
Subject: Council Motion – Winter Plan

Report to: Public Health and Social Services Committee

Report date: Tuesday, February 10, 2026

Recommendations

1. That this report **BE RECEIVED** for information.

Key Facts

- This information report provides background information for Councillors and serves as a companion document to a presentation that will be provided at Public Health and Social Services Committee February 10, 2026.
- Niagara Region has a Homelessness Winter Plan for individuals experiencing homelessness. The plan coordinates the collaboration between funded homeless agencies, services partners and emergency responders in instances of extreme winter weather.
- Given the exceptionally cold weather in Niagara this winter, the Homelessness Winter Plan has been in effect for most of 2026. The shelter system has had sufficient capacity to meet demand all season and no one has been turned away from homelessness shelters due to lack of capacity in the system.
- Staff do not recommend moving forward with the investment to support a winter weather response at 0 °C. Given the funding available to support homelessness offerings, strategic investments in supportive housing are recommended.
- Staff will not make recommendations regarding the Niagara Regional Police implications in the motion, however staff do not recommend proceeding with these aspects of the motion due to the unintended consequences for unhoused persons.

Financial Considerations

The Motion brings forward a request to enhance the tiered Winter Plan such that the tier three response, which includes activating emergency shelter overflow capacity and enhanced outreach support, goes into effect at 0 °C instead of at -10 °C.

In Niagara, the winter weather falls at or below 0°C most winter days. The incremental cost of expanding the Winter Plan from the current average of about two weeks to five

and a-half months (November 1 to April 15) is estimated to be \$2,291,400. This includes emergency shelter support costs of \$1,901,700 to cover expenses including physical space, staffing, and security. This also includes outreach costs of \$389,700 to cover expenses including staffing and supplies.

Analysis

The Homelessness Services System continues to be challenged by limited access to affordable housing, supportive housing and a client group presenting with significant physical health, substance use and mental health challenges.

Homelessness Services has introduced a number of programs and services to help prevent homelessness and to support individuals experiencing homelessness to be successfully rehoused. The AMO report, *Municipalities Under Pressure One Year Later: An Update on the Human and Financial Cost of Ontario's Homelessness Crisis*, reported that across Ontario homelessness has increased 30% since 2022. In Niagara, homelessness programs and services have effectively mitigated this level of escalation. Niagara has seen a comparative increase of 8.7%. Factors contributing to this outcome include:

- Housing focused shelters and housing focused outreach programs resulted in 934 individuals who were successfully rehoused in 2025
- Increasing shelter capacity by 49 units in 2025
- Enhancing overflow shelter capacity by 50 spaces
- Enhancing NASO services
- Expanding the diversion program system wide, with a diversion rate of 20%
- Introducing the Welcoming Streets pilot program
- Developing a supportive housing strategy, 49 units coming on-line Q4 2026
- Securing HART Hub funding
- Securing two funding grants to support re-housing related to homelessness and families and homelessness and seniors

At the end of the 2024/2025 winter season, Homelessness staff reviewed the winter plan to determine if the plan had been effective and to identify opportunities for improvement. Based on this review, the 2025/2026 Homelessness Winter Plan was revised and was shared with Public Health and Social Services Committee July 2025. Staff continued to monitor the current situation and based on an increase in individuals experiencing chronic homelessness and an anticipated harsh winter, further measures were introduced to enhance the plan. This enhanced plan was shared with Public Health and Social Services Committee December 2025. The Homelessness Services

team, working closely with collaborating partners, explored opportunities to further expand overflow capacity such as the -15 °C threshold and whether it could be decreased to -10 °C. Collaborating partners all contributed to further shore up the plan.

The homelessness emergency shelter system has a system capacity of 288 rooms. Some rooms offer double occupancy to support couples. In total the system can accommodate up to 300 individuals per night.

To enhance capacity in the winter, the winter plan overflow capacity is activated. Overflow capacity means that shelters have added mattresses and/or mats to the common spaces in their shelter. During extreme cold weather, maximizing the number of individuals who can be supported through the emergency shelter system is the priority. Although overflow adds crucial system capacity when it is needed most, it is not a sustainable long-term solution. Usable common spaces are important to the effective function of shelters and an integral component of housing focused work. When shelter staff are functioning at overflow capacity they cannot focus on re-housing efforts.

By incorporating overflow capacity of 98 spaces to the overall shelter system capacity, under the winter plan, the shelter system can accommodate up to 398 individuals per night.

The emergency shelters located across Niagara function as a connected system. If an individual presents at an emergency homelessness shelter and the shelter is full and does not have any more capacity, staff will share which shelters still have capacity, provide transportation to and from the alternate site, and advise the receiving shelter that someone is on their way. This practice is in place all year round, not just during periods of inclement weather.

The shelter system has had sufficient capacity to meet demand all season and no one has been turned away from homelessness shelters due to lack of capacity in the system. Year to date the number of vacancies available across the shelter system each night have ranged from 80 on the milder nights to 9 on the colder night.

The Winter Plan is a coordinated approach among funded homelessness agencies, service partners including REACH Niagara, Welcoming Streets Initiative, Positive Living Niagara/Streetworks, Niagara Transit and emergency responders such as Niagara Emergency Medical Services and Niagara Regional Police Community Oriented Response and Engagement team. All collaborating partners are part of an active communication system, all enhance service or support communication of the winter plan to unhoused individuals in line with the tiered winter weather response and may

contribute to response amendments in line with identified opportunities for improvement. The full 3-Tier Winter Plan is attached as Appendix 1 – Homelessness Winter Weather Response.

The motion speaks to introducing a system to declare individuals known to the homelessness system, not presenting at shelter as missing persons. Although introduced as a measure to support the safety and wellbeing of individuals who are experiencing homelessness, there are unintended consequences to this proposed direction.

Given complex, underlying challenges faced by individuals experiencing homelessness, the trust relationship between shelter staff and shelter clients is critical. Even with this working relationship it can be difficult for an individual to seek shelter in a congregate setting. Knowing that presenting to shelter means that the first night someone chooses not to seek shelter within the system that they will be deemed a missing person and part of a police search until they are found, will discourage a high number of individuals from seeking support from the shelter system. This is a concern because shelters offer necessary supports and services. Furthermore, because our shelter system is built on a housing focused shelter model, shelters are an important component of success in rehousing individuals who are experiencing homelessness.

Alternatives Reviewed

Not applicable.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

The information in this report aligns with the strategic goal of an effective and equitable region. The context provided supports Councillors to make an informed decision.

Other Pertinent Reports

- [COM-C 21-2025 Councillor Information Requests](#)

(<https://pub-niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/Meeting.aspx?Id=fbc14364-a144-492d-b6f7-08e16f1012a9&Agenda=Agenda&lang=English&Item=20&Tab=attachments>)

- [COM-C 22-2025 – Updated 2025-2026 Homelessness Winter Plan](#)
(<https://pub-niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/Meeting.aspx?Id=fb14364-a144-492d-b6f7-08e16f1012a9&Agenda=Agenda&lang=English&Item=21&Tab=attachments>)
- [CWCD 2026-02 Supportive Housing Provincial Communication Update](#)
(https://niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/Council%20Weekly%20Correspondence%20Distribution_Jan09_2026/Pages/VisitorView.aspx?itemID=4)

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Homelessness Winter Weather Response
Appendix 2 Referred Motion – Winter Weather Emergency Procedure for
 Unhoused Residents