

Subject: Seasonal Shelter

Report to: Public Health and Social Services Committee

Report date: Tuesday, February 4, 2025

Recommendations

1. To be received **FOR INFORMATION.**

Key Facts

- The purpose of this report is to provide additional information to Public Health and Social Services Committee (PHSSC) to provide context for a one-time request of \$400,000 for a temporary seasonal shelter at the Budget Review Committee of the Whole December 5, 2024.
- At the January 7, 2025, PHSSC meeting staff provided an update on the status of work in Homelessness Services, including an overview of the shelter system. Staff also provided a presentation that included an overview and update of the homelessness services approach, service focus, current challenges and opportunities and next steps. This report serves to further supplement that information and provide further details.
- Expanding shelter options could address ongoing pressures in some local communities related to unsheltered homelessness and encampments.
- Three options that could add additional shelter spaces in 2025 include (1) opening a seasonal shelter, (2) adding a new temporary permanent shelter similar to Riordon and Ontario Road sites, or (3) expanding the current temporary shelters when they are moved to their permanent locations.
- A Permanent shelter would cost more than a seasonal shelter but would support the outcome of reducing homelessness by assisting persons experiencing homelessness to return to housing.
- The necessary funding for adding an additional shelter currently does not exist in the Niagara Region 2025 operating budget.

Financial Considerations

The necessary funding for adding an additional shelter currently does not exist in the Niagara Region 2025 operating budget.

In prior years before implementing the OrgCode Consulting report recommendations which included a transition from seasonal shelters to permanent shelters, a budget of approximately \$400,000 was required to support a seasonal shelter. However, the current cost to deliver this service is unknown and has likely increased significantly, with inflation and adjustments to funding to shelter agencies to reflect the increasing needs of shelter participants. The Region would need to issue a request for proposal for an operator, and that process would generate a more accurate costing, addressing staffing ratios, rates of pay, insurance rates, rent (subject to property available) and damages. Anticipated costs for a seasonal shelter are significantly less than the anticipated costs for an additional permanent shelter. All options would provide additional spaces for people experiencing homelessness. An investment in permanent shelters would also support a reduction in homelessness, which a seasonal shelter would not.

Analysis

Ontario's homelessness crisis has deepened significantly over the past decade and there is an increasing proportion of people with complex needs who are experiencing chronic (long term) homelessness. In Niagara, 2,609 people experienced homelessness in 2024. This is down slightly (8%) from 2023. Of people experiencing homelessness in Niagara, 55% are chronically homeless.

For most of 2024 Niagara's homeless serving system had 287 shelter spaces, including 204 spaces for singles and 83 spaces for couples and families. The opening of the Ontario Road shelter in Welland in December added an additional 30 net new spaces to the system. Shelter spaces are available in St. Catharines, Niagara Falls and Welland and are available to support people experiencing homelessness in any local area municipality. In 2024 Niagara's shelters did 4,995 intakes for 1,917 unique clients. This is an average of 13-14 intakes per day. Niagara's shelters have been about 92-97% full with fewer spaces available in winter season and more spaces available in the warmer seasons.

Encampments continue to pose a significant issue in some local communities. Sometimes when someone is looking to access a shelter space an appropriate bed is not available. Some turnaways are to be expected as no shelter system is designed to accommodate everyone experiencing homelessness at one time. In 2024 staff were unable to accommodate individuals looking for shelter due to lack of appropriate space, 22 times per month on average.

Also, some people at encampments choose not to access shelter and some face barriers to shelter. The most common barriers to shelter in 2024 were:

- Existing service restriction (90 people)
- Doesn't want to leave street community (77 people)
- No available shelter space for couples (65 people)
- Pets (59 people)
- Shelter environment is retraumatizing (45 people)
- Exacerbation of mental health issues (44 people)

Many of these barriers will persist within the system even if new shelter spaces are added. For example, people who are service restricted for assault, sexual assault, arson or other significant property damage, or solicitation to human trafficking will not be able to access any new shelter spaces while such service restrictions are in place. This is necessary to protect the safety of shelter staff and other people staying in our shelters.

Based on a shelter capacity review completed by OrgCode in 2023, several improvements to Niagara's shelter system have been made or are underway. These include:

- Made permanent the 95 beds that were seasonal in St. Catharines and Niagara Falls (Riordon and Summer Street Shelters) and added beds for a total of 120 permanent beds
- Maintain overflow motels (Interim Family Sheltering in St Catharines and Niagara Falls)
- Increase capacity for couples (Riordon, Summer Street and new South Niagara Shelters)
- Scale up Shelter Diversion at all shelters

The next recommended 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. Improving outflow from shelters to housing is a critical factor in ensuring that Niagara's system is maximizing its current investment in shelters.

Yet, encampments remain a significant and urgent challenge in a number of local communities. Several initiatives are planned or underway to reduce inflow to homelessness through enhanced prevention and diversion. This was supported through recent Canada Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB) funding from the province to assist approximately 70 people to move from unsheltered homelessness and encampments.

There are also three options to improve shelter capacity that could be implemented in 2025. Two of these include addition of a new shelter, either a seasonal shelter or temporary permanent site following the model of the Riordon or Ontario Road shelters.

A comparison of these two options is provided below.

New Seasonal Shelter	New Permanent Shelter
Is not a strategy to end homelessness	Ultimately can support and end to homelessness
Meets basic needs only (bringing in people out of the cold)	Meets basic needs while supporting people experiencing homelessness to return to housing
Not Housing-focused (up to 2% of clients exit to housing)	Housing-focused (up to 86% of clients exit to housing)
<p>No daytime service hours. People must leave the shelter during the day.</p> <p>During the day people are likely to return to encampments.</p>	<p>24 hour services. Day service provided includes case management, income supports, health supports, mental health and addiction referrals and supports, housing supports and life skills guidance.</p> <p>Day services ensure programming for participants during the daytime hours in lieu of discharge to the street.</p>
Service restrictions are in effect (zero tolerance for violence or threats of violence, sexual harassment or sexual violence, theft, excessive damage to property, arson, and drug dealing)	Service restrictions are in effect (zero tolerance for violence or threats of violence, sexual harassment or sexual violence, theft, excessive damage to property, arson, and drug dealing)
Favoured by street involved individuals who may be comfortable living unsheltered or at encampments most of the year	Favoured by individuals interested in solutions that involve returning to housing.
Does not directly provide supports for mental illness and substance abuse	Does not directly provide supports for mental illness and substance abuse
Not in current budget. Anticipated cost of \$400,000 for three to four months operation.	Not in current budget. Anticipated capital cost of \$5.5 million and annual operating cost of cost of up to \$2 million.

New Seasonal Shelter	New Permanent Shelter
Could be implemented in approximately 1 month after necessary approvals if an appropriate site is identified.	Could be implemented in approximately six months if an appropriate site is identified.

Alternatives Reviewed

1. Seasonal shelter

Investment in a seasonal shelter would be structured (length of time it is open) in line with the proposed \$400,000 budget. During a reach out to community organizations, one potential partner to host a seasonal shelter was identified. The interested organization would still need to get governance approval for the initiative, approval for a change of use of the site, insurance etc. in order to move forward. Implementation could be anticipated to open, at best, one month after the completion of all necessary approvals by both the organization and the Region, if such approvals are received. The period of operations of the seasonal site would be in line with a \$400,000 all in budget.

2. Temporary permanent shelter

Investment in an additional temporary permanent shelter is anticipated to cost approximately \$5.5 million in capital and up to \$2 million in annual operating expenses. To implement an additional temporary permanent site a temporary site would need to be sourced within a local municipality and the capital asset procured and delivered. If a site was secured, a temporary permanent shelter could be anticipated to open approximately six months afterward.

3. Increase capacity at future permanent shelter sites

Alternatively, capacity could be increased at existing shelters when the temporary permanent shelters are moved to their permanent sites through the addition of more modules to those that already exist. This could potentially increase the capacity at each site from about 60 people to 80 people. This could be implemented at the time the shelters are relocated to their permanent sites and could be completed in 2025 if permanent sites are provided. This option is estimated to have an incremental capital investment of \$200,000 and an incremental operating cost of \$800,000 for two sites.

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 2-2025 Homelessness Services Update](https://niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/PHSSC_Jan07_2025/eSCRIBE%20Documents/eSCRIBE%20Attachments/COM%202025%20Homelessness%20Services%20Update.pdf)

(https://niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/PHSSC_Jan07_2025/eSCRIBE%20Documents/eSCRIBE%20Attachments/COM%202025%20Homelessness%20Services%20Update.pdf)

[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 21-2023 Shelter Capacity

[Niagara Region Shelter Capacity May 2023](https://niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/PHSSC_Jun06_2023/eSCRIBE%20Documents/eSCRIBE%20Attachments/Appendix%20A%20-%20Niagara%20Region%20Shelter%20Capacity%20May%202023.pdf)

https://niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/PHSSC_Jun06_2023/eSCRIBE%20Documents/eSCRIBE%20Attachments/Appendix%20A%20-%20Niagara%20Region%20Shelter%20Capacity%20May%202023.pdf

Prepared by:

Jeffrey Sinclair
Manager, Homelessness Services
Community Services

Recommended by:

Henri Koning, MHSc
Commissioner
Community Services

Submitted by:

Ron Tripp, P.Eng.
Chief Administrative Officer

This report was prepared in consultation with Cathy Cousins, Director, Homelessness and Community Engagement and Donovan D'Amboise, Manager Program Financial Support.