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**Subject:** Homelessness Services Update

**Report to:** Public Health and Social Services Committee

**Report date:** Tuesday, January 7, 2025

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## **Recommendations**

1. That Report COM 2-2025 **BE RECEIVED** for information.

## **Key Facts**

- The purpose of this report is to update Council on the current state of Niagara's Homeless Serving System and identify next steps for incremental improvement.
- While many factors impacting homelessness are beyond its control, the Region in its role as service manager can choose to invest in proven practices that support an end to homelessness.
- Based on the recommendations of Niagara's shelter capacity review, the next system improvement to implement is to significantly increase available supports and housing allowances to increase the flow of people from encampments and shelters to permanent housing.

## **Financial Considerations**

The activities described in this report are delivered within the existing budget of the Homelessness Services Division. As such, there are no direct financial implications, and no new expenditures or funding requests are proposed through this information report.

## **Analysis**

Niagara Region is one of 68 communities in Canada that are part of Built for Zero Canada (BFZ). BFZ is an ambitious national change effort helping a core group of leading communities end chronic homelessness and veteran homelessness as steps to ending all homelessness. Niagara and other BFZ Communities use a structured, data-driven approach to optimizing local homeless systems, adopting proven practices and driving continuous improvement. Through its work with BFZ the Niagara Region has achieved the milestones of a quality By Name List and Coordinated Access. A By

Name List is a list of everyone in the community known to be experiencing homelessness. Coordinated Access is a system for consistently and equitably connecting people experiencing homelessness to services and housing related resources. Niagara Region and its community partners have received recognition for practices in the areas of Data Collection and Use, Engagement of Lived Experts, Youth Homelessness Prevention, Shelter Diversion, Bridge Housing, Recuperative Care and other Health Interventions, Housing Focused Shelters and Assertive Street Outreach.

While some communities have seen large increases in the numbers of people experiencing homelessness since the pandemic, the number of people experiencing homelessness in Niagara has increased by up to 10% annually and held steady between 2023 and 2024 at about 1,200 people. However, during this time Niagara has also seen nearly a doubling in the number of people experiencing Chronic Homelessness (long-term homelessness). Currently 53% of all people who are homeless in Niagara are chronically homeless. Chronic homelessness often includes those with complex needs, struggling with a disabling condition such as a serious mental illness, substance use disorder, physical disability, illness or medical condition, learning disability, acquired brain injury or a combination of such challenges.

Homelessness is the result of systemic or societal barriers, a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, the individual/household's financial, mental, cognitive, behavioural or physical challenges, and/or racism and discrimination. Many factors impacting homelessness, such as inadequate social assistance rates, access to mental health and substance use treatment and supply of affordable housing are in part or in whole beyond the control of Regional and Municipal governments. Local Point in Time Count surveys have consistently identified a lack of affordable housing and low income as top factors preventing people from being housed. Some factors are within the control of the Region in its role as service manager including decisions about investment in solutions that create housing and supports for people experiencing homelessness.

When thinking about supporting people who are experiencing homelessness the first thing that often comes to mind is emergency shelters. A shelter capacity review completed for the Region by OrgCode Consulting in 2023 identified several system improvements related to shelters and is being used by staff to guide investment related to shelters and supportive housing. Improvements already made or underway include:

- Transitioned 95 seasonal shelter beds to permanent shelter beds (Riordan and Summer Street shelters in St. Catharines and Niagara Falls); added more bed capacity to achieve a total of 120 permanent shelter beds.
- Continue to maintain overflow motels (Interim Family Sheltering in St Catharines and Niagara Falls)
- Increased capacity for couples (Riordon, Summer Street and new South Niagara Shelters)
- Scaled up Shelter Diversion at all shelters

The next system improvement to implement is to significantly increase supports and rent supplements to increase the flow of people from encampments and shelters to permanent housing.

After an increase in rent supports, the final recommendation is to increase the amount of bridge housing, permanent supportive housing, and housing focused shelter spaces to address identified unmet needs for women, non-binary and gender fluid people, Indigenous community, and older adults. Note that the new Bridge Housing site at Geneva Street in St. Catharines, currently under development, contributes to fulfilling this recommendation.

Supporting unsheltered and emergency sheltered people who are experiencing homelessness to access housing is a critical success factor for any homeless serving system. Between January and December 2024, Niagara's homeless serving system supported 991 people to successfully transition from emergency shelter to housing. During the same time, 330 people moved from unsheltered homelessness to emergency shelter and 50 people moved directly from unsheltered homelessness into housing. These numbers do not include additional people who self-resolved their unsheltered or sheltered homelessness. There has been space in local shelters year-round, with 14 people a day on average booking into an available shelter space. Although shelter occupancy increases with colder weather, the 30 net new shelter beds at the South Niagara Shelter will help address this seasonal pressure.

For the first time since the pandemic Niagara's rental housing market has begun to stabilize in 2024. Vacancy rates are around 2.8%<sup>1</sup> and the cost of rent for someone

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<sup>1</sup> CMHC Data Portal

moving into a rental unit has levelled off at around \$1,660 for a 1-bed and \$1,972 for a two-bed unit<sup>2</sup>. However, a single person receiving \$733 per month on Ontario works is unable to afford \$1,660 per month without significant rent subsidy.

The current state of Niagara's homeless serving system, a stabilizing rental market, and a focus on increasing the flow of people from encampments and shelters to permanent housing make increasing available supports and rent assistance an effective strategy to decreasing the number of people experiencing homelessness.

### **Alternatives Reviewed**

Not Applicable

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

This report supports the council priority of an Equitable Region by providing access to housing and supports for people challenged with homelessness.

### **Other Pertinent Reports**

#### [COM 21-2023 Homeless Shelter Capacity Review](#)

([https://niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/PHSSC\\_Jun06\\_2023/eSCRIBE%20Documents/eSCRIBE%20Attachments/COM%2021-2023%20Homeless%20Shelter%20Capacity%20Review.pdf](https://niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/PHSSC_Jun06_2023/eSCRIBE%20Documents/eSCRIBE%20Attachments/COM%2021-2023%20Homeless%20Shelter%20Capacity%20Review.pdf))

#### [COM 8-2024 Homelessness Prevention Program Investment Plan 2024-25](#)

([https://niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/PHSSC\\_Mar05\\_2024/eSCRIBE%20Documents/eSCRIBE%20Attachments/COM%208-2024%20Homelessness%20Prevention%20Plan%20Investment%20Plan%202024-25%20Fiscal%20Year%20-%20DD.pdf](https://niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/PHSSC_Mar05_2024/eSCRIBE%20Documents/eSCRIBE%20Attachments/COM%208-2024%20Homelessness%20Prevention%20Plan%20Investment%20Plan%202024-25%20Fiscal%20Year%20-%20DD.pdf))

#### [COM 8-2024 Appendix 1](#)

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<sup>2</sup> Rentals.ca December 2024 Rental Report

([https://niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/PHSSC\\_Mar05\\_2024/eSCRIBE%20Documents/eSCRIBE%20Attachments/COM%208-2024%20Appendix%201%20Sub-Categories%20Table%20Revised%20HPP%20investment%20plan%202024%20short.pdf](https://niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/PHSSC_Mar05_2024/eSCRIBE%20Documents/eSCRIBE%20Attachments/COM%208-2024%20Appendix%201%20Sub-Categories%20Table%20Revised%20HPP%20investment%20plan%202024%20short.pdf))

[COM 15-2024 Housing and Homelessness Action Plan Update 2023](#)

([https://niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/PHSSC\\_May07\\_2024/eSCRIBE%20Documents/eSCRIBE%20Attachments/COM%2015-2024%20Housing%20and%20Homelessness%20Action%20Plan%20Update.pdf](https://niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/PHSSC_May07_2024/eSCRIBE%20Documents/eSCRIBE%20Attachments/COM%2015-2024%20Housing%20and%20Homelessness%20Action%20Plan%20Update.pdf))

COM-C 2-2025 Homelessness Point-in-Time Count Memorandum

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**Prepared by:**  
Jeffrey Sinclair  
Manager, Homelessness Services  
Community Services

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**Recommended by:**  
Henri Koning, MHSc  
Commissioner  
Community Services

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**Submitted by:**  
Ron Tripp, P.Eng.  
Chief Administrative Officer

This report was prepared in consultation with Cathy Cousins, Director, Homelessness and Community Engagement.