

Memorandum

COM-C 12-2024

Subject: Homelessness Plans for Winter 2024-25

Date: October 8, 2024

To: Public Health and Social Services Committee

From: Adrienne Jugley, Commissioner, Community Services

Niagara Region's Homelessness Services team has put a number of strategies into place to support clients during the winter months.

The homelessness services system and those who are unhoused, continue to be challenged by the housing market, rental vacancy rates and rental costs in Niagara. Even more worrisome, the unhoused population continue to present with disabling substance use and mental health issues as a lingering impact of a prolonged pandemic that saw long periods of isolation and reduced services. All of these combined pressures, coupled with the anticipation of colder winter months have resulted in the need for Niagara to implement strategies that support enhanced capacity within the homelessness system, but still within the assets and finances available.

Emergency Shelter Capacity and Community Assets

- Niagara Region funded emergency shelters (Southridge, YWCA, The Raft, Salvation Army Booth Centre and Hope Centre) currently account for 162 year-round units (136 beds and 26 family/motel units).
- Niagara Region directly operates two year-round shelters, one in St. Catharines and one in Niagara Falls offering a total of capacity of 105 – 115 spaces depending on mix of couples and singles.
- Niagara Region will enhance services at the Niagara Falls shelter increasing the spaces available by 8 beds for the duration of the winter, Nov 1 – April 15.
- Homelessness Services, in partnership with Public Health are working with emergency shelters and homelessness serving agencies to implement appropriate outbreak management plans and Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) measures for the upcoming respiratory illness outbreak season, to maintain safer environments.

- Homelessness Services, in partnership with the Hope Centre, is working to increase shelter capacity in their service area by increasing the number of shelter hotel rooms from 18 to 26 for the winter months, until such time as the new South Niagara Shelter is operational. At that time the 49-unit shelter will open, and 18 of the 26 hotel rooms will close, leaving 8 to continue to support families.
- An “overflow” shelter phone line will be in operation to address shelter needs for eligible individuals (families and individuals with accessibility needs) when the regional shelter system is full. It is available daily until 11 p.m. and directly accessible through 211 or referred through a shelter provider. This ensures that those in critical need, after diversion efforts have been exhausted, and who are at greatest risk, can be sheltered should the system be otherwise full. This is a practice consistent with much of Ontario as all communities are grappling with limited shelter capacity.

Further Proactive Strategies to Support Housing Focused Approach

- Beyond emergency-based responses, Homelessness Services invests in prevention and diversion programs which seek to reduce the number of households who otherwise would require emergency shelter. The shelter diversion program will continue throughout the winter to reduce demand on shelters. This is considered a best practice approach both reducing pressure on the shelter system and ensuring that residents have the most appropriate solutions for their needs – it is recognized that shelters are not a ‘one-size fits all’ response.
- Niagara’s Assertive Street Outreach (NASO) region-wide program will continue to support clients to move directly from street to housing, as well as support those who can be supported in local shelters. To date, in 2024, NASO has had 50 successful housing placements directly from the street.

Additional supports during cold weather alerts

- Niagara will send an alert to all regionally funded homelessness agencies and first responder organizations to make them aware of cold weather alerts and confirm the services available for unhoused individuals, each time an alert is declared.

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- Niagara Region, at the two directly operated shelters, will temporarily increase space available during cold weather alerts, leveraging the common room areas increasing capacity by 15 beds in St. Catharines and 25 beds in Niagara Falls. Staffing to support these 'just in time responses' will be managed through offering of overtime and leveraging any available casual staff.
 - Niagara Assertive Street Outreach will enhance hours and staffing during an alert to the extent possible within staffing, including incurring overtime costs, for which the Region will reimburse, to support clients in accessing services.
 - During alerts, as noted in the Region's shelter standards, some service restrictions will be lifted for the duration of the alert to ensure individuals are supported.

Niagara's diverse strategies offer both emergency and proactive approaches to ensure that agencies are in the best position possible to respond to the multiple pressures currently facing the homelessness serving system.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

Adrienne Jugley, MSW, RSW, CHE
Commissioner