

Memorandum

COM-C 16-2025

Subject: 2025-2026 Homelessness Winter Plan

Date: Tuesday, July 8, 2025

To: Public Health and Social Services Committee

From: Cathy Cousins, Director Homeless Services

Niagara Region's Homelessness Services team has developed the 2025-2026 Homelessness Winter Plan to support individuals experiencing homelessness during the winter months.

The homelessness services system continues to be challenged by limited access to affordable housing, supportive housing and a client group presenting with significant substance use and mental health issues. The 2025-2026 Homelessness Winter Plan takes a tiered approach to addressing and mitigating the enhanced risks and challenges presented by cold weather advisories in Niagara for un-housed individuals.

The winter plan was informed by:

- An evaluation of the 2024-2025 winter plan;
- An environmental scan of municipal comparators;
- Feedback from the Lived Expert Advisory Committee; and
- Consultation with Niagara Emergency Medical Services (EMS) on the cold-weather health impacts of those experiencing homelessness.

2024-2025 Winter Plan Evaluation Highlights

The shelter system in Niagara has capacity to support 300 individuals with enhanced surge capacity during cold weather alerts and further overflow capacity for families and individuals with accessibility needs. The shelter system was expanded on December 23, 2024 when the South Niagara shelter opened, two months into the winter season.

During the winter 2024-2025 season Niagara Region had 11 days of cold weather alerts and extended cold weather alert protocols due to blizzard and ice conditions. The emergency shelter system ran at surge capacity for all 11 days.

Emergency shelter system occupancy during cold weather alerts showed an average of 14.5 beds available. Emergency shelter system occupancy during the winter months on days that the temperature did not trigger a cold weather alert showed an average bed availability of 5.7 beds.

Environmental Scan of Municipal Comparators Highlights

Staff reached out to comparator municipalities to identify opportunities to improve the winter plan. Through this work it was noted that winter responses are relatively consistent across municipalities who responded within Ontario, with some establishing resources for the full winter season, and others not triggering until much colder temperatures, example -35°C . Key elements of all responses included: enhanced outreach services to provide winter supplies and encourage individuals to access services, lifting of shelter restrictions (except those where staff and participant safety is at risk), free transportation options and increasing overnight shelter capacity during alerts.

Lived Expert Advisory Committee Feedback

Staff engaged the Niagara Lived Experience Advisory Committee to gather input on cold weather responses. The Committee focused on identifying opportunities to better support individuals with higher needs and service restrictions during cold weather alerts and provided recommendations for improving the cold weather response program.

Although no new recommendations were made to enhance support for high acuity clients during the winter, the Committee members did indicate that overnight accommodations for clients with multiple barriers would be ideal, inclusive of pet supports, safe storage, specific space for women, medical personal available, laundry and showers. Other ideas discussed, that would assist those who cannot access the shelter system included: increased access to outreach through longer shifts, individuals being provided with a low dollar value gift card to support using commercial spaces, access to bathrooms during non-business hours, capacity building for clients on how to help yourself, peer supports, increased communication on where help is available, more access to winter supplies (through REACH Niagara and Niagara Assertive Street Outreach (NASO)) and increased access to transportation. Committee members shared that they look forward to the introduction of the Homeless and Addiction Recovery Treatment (HART) Hub program to augment the current services offered.

EMS Evaluation of Cold-Weather Impacts of those Experiencing Homelessness

EMS data illustrates that individuals are at greatest risk of harm during relatively mild winter temperatures, when a choice is made to stay unsheltered despite available emergency shelter capacity. EMS data shows limited calls for cold weather supports during the times that Niagara activated their cold weather alert protocols.

NASO Review of 2024-25 Cold Weather Response

Debriefing with NASO identified the value of tracking daily encampment visits during cold weather alerts using the encampment mapping tool. NASO identified an opportunity to improve their cold weather response in the 2025-26 winter season by developing an inventory of cold weather supplies in anticipation of cold weather events to enhance response efficiency. The NASO team is committed to continuing to provide enhanced supports and willingness to extend that effort for the upcoming winter.

Overview of the Homelessness Plans for Winter 2025-2026

Niagara Region Homelessness Services had developed a data-informed tiered cold weather strategy for the 2025-2026 winter season. The following measures will be triggered at the temperatures indicated.

TIER 1: When the Temperature Falls to 0°C

In collaboration with homelessness serving programs across Niagara (i.e. NASO, Niagara Homeless Prevention agencies, REACH, Welcoming Streets, Positive Living, EMS Outreach, Niagara Regional Police Community Oriented Response and Engagement (CORE) Unit, Soup Kitchens), staff will disseminate health risk information to clients and provide winter supplies as needed.

TIER 2: When the Temperature Falls to -5°C

Outreach teams will increase visits to encampments and areas frequented by unsheltered clients to address wellness concerns through proactive engagement.

NASO will initiate safety screening, distribute supplies, and encourage un-housed individuals to go to an emergency shelter.

Niagara Region Transit and station staff will be requested to identify and refer individuals in need to NASO for assistance.

Emergency shelter staff will provide winter supplies to individuals who are turned away due to service restrictions or due to lack of capacity in the system with referrals to NASO.

TIER 3: When the temperature drops below -15°C or if Niagara is experiencing an extreme weather event such as a snowstorm or an ice storm a cold weather alert is activated

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

The Regional website will be updated to alert the public that the cold weather alert protocol has been activated and provide the measures that will be implemented as part of the cold weather alert activation response.

Emergency shelter capacity during cold weather alerts will be increased by 40 beds with the associated costs being reimbursed by the Region.

NASO will conduct daily wellness checks for unsheltered individuals and provide winter supplies and support. NASO will enhance hours and staffing (based on staffing capacity) during an alert to support clients in accessing services. Niagara Region will reimburse NASO for any associated overtime costs and supplies that are incurred.

Emergency shelter providers will lift service restrictions for the duration of the alert, where it is safe to do so, to ensure individuals are supported.

The current 211 afterhours access process will be adjusted to activate an “overflow” shelter phone line to address shelter needs for eligible individuals (families and individuals with accessibility needs) when the Regional shelter system is full. It will continue to be available daily until 11:00 p.m. and directly accessible through 211 or referred through a shelter provider. This line will ensure that those in critical need and greatest risk, after diversion efforts have been exhausted, can be sheltered should the system be otherwise full. This practice is consistent with much of Ontario as all communities are faced with the challenge of limited shelter capacity.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

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This memo was prepared in collaboration with John Pickles, Program Financial Analyst, Donovan D'Amboise, Manager, Program Financial Support, Jeffrey Sinclair, Manager Homeless Services and Prabhjot Kaur, Community Services Specialist.