
Subject: Recommendations to Update Niagara Region’s Centralized Waitlist for Community Housing

Report to: Public Health and Social Services Committee

Report date: Tuesday, July 11, 2023

Recommendations

1. That Regional Council **APPROVE** the recommended changes to the Housing Services Local Priority Groups for households applying to be on the centralized waitlist for Niagara Region community housing as outlined in Report COM 25-2023.

Key Facts

- In 2019, the total number of households on the community housing waitlist was 7,004 and now, as of May 2023, the number of households on the waitlist is 10,521, representing a 50% increase.
- Currently, the Local Priority Group policy has three local priority groups for households applying to community housing in Niagara Region: Overhoused, Urgent (includes Mobility Barrier and Hardship Barrier), and Homeless.
- Provincially, there is one mandated priority group, which is known as the “Special Priority Policy” (which must precede all local priority groups).
- The most recent review of the Housing Services Local Priority Groups policy occurred in 2014; a recommendation at the time, to remove the Health & Safety priority group and replace with the current Urgent priority group, was approved.
- The current Local Priority Group policy presents assessment and approval challenges to Housing Services staff, and based on a recent review of data, has been found to not address local need. The change proposed, is intended to address these concerns.

Financial Considerations

There are no financial considerations as a result of the recommended change to the Housing Services Local Priority groups.

Analysis

Similar to communities across Ontario, the need for community housing far surpasses the amount of housing available in the Niagara Region. In the last several years, the Niagara Region housing waitlist has grown considerably and there are several contributing factors to this including: an increasingly inaccessible housing market resulting in little turnover of existing community housing units; increased tenant evictions for 'renovations' as landlords seek to maximize profits; end of mortgages with current community housing providers (who can potentially choose to withdraw from the provision of community housing and stop taking individuals from the housing wait list); and the loss of rent supplement agreements with private sector landlords, as they can afford to be more selective of tenants and raise their rates in the rental market while still easily finding tenants willing to pay.

To respond to the increased need for housing, multiple communities across Ontario are changing local priorities for community housing to better align with current community need and re-prioritize urgent populations facing barriers to housing.

As people seek ways to, understandably, avoid very lengthy waits on housing lists, staff are observing a number of assessment and approval challenges associated with the application of current local priorities. To address these challenges, staff completed a comprehensive review of the local priority groups and waitlist processes to understand whether it was meeting community need. Staff also sought input from a number of key impacted parties including the Housing Provider Advisory Committee, the Niagara Regional Housing (NRH) Board, Housing and Homelessness divisions' senior leadership, and Housing Services staff who administer the waitlist.

Current Local Priority Groups

Households on Niagara Region Housing Services centralized waitlist are currently offered community housing units in the following order:

1. Special Priority Policy (SPP) *Provincially Mandated*
2. Overhoused (OVH) *Local Priority*
3. Urgent (URG) consisting of Mobility Barrier and Hardship Barrier *Local Priority*
4. Homeless (HML) rotational 1 in 10 Vacancies *Local Priority*
5. Chronological (CHR) based on date of application

Currently, priority groups (SPP, OVH, URG & HML) make up an average of 21.2% of households on the centralized waitlist and receive an average of 74% of units. The Chronological group makes up 78.8% of the waitlist and receive an average of 21% of the available units. The remaining 5% were households that were selected for market rent units within community housing locations. These statistics have not changed since the last review in 2014. A more detailed summary of each Priority Group is summarized below:

Special Priority Policy (SPP): This priority group is mandated by the province and remains a mandatory top priority on the centralized waitlist for all Service Managers across the province. The Special Priority Policy is intended for those fleeing domestic violence and/or human trafficking.

Overhoused (OVH): Overhoused households have been established as the second priority group after SPP. Overhoused households are those households that have had a change in their household composition and are currently living in community housing receiving rent-geared-to-income assistance. These households are occupying a unit that is larger than their household composition requires. People waiting in these units are recognized as blocking access for those who require larger units.

Urgent (URG): The Urgent category is the third priority on the centralized waitlist and includes two sub-categories: Mobility Barrier and Hardship Barrier.

- The Mobility Barrier sub-category refers to circumstances where a tenant has physical limitations, cannot walk upstairs, and is living in a building that does not have an elevator. A doctor's note is required to confirm that the applicant's health is significantly compromised due to the individual's condition and inability to manage stairs in their current residence.
- Extreme hardship sub-category refers to circumstances where the individual's situation puts them at 'extreme risk and/or causes extreme hardship' and relocation would reduce the risks and/or alleviate the hardship.

Homeless (HML): Homeless status is the fourth priority on the centralized waitlist. Housing providers offer one in every 10 vacancies to applicants on the waitlist who have been identified as homeless. Currently, the following is the criteria for Homeless status: living on the street (no shelter), living in a motel, living in substandard housing which has been condemned by the municipality, using the emergency shelter system as their primary residence, accommodation that has recently been destroyed by fire or natural disaster, living with family or friends on a temporary basis for less than six months, or awaiting release from hospital or other time-limited treatment facility and cannot return

to their former place of residence due to the modifications required to the home. It should be noted, that this does not align with the definition of homelessness used by Homelessness Services or Built for Zero.

Proposed Changes to Local Priority Groups

Further to a desire to increase access for those on the chronological waitlist and better align policy with other efforts to reduce homelessness in the Region, the following is the proposed new local priority groups for households applying for community housing in the Niagara Region:

1. Special Priority Policy (SPP) *Provincially Mandated*
2. Overhoused (OVH) *Local Priority*
3. **Urgent (URG) Local Priority**
 - a. **Mobility Barrier only**
4. **Homeless (1 in every 5 vacancies) Local Priority**

Details to Support Proposed Changes

1. Urgent category – Recommendation to remove the Hardship Sub-Category from this priority group

The hardship sub-category continues to present challenges, as the discretion necessary for approval is too subjective for staff. Just over one quarter (30%) of all households with Urgent status are in the Hardship sub-category. Due to the vagueness of requests for Urgent status, 60% of requests to this priority group are regularly denied. Currently, there are 300 households in this priority group on the centralized waitlist (2023). Staff are suggesting removing this category from future priority groups and only having one category, that being Mobility Barriers. (Staff also propose to grandfather all existing “Urgent” households currently on the waitlist in this category, rather than remove them).

2. Homeless category – Recommendation to align this priority group with the Niagara Region’s Coordinated Access system, which utilizes Niagara’s By-Name List (BNL) and move to a 1 in 5 rotation

This priority group has the greatest number of households on the waitlist amongst all priority groups, currently sitting at approximately 1,500 households. Almost all households who apply for this status are approved; 91% approval in 2022. Very few households in this category, each year, are being housed in community housing units.

In 2022, 48 homeless households were housed in community housing; representing approximately 10% of the total housed that year. One of the greatest challenges of this priority group is the ability to keep client contact information up to date, given the challenges a person experiences when homeless and the inherent risk of transience. Staff are recommending aligning the definition of homelessness, understanding of who those individuals are in our community, with that of Niagara's BNL which is a real-time list of all known persons experiencing homelessness locally who are accessing homelessness services in the Region. The BNL includes a robust set of data points that support coordinated access and prioritization at a household level and an understanding of homeless inflow and outflow at a system level. Households, in the updated policy, will be eligible for Homeless status if they are on Niagara's By-Name List of homelessness or transitional housing, or are Indigenous households experiencing homelessness. Staff are also recommending moving from a 1 in 10 rotation of placement to a 1 in 5 rotation to support more movement in this priority group into community housing. Staff do not recommend grandfathering households (who applied using the previous very broad definition) in this category. Instead, staff recommend updating information for all existing Homeless households on the waitlist and applying the new criteria for Homeless status to this group, which is anticipated to result in a decrease of households in the Homeless category.

Engagement with Impacted Parties

To inform these proposed changes, staff engaged with a number of impacted parties including the Housing Provider Advisory Committee, the Niagara Regional Housing (NRH) Board, Housing and Homelessness divisions' senior staff, and Housing Services staff who administer the waitlist. Overall, all parties endorsed the recommended changes to the Local Priority Groups. All parties noted concerns around the need for additional supports to tenants in Community housing among approved local priority group households. Housing providers specifically noted the need for increased supports for tenants approved under the Special Priority Policy (provincially mandated) for those fleeing domestic violence and/or human trafficking. Additionally, all parties agreed that more supports are needed for households approved under the Homeless local priority group. All parties shared concerns for a significant number of tenants experiencing poor mental health and substance use living in community housing.

The Housing Services and Homelessness divisions are committed to working with housing providers to provide additional supports for Special Priority Policy (Provincial mandatory group) households and Homeless priority group (local priority group) households.

Alternatives Reviewed

Alternatives reviewed to inform this report included an environmental scan of comparable service system managers across Ontario to understand recent changes made to local priority groups and priority order. There are a small number of municipalities that do not have an Homelessness category.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

The Housing Services Local Priority Groups policy supports the Council Priority of a Healthy and Vibrant Community and contributes to Council's direction to envision a community where all residents feel safe and belong.

Other Pertinent Reports

- NRH Board Report 135 - Housing Services Act Local Areas of Flexibility – Local Priority Groups, September 26, 2014

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