year with respect to efforts of the previous year. This report serves to meet the requirement for 2021.

The HHAP was developed in response to the *Housing Services Act 2011, section 6*, which requires municipalities to establish and implement a 10-year plan to address local housing and homelessness needs. The five-year review and updated HHAP was

approved by Regional Council in October 2019, and acknowledged by MMAH in March 2020. The updated plan provides guidance for the five-year period of 2019-2023.

The HHAP provides a complete vision for aligning activities to address current and future need in Niagara related to affordable housing and homelessness. The plan is responsive to recent changes in the community and the housing market that affect local demand for homelessness services and affordable housing over the long term. The HHAP integrates with other Region strategies and initiatives, including the New Official Plan, Niagara Housing Database, Niagara's Housing Master Plan, Niagara's Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan (CSWP), Built for Zero Canada (BFZ-C), direct investment in housing, the Region's incentive review and development charge bylaw review.

The HHAP incorporates recognized Canadian best practices and emerging practices in housing and homeless services to address the whole continuum of housing and supports from interventions like street outreach and temporary short term accommodation to permanent community, affordable and market housing options. Best practices include the use of a Quality By Name List (QBNL) of all people experiencing homelessness in the community, common assessment of need, and coordinated access (CA) to connect people to the housing and supports that best meet their needs, and a commitment to decreasing the number of people experiencing chronic homelessness and ensuring the experience of homelessness is brief and non-recurring.

Niagara Region cannot accomplish the goals of the HHAP on its own, and so must partner broadly with housing and homelessness services providers, across the health, corrections and child welfare systems, with municipal, provincial and federal governments, with private developers and with Indigenous organizations and communities. The HHAP working groups support collaboration in nine focus areas by providing opportunities for participants to align initiatives and provide input to the CMSM about service and system planning on an ongoing basis. In 2021, the HHAP working groups included:

- Assertive Street Outreach
- Housing-Focused Shelter
- Supported Transitional Housing
- Housing First and Home for Good
- Coordinated Access and By-Name List
- Lived Experience Advisory
- Homelessness Prevention
- Housing Provider Advisory
- Housing Affordability Innovation

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the HHAP continued to guide ongoing homeless services system transformation by informing pandemic responses that were consistent with long-term system goals and could be leveraged as part of the ongoing housing and homeless system after the pandemic response has ended, including a strategic investment of the capital share of the Social Services Relief Fund (SSRF). In response to changes in the housing market and the anticipated longer term economic impact of the pandemic on local households, in the second half of 2021 the HHAP work began to focus on system improvements for homelessness prevention and diversion in addition to the creation of adequate affordable housing supply.

By the end of December 2021, 61% progress had been made toward finishing all 75 actions in the updated HHAP. At that time, 32 actions were completed, 27 had seen progress and were on track for completion by end of 2023, and 16 required significant work to be completed within the five year period covered by the updated HHAP. Two key areas requiring additional focus in 2022 and 2023 include Indigenous housing and homelessness prevention.

Further to Council direction in October 2019 (COM 40-2019), staff continued to provide regular updates about activities, outcomes and challenges related to the HHAP throughout 2021. Highlights related to the four HHAP goals include:

Goal 1 – House People Who do not Have a Home

By the end of December 2021, 77% progress had been made toward finishing the 11 actions related to Goal 1. Eight of these actions were completed, one had seen progress and was on track for completion by end of 2023, and two required significant work to be completed within the five year period covered by the updated HHAP. Key accomplishments since 2019, include the shift to assertive street outreach and low-barrier housing-focused shelters, introduction of a QBNL and CA, and the development of additional supports for those experiencing chronic homelessness. Progress and accomplishments in 2021 include:

- The YWCA Oakdale Commons project was completed in February with occupancy in March. The 24-unit apartment building located in St. Catharines provides a mixture of permanent and transitional family shelter units. The project was funded in part through provincial Home for Good capital funding secured in 2017 and supported by project management assistance from Niagara Regional Housing (NRH) throughout the construction and occupancy phases.

- The HHAP Housing Focused Shelter Working Group engaged staff from Niagara Health (NH) to collaborate on improving the process for client transfers between local hospitals and emergency shelters, and reduce discharges from hospital into homelessness. This work will be ongoing in 2022.
- A task group of staff and community partners reviewed Niagara's common assessment tools to identify and minimize the risks and potential barriers that common assessment may present for women, youth, Indigenous people, and other priority populations trying to access homelessness services.
- The housing-focused shelter pilot, supporting individuals on the QBNL who are experiencing chronic homelessness transition to permanent housing while connecting them to wrap around supports and community, continued to show very positive results from its launch in 2020, until winding down service in December 2021. In 2021, the pilot had 51 intakes and 31 successful exits to housing, for a total of 83 intakes and 50 successful exits to independent housing, supportive living, and family reunification since launch.
- Niagara joined the BFZ-C veterans cohort in June, to work together with representatives from the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH) and the Royal Canadian Legion (RCL) to achieve a "functional zero" end to veteran homelessness. In 2021, RCL was included as a service provider within Niagara's homeless serving system and established as a key contact to help coordinate supports for veterans experiencing homelessness including confirming veteran status through Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC). By the end of 2021, local partners had established a referral process for veterans, developed and delivered customized training to front line homeless services workers, and Niagara Assertive Street Outreach (NASO) was working to engage and support positive housing transitions for seven veterans experiencing chronic homelessness.
- Seasonal shelters opened November 1, with 50 beds at Westminster Church in St Catharines and 28 beds at St. Andrews Church in Niagara Falls operating during the winter months in addition to the COVID-19 isolation shelter and 186 units of emergency shelter which operate year round.

In 2021, an average of 19 chronically homeless people per month were supported to exit to housing, and the NASO team supported 180 people to move from the street directly to housing. On December 31, 2021, there were 424 people experiencing chronic homelessness.

Of the 2,055 unique individuals who accessed emergency shelter in 2021, the largest proportion were single men (28.1%), single women (15.7%), Indigenous Individuals

(11.4%), seniors 55+ (11.2%), and youth 16-24 without a guardian (8.3%). One hundred and twenty eight individuals (6.2% of shelter clients) had 180+ days in shelter.

Areas for focus for 2022 and 2023 include exploration of a rapid rehousing program and introducing Indigenous-focused street outreach and emergency shelter.

Goal 2 – Help People to Retain a Home

By the end of December 2021, 44% progress had been made toward finishing the 16 actions related to Goal 2. Three of these actions were completed, eight had seen progress and were on track for completion by end of 2023, and five required significant work to be completed within the five year period covered by the updated HHAP. Key accomplishments since 2019, include providing enhanced services for persons with concurrent disorders and working in partnership with the Local Health Integration Network (LHIN) and Regional Essential Access to Connected Healthcare (REACH) Niagara to provide health, mental health and addictions support for persons experiencing homelessness, including supporting the launch of the REACH mobile health clinic. Progress and accomplishments in 2021 include:

- In 2021, the expansion of eviction prevention and supports to housing providers and the Rent Supplement Program through the Community Programs Coordinators continued on a pilot basis.
- An analysis of the shelter diversion pilot, started in 2019, is being undertaken. The expected completion date for the analysis is April 2022, and it will provide recommendations for a local model of shelter diversion moving forward.
- An evaluation of local homeless prevention programs is underway and will provide recommendations to enhance the delivery of homelessness prevention. The recommendations are expected to be completed by end of April 2022, and will incorporate nationally recognized best practices, feedback from prevention service users and providers, and leverage the strengths of current prevention service delivery. The updated prevention framework will support the goals of system transformation and the HHAP and be grounded in BFZ-C and Housing First principles to support and end to homelessness.

In 2021, an average of 327 households per month were stabilized. Returns to chronic homelessness from housing remained low, at five per month on average in 2021.

Areas for focus for 2022 and 2023 include improving identification of housing loss risk, revising the trusteeship program and, for Indigenous persons, supporting exits from

provincial systems, addressing discrimination as a barrier to housing, and supporting the right to housing.

Goal 3 – Increase Housing Options and Opportunities for Low- and Moderate-Income Households

By the end of December 2021, 75% progress had been made toward finishing the 24 actions related to Goal 3. Fourteen of these actions were completed, eight had seen progress and were on track for completion by end of 2023, and two required significant work to be completed within the five year period covered by the updated HHAP. Key accomplishments since 2019, include development of an affordable housing strategy, supporting local municipal affordable housing plans, financing for capital repair needs, addressing End of Operating/Mortgage agreements and supporting not for profit housing provider capacity to develop. Progress and accomplishments in 2021 include:

- The Regional incentive review was completed in 2021, with all participants ranking affordable housing as the most important of four priority areas for incentives. In October, Regional Council approved the Niagara Region Incentives Policy, which included eleven Regional affordable housing incentive programs. Work will continue in 2022, to operationalize some of the new and revised affordable housing programs and update key legislation such as the Municipal Capital Facilities bylaw. These programs are open to a variety of partners (private, public, non-profit, individuals) and employ a variety of mechanisms (grants, loans, deferrals) to:
 - Generate new, purpose-built affordable housing, particularly affordable rental
 - Provide for maintenance and repair of existing affordable housing stock
 - Move clients off the centralized housing waitlist.
 - Leverage a range of partnerships and resources to support affordable housing
- At the end of 2021, Niagara's Housing Master Plan was progressing well with stakeholder engagement and data gathering completed and an initial draft report submitted to staff for review. The Master Plan will provide a long-term roadmap to 2041, to ensure the sustainability of existing community housing stock and outline the future needs for affordable housing stock in Niagara.
- Throughout 2021, NRH and Niagara Region staff continued to work with the development community to explore innovative housing solutions that address the cost of affordable housing. At the end of 2021, the NRH project team was supporting 533+ potential new affordable housing units within the non-profit sector, including 40 units for high acuity clients.

- The in-situ Rent Supplement program engaged new landlords and offered applicants on the centralized housing waitlist an opportunity to receive Rent-Geared-to-Income assistance where they currently live. In 2021, new agreements were initiated with 19 new landlords.
- The Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB) is a portable rent benefit that helps applicants on the centralized housing waitlist pay their rent to their current landlord in the private market. At the end of 2021, there were 302 eligible households receiving COHB benefits.
- New Affordable Housing Development Highlights, as of end of December 2021:
 - Construction on an affordable four-plex in St. Catharines and duplex in Thorold (Oonuhseh Niagara Native Homes) were completed in April 2021.
 - Hawkins Avenue Niagara Falls, 73 affordable units (NRH) – construction 100% complete, occupancy is now well underway.
 - Buchanan Avenue Niagara Falls, 25 permanent supportive housing units for high acuity chronically homeless clients – construction completed and partial occupancy awarded in December 2021. Tenants have been selected using coordinated access in alignment with BFZ best practices and move-ins are commencing.
 - Victoria Avenue Niagara Falls, 15 bridge housing units and potential for 10 recuperative care beds – project has experienced some COVID-related construction delays, but partial occupancy is targeted for mid-March 2022.
 - Rapid Housing Initiative – federal government has awarded \$10.5 million for the 43-unit project at York Street in Welland. Design-build contract was awarded and design phase is in progress. Target completion is planned for December 2022.

Niagara renters experienced a more challenging market in 2021¹. In contrast to population growth, Niagara had a net loss of purpose built rental units, with the 313 new rental apartment units added being offset by a loss of more than 313 current units removed from supply by conversion or other uses. Market rents for two-bedroom units increased by about 6% for the second year in a row, with average rents for a two-bedroom unit increasing to \$1,192 per month. The difference between average and asking rents rose by nearly 17%, with the difference close to 40% for scarce bachelor and three-bedroom units. For example, the average asking rent for a two-bedroom unit

¹ Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation. (2022, February). Rental Market Report: Canada and Selected Markets.

in St. Catharines in December 2021, was \$1,649 per month². The average vacancy rate fell to 1.9% from 2.7% in 2020, with average vacancy rates closer to 1% for units that are affordable for lower income households. A more challenging rental market increases pressure on community housing supply.

At the end of 2021, there were 7,967 community housing units in Niagara, including 2,908 NRH-owned, 3,357 provider, and 1,702 rent supplement/housing allowance/COHB units. From December 31, 2020, to December 31, 2021, the centralized housing waitlist grew by 11.5% from 8,228 to 9,171 households. This represents an additional 2,020 people waiting for community housing over the previous year (a 13.7% increase from 14,737 to 16,757 people).

Areas for focus for 2022 and 2023 include supporting Indigenous access to land and incentives and revising the homeless priority on the centralized housing waitlist.

Goal 4 – Build Capacity and Improve the Effectiveness and Efficiency of the Housing and Homelessness System

By the end of December 2021, 50% progress had been made toward finishing the 24 actions related to Goal 4. Seven of these actions were completed, ten had seen progress and were on track for completion by end of 2023, and seven required significant work to be completed within the five year period covered by the updated HHAP. Key accomplishments since 2019, include developing a common system vision to end homelessness, improving the accuracy and completeness of the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) data, increase use of systems standards, increase frequency and quality of communications and participation in the BFZ-C. Progress and accomplishments in 2021, include:

- Niagara Counts 2021, Niagara's third homelessness point-in-time count (PiT count), took place on March 23, 2021. A PiT count is intended to provide a picture of homelessness at a single point in time through a homeless enumeration and an accompanying survey. As a consequence of the pandemic, planned Indigenous magnet events, in collaboration with Indigenous-led service providers, were unable to take place. As a result, the PiT count report recognizes that critical input from local Indigenous communities is still needed to ensure that the experiences and extent of Indigenous homelessness in Niagara is represented and heard. Because of

² Rentals.ca December 2021 Rent Report

changes enacted to protect the health and safety of everyone involved, the results of the 2021 PiT count may not be directly comparable to those of years past.

- Staff developed a revised data strategy to support outcome measurement. Work in 2021, consisted of developing principles, framework and approach, and scanning municipalities and publications for best and promising practices. Initial work identified 280 performance measures across all areas of homeless services delivery. The measures have been prioritized for further refinement to support strategic priorities, and provincial and federal requirements.
- Niagara Region Homelessness Services purchased much needed accessibility enhancing items included ramps, accessible beds, wheelchairs, shower chairs, hand rails and grab bars. Client needs were determined in collaboration with shelter and street outreach agencies. The items were delivered to agencies with positive client feedback. Niagara Region had received \$60,000 in provincial funding through the Inclusive Community Grants Program in March 2021, for purchases to improve accessibility in the homeless serving system.
- Niagara Region Homelessness Services Quarterly Newsletter was relaunched in July 2021, to improve communications with service providers and other stakeholders.

A key component of BFZ-C, the QBNL supports system planning to meet community need. Of the 424 unique (chronically homeless) individuals on Niagara's QBNL at December 31, 2021, the largest proportion were single men (35.4%), single women (19.8%), Indigenous Individuals (13.4%), seniors 55+ (12.3%), and youth 16-24 without a guardian (8.5%). Five veterans were experiencing chronic homelessness and one was approaching chronic homelessness on December 31.

There were also 44 Indigenous persons experiencing chronic homelessness and 16 Indigenous persons were approaching chronic homelessness (experiencing 90 to 179 days homeless) on December 31. Indigenous people remain significantly overrepresented within the homeless population of Niagara, representing 2.8% of the population of Niagara, but 11.4% of those accessing emergency shelter and 13.4% of those experiencing chronic homelessness in 2021.

Areas for focus for 2022 and 2023, include increasing focus on actions that prevent homelessness, improving service manager engagement with Indigenous organizations and supporting Indigenous-led housing and homelessness solutions.

Alternatives Reviewed

There are no applicable alternatives as reporting on the HHAP is required under the *Housing Services Act, 2011*, per its regulations as noted in the Analysis on page 1.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

The HHAP describes actions, outcomes, and targets for the priority project of Affordable Housing 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

- COM 40-2019 Five-Year Review of Niagara's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Action Plan
- COM 11-2021 Housing and Homelessness Action Plan Update 2020
- COM-C 35-2021 Activities Related to Niagara's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Action Plan for September, October, November 2021
- COM-C 4-2022 Activities Related to Niagara's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Action Plan for December 2021, and January, February 2022
- COM 12-2022 Homelessness Services Report 2021

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