

Subject: Shelter Diversion Workers

Report to: Public Health and Social Services Committee

Report date: Tuesday, March 4, 2025

Recommendations

1. That report COM 10-2025 **BE RECEIVED** for information.

Key Facts

- The purpose of this report is to update Council on the Homelessness Services Division's intention to expand diversion services across the emergency shelter system.
- Shelter diversion is a proven process for finding the safest and most appropriate option to meet the basic need for immediate housing for each individual seeking to access a shelter and may include options such as staying with a family member or friend.
- Niagara Region currently funds the RAFT as the homeless serving system's Shelter Diversion lead. Currently local shelters, with the exception of the RAFT, a youth focused shelter, do not have funding for dedicated diversion workers.
- Under the current shelter staffing model, shelter staff practice diversion with 18% of individuals who present to shelter. The introduction of dedicated diversion workers across the shelter system would support staff to practice diversion with all individuals who present at shelter. The cost of enhancing diversion workers to ensure dedicated coverage across the shelter system is \$350,000 for one year. Staff can leverage recent enhanced funding to pilot this system enhancement to test the effectiveness of the strategy for the system.

Financial Considerations

The annual cost to pilot expansion of dedicated diversion workers across the shelter system is estimated at \$350,000 for a one-year pilot. This amount can be funded through recent enhanced funding allocated to the homelessness sector to support a one-year pilot program. Long-term funding may depend on continued support from higher levels of government.

Analysis

Shelter Diversion is a process that can be used to support every individual and family seeking to stay at an emergency shelter. It is a conversation about finding the safest and most appropriate option to meet the basic need for immediate housing for someone experiencing homelessness. The key to Shelter Diversion is to identify and explore any safe, appropriate alternatives to shelter. At the end of the Shelter Diversion conversation the client and diversion worker can say that all options have been explored, and that the safest, most appropriate option has been chosen.

The benefits to Shelter Diversion include:

- Keeping individuals and families experiencing homelessness connected to supports and attachments that already exist in their personal network.
- Finding options for those who may prefer not to access shelter due to curfews and other rules, existing or potential service restrictions due to behaviors, not being able to use substances, being around people who are using substances, or finding the experience retraumatizing or exacerbating to their mental health issues.
- Reducing overreliance on shelter for those who do have other options, thereby freeing up spaces in shelters for those who need those spaces the most.
- Maximizing the current investment in local shelter capacity.

Niagara Region homelessness services currently provides funding for the RAFT to provide a Diversion Lead for the homeless serving system. The RAFT provides a proven model of Shelter Diversion that they train on across the country. Individual shelters do not currently have funding to support dedicated diversion workers, and most assign this work as an additional responsibility to one or more members of their team, typically those staff who complete client intakes. While it can be performed by any staff member who is doing intakes, Shelter Diversion is a better service when there is a dedicated worker trained in Shelter Diversion.

In early 2025, diversions have been attempted for 18% of shelter intakes. The overall rate of successful diversions is 25% of attempted diversions, with the success rate for youth of 76%, families of 39% and 12% for single adults. There is significant opportunity to increase attempted diversions and increase successful diversions for all populations, particularly single adults.

Niagara Region engaged with OrgCode in 2023 to prepare a shelter capacity review for the Region. Included in the report, was a recommendation that the current diversion

initiative at the Region be enhanced to mitigate pressures within the shelter system. With the recent funding increases and having completed or commenced action on all other recommendations, staff are commencing the implementation of a broader diversion strategy.

An increase in funding for Diversion Workers could provide for dedicated, trained Diversion staff to be available at all local shelters. This would enable an increase in diversion attempts from 18% working to a goal of 100% of the time someone is seeking to access shelter. More diversion attempts would be anticipated to increase successful diversions for all populations, but particularly for single adults. It would also improve service quality by increasing opportunities to have diversion conversations over the phone, when someone first calls to enquire about a shelter space, instead of after they have located an available bed. Finally, more people could be diverted to safe, appropriate options prior to travelling to a shelter with an available bed.

Alternatives Reviewed

The alternative is to continue with the current diversion model.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

Supporting access to safe, appropriate options for people experiencing homelessness to meet their immediate housing need supports Council's 2023-2026 Strategic Priority for an Equitable Region.

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

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