
Memorandum

COM-C 17-2025

Subject: Emergency Shelter Service Restrictions

Date: Tuesday, July 8, 2025

To: Public Health and Social Services Committee

From: Cathy Cousins, Director Homeless Services

This memo is in response to COM-C-12-2025 Motion Respecting Alternative Housing Plans and Service Restriction Notifications, Public Health and Social Services Committee, May 6, 2025.

Motion:

1. That, when a client is being restricted from Regional operated or funded shelter, that staff BE DIRECTED to develop alternative housing plans for these clients and bring the framework for these clients at the Public Health and Social Services Committee meeting being held on July 8, 2025, for review;
2. That staff REPORT BACK on alternative housing plans being uploaded to Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) and local area municipalities and Niagara Regional Police being notified about the service restrictions and alternative housing plans for each individual who is restricted; and
3. That staff PROVIDE information on the other questions raised on this matter during the meeting.

Alternative Housing Framework for Clients Restricted from Shelter

Homelessness Services has an existing housing framework to meet the provincial mandate to:

- i. prevent homelessness and
- ii. support individuals who are un-housed to be re-housed.

The framework is built on the following pillars:

- Prevention
- Diversion

- Emergency Shelter Solutions
- Outreach Services
- Housing Solutions

Introducing the following programs will improve the ability for homelessness services to decrease the number of individuals issued service restrictions and more effectively meet the needs of individuals with a history of significant service restrictions.

Introduce Behaviour Support Workers across the emergency shelter and outreach systems. This enhanced service introduces a resource with the specialized education and experience required to prevent and mitigate the triggers and behaviours that often result in service restrictions. Behaviour Support Workers would work directly with shelter participants to prevent and address these behaviours while in shelter, with the goal of avoiding a shelter restriction, as well as working with those living unsheltered to manage behaviours and enhance community safety.

Introduce Peer Support Workers across the shelter and outreach systems to provide individuals access to support from someone who has lived experience and can foster a more trusted relationship with individuals experiencing homelessness. Peer Support Workers can provide another layer of support for individuals with behaviours, again with the goal of avoiding shelter restrictions and supporting the individual on the journey to housing.

Introduce Enhanced Cognitive Supportive Housing. This supportive housing program would consist of a purpose-built facility for 25 individuals, with a staffing design inclusive of mental health, addictions, occupational support, security and case management in an intensive wrap-around program. The client group that would be prioritized for this asset would be those with a history of more significant service restrictions.

Introduce Seniors Specialty Supportive Housing. This program would be available to those over the age of 55 with a history of significant service restrictions and health challenges. Seniors are the fastest growing population within homelessness. This asset will support those with more complex needs and challenges.

HIFIS: Capturing Housing Plans, Individualized Restrictions and Case Notes

Housing Plans for individuals experiencing homelessness are stored in the federal data collection and case management system called Homeless Individuals and Families Information System more commonly known as HIFIS.

The intent of the HIFIS system is to enable homelessness service providers within the same community to access, collect, and share local real-time homelessness data to ensure individuals and families accessing services are prioritized and referred to appropriate services at the correct time. In further detail HIFIS:

- Supports client intake, program assignment and case management
- Assists with housing inventory and matching
- Offers pre-built and evidence-based reports
- Includes communication tools to support collaboration
- Provides privacy and confidentiality controls to protect data and
- Supports reporting, analysis, research and decision making

As a host for HIFIS in Niagara, the entered into an End-User License Agreement and a Data Provision Agreement with Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada. Under the Data Provision Agreement, HIFIS users must adhere to federal and provincial privacy standards respecting personal information.

Given that federal government mandates the use of HIFIS as part of receiving Reach Home funding, and mandates the requirements under the Data Provision Agreement there is not an opportunity to extend access to Niagara Regional Police or the Local area municipalities. There are a number of measures taken to support effective collaboration and to ensure the continued safety of the Niagara Regional Police Community Oriented Response and Engagement (CORE) team and the local area municipality staff.

The Niagara Assertive Street Outreach (NASO) staff will continue to discuss safety concerns related to specific encampments with partners during the weekly / bi-weekly encampment meetings. NASO staff will continue to provide the information necessary for municipal staff to do their work safely without breaching confidentiality. For example, staff at the local area municipality can alert NASO if they plan to clear an encampment, the NASO team will continue to support individuals at the encampment to access services, shelter or housing. The NASO team is able to communicate with local area municipality staff that, “there are X number of people remaining” and / or “recommend police support to clear the remaining individual(s)”. Similarly, to support safety concerns in day-to-day work such as grounds maintenance, staff can reach out to NASO to support communication with encampments and can reach out to the CORE team, who also often have relationships with individuals at the encampments. In addition, NASO offers training for municipal employees to increase understanding and reduce stigma when encountering individuals experiencing homelessness, and to provide education on roles and supports available.

Questions Raised at the May 6, 2025 Meeting on this Matter and Responses

How do we register and record behaviour at the emergency shelters that requires a police response and triggers a service restriction?

In 2024 Niagara Region established a standardized shelter restriction policy as part of the shelter standards for Niagara. This document outlines restriction levels, expected consequences, the appeal process and reporting requirements. Restrictions including details and duration are recorded HIFIS. Details would include whether first responders were called.

What do alternative housing plans currently look like?

In a housing-focused system every client has a housing plan. Elements of a housing plan include the various steps required to achieve the goal of housing, and may include getting identification, ensuring financial opportunities have been explored, choice of community and type of housing based on understanding of unique needs and barriers, searching for a unit, preparing for move, and life stabilization skills to support tenancy.

If it's not safe to be in a shelter then it is not safe to be in a public space either. What does developing housing plans for individuals with level 4 and 5 restrictions look like?

The housing plan for each individual or family follows them throughout their homeless experience. NASO continues to work with individuals who are service restricted from shelter, using the same housing plan that may have been developed while in shelter.

Potential safety issues are identified by NASO and captured in the mapping tool to support the continued safety of NASO staff. When visiting an encampment site with identified safety concerns, NASO staff request the attendance of the CORE team or fire services as appropriate.

When a local area municipality is clearing an encampment, the clean up may be discussed as part of the weekly or bi-weekly call to coordinate encampment responses. The NASO team will meet with occupants of the encampment to discuss the impending clean-up of the encampment and offer support to them with access to services, shelter or housing. NASO staff will alert the local area municipality team if there are individuals remaining at the encampment and if there should be a police presence when the encampment is cleared.

Why are individuals at shelters not charged if they are violent, incurring property damage or trafficking?

These cases are reported to the police. Police then determine how to address each instance within the legislation and tools available to them.

Why is it so difficult to address the needs of this particular population?

Underlying mental health and addiction issues, along with significant trauma historically and as a result of being un-housed for many years impact the behaviours of many homeless individuals. There is limited availability and access to dedicated programs to address the complex needs of this cohort. Many traditional programs are only available to individuals who have an address. The recently announced Niagara HART Hub will help to address this current gap, as the population being targeted through the Hub is chronically homeless individuals.

How do staff know who has had a level 4 or 5 restriction?

This information is shared among service providers who are a part of the continuum of care through HIFIS.

Can staff clearly outline the demonstrated need (inventory and associated transparent framework with associated costs)? Explain how the un-housed are impacted by homelessness and how neighbourhoods where un-housed individuals stay are impacted.

The experience of homelessness is generally negative, unpleasant, unhealthy, unsafe, stressful and distressing. Unhoused persons may experience increased risk of harm, including personal safety and long term impacts on health and mental health (including impacts of substance use). The experience of homelessness including stigma, is likely to exasperate the behaviours of someone who is challenged by extreme poverty, mental health, addictions and trauma.

Homelessness impacts all community members in a neighbourhood, including those who are unsheltered or living in a shelter, local renters, homeowners and businesses. There are negative impacts on safety and perception of safety, enjoyment of public space and economic opportunities. Homelessness in a community also impacts service demands and costs associated with policing, EMS, fire, hospital, judicial and health services.

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. Homelessness services cannot on its own respond to and address this crisis.

Attached is the framework of services offered to support those who are at risk of homelessness and who require prevention services as well as services to support those who are unhoused to become rehoused.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

Cathy Cousins, CPA, CA
Director, Homelessness Services

Appendices

Appendix 1 Homelessness Services Framework