

Homelessness Winter Weather Response

February 2026

Contents

- Overview 3**

- Three-Tiered Homelessness
Winter Weather Response 4**
 - Tier 1: When the Temperature Falls to 0 °C4
 - Tier 2: When the Temperature Falls to -5 °C5
 - Tier 3: When Temperatures Fall to -10 °C
- Winter Weather Advisory Activated7

- Service Partners 10**

Overview

Niagara's Homelessness Services System continues to be challenged by limited access to affordable housing, supportive housing and a client group that comes to shelters with significant substance use and mental health challenges. To address the added risks that winter conditions present, the Homelessness Winter Weather Response takes a tiered approach to address and mitigate risks and challenges presented by cold weather and winter storms for individuals who are experiencing homelessness in Niagara.

Niagara Region delivers the Homelessness Winter Weather Response through strong collaboration with community and emergency response partners, including:

- **Funded Homelessness Agencies:** Housing-focused emergency shelters, Niagara Assertive Street Outreach (NASO), and homeless prevention agencies (Community Care, Project Share, Hope Centre, Port Cares)
- **Service Partners:** Regional Essential Access to Connected Healthcare (REACH) Niagara, Positive Living, Welcoming Streets Initiative, Social Assistance, Supportive Housing Providers, Niagara Regional Transit, and others
- **Emergency Responders:** Niagara Regional Police Service (NRPS), and Emergency Medical Services (EMS)

To support maximum shelter capacity year-round, including during Winter Weather Advisories, Niagara Region continues to prioritize diversion and prevention as standard practice. This approach supports individuals to access available community-based supports and housing options wherever possible, rather than relying on shelter as the primary response.

Ultimately, housing people (both with and without supports) into affordable units remains the most effective long-term solution to homelessness. For individuals with significant substance use and mental health challenges, supportive housing is the safest and most effective housing option, delivered in collaboration with health and social service providers.

Three-Tiered Homelessness Winter Weather Response

Tier 1: When the Temperature Falls to 0 °C

Trigger: When the temperature is forecasted at 0 °C for a minimum of two hours as indicated by the Weather Network in St. Catharines.

Objective: To provide risk messaging, basic winter supplies to reduce cold-related harm for individuals who are unsheltered, and support access to shelter/warming options through referrals and transportation supports.

Tier 1: Actions

- Share cold-related health risk information with clients and the public as needed
- Provide winter supplies where needed (winter supplies distributed via NASO)
- Respond to 211 calls from concerned citizens and individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness
- Maintain partner awareness and readiness for escalation to Tier 2

Tier 1: Roles and Responsibilities

NASO

Operational Tasks	Niagara Region’s Role
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information about the health risks of cold temperatures • Provide winter supplies as needed • Respond to 211 calls from concerned citizens and individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate and support the planning, monitoring and stocking of winter supplies

Service Partners and Emergency Responders

(i.e., REACH Niagara, Welcoming Streets, Positive Living, EMS Outreach, Niagara Regional Police Community Oriented Response and Engagement (CORE) unit)

Operational Tasks	Niagara Region's Role
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide information about the health risks of cold temperatures• Encourage safer alternatives (warming centres/shelter referrals where appropriate)• Health providers assess for care needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Maintain shared awareness across the system

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

Trigger: When the temperature is forecasted at -5 °C for a minimum of two hours as indicated by the Weather Network in St. Catharines.

Objective: To increase outreach intensity, conduct proactive wellness checks for those experiencing unsheltered homelessness, and support access to shelter/warming options through referrals and transportation supports.

Tier 2: Actions

Outreach and Engagement

- NASO increases attempts to visit all known encampments and areas frequented by unsheltered individuals
- NASO conducts health and safety checks to monitor individuals for breathing, skin colour, orientation and frostbite
- Encourage and support individuals to access emergency shelters and/or warming centres

Transportation and Referral Pathway

- Niagara Transit driver and station staff identify and refer individuals to NASO for assistance

- NASO distributes Niagara Transit bus passes for transportation to warming centers (operated through Local Area Municipalities) and/or shelters

Shelter System

- Shelters provide winter supplies to individuals who are unable to access shelter due to:
 - Service restrictions
 - Lack of capacity

Individuals unable to access shelter will be referred to NASO for support.

Tier 2: Roles and Responsibilities

Housing Focused Shelters

Operational Tasks	Niagara Region's Role
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shelter staff will provide winter supplies to individuals who are unable to access shelter due to service restrictions • If the shelter is at capacity, a referral to another shelter in the region will be provided 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate distribution of supplies to shelters (including pre-packed kits and bus passes). Kits include: one hat, a pair of socks, gloves, hand and foot warmers, and two bus passes. • Ensure shelters have access to winter supply kits and understand the referral process

Niagara Transit

Operational Tasks	Niagara Region's Role
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bus drivers and station staff to identify and refer individuals to NASO for assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate Tier 2 referral pathway expectations with Niagara Transit

NASO

Operational Tasks	Niagara Region's Role
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure adequate stock of winter response supplies is on hand in preparation for winter weather advisory • Increase visits to encampments and areas frequented by unsheltered clients to encourage accessing emergency shelter or warming centres • Increase health and safety checks and distribute cold weather supplies • Respond to 211 calls (including Niagara Transit staff referrals) from concerned citizens and individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness • Distribute Niagara Transit bus passes for transportation to the warming centers run by Local Area Municipalities and to emergency shelters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate and support the planning, monitoring and stocking of winter supplies • Provide Niagara Transit bus passes to NASO

Service Partners and Emergency Responders

(i.e., REACH Niagara, Welcoming Streets, Positive Living, EMS Outreach, Niagara Regional Police Community Oriented Response and Engagement (CORE) unit)

Operational Tasks	Niagara Region's Role
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information about the health risks of cold temperatures • Encourage safer alternatives (warming centres/shelter referrals where appropriate) • Health providers assess for care needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share Tier 2 messaging via email to all allied community partners • Maintain awareness across the system

Tier 3: When Temperatures Fall to -10 °C - Winter Weather Advisory is Activated

Trigger: When the temperature is forecasted at -10°C for a minimum of two hours as indicated by the Weather Network in St. Catharines OR Niagara is experiencing an extreme winter event (snowstorm/ice storm) as indicated by the Weather Network in St. Catharines. The Region communicates a minimum of 48 hours in advance for Tier 3 activation and conclusion.

Objective: Activate the Winter Weather Advisory to increase capacity, reduce barriers to shelter access, enhance outreach operations, and improve safe transportation access.

Tier 3: Winter Weather Advisory Activation Actions

System activation and communications

- Homelessness Services issues an advisory notice to:
 - All Region-funded homelessness agencies
 - Niagara Regional Police
 - Emergency Medical Services
 - Other Allied community partners
- Advisory notice includes confirmation of services available for unhoused individuals each time an advisory is declared
- The Regional website will be updated to:
 - Alert the public that the winter weather advisory response plan has been activated
 - Provide the measures that will be implemented as part of the response

Outreach escalation

- NASO conducts daily wellness checks for unsheltered individuals
- NASO enhances hours and staffing (as staffing capacity allows)
- NASO distributes winter survival kits and supports service navigation
- Winter survival kits include a waterproof HeatStore Reflective sleeping bag, -20°C sleeping bag (to layer with HeatStore), socks, hand warmers, a light stick and whistle for visibility, mittens, and a toque
- Shelter system escalation
- Housing-focused emergency shelters temporarily lift service restrictions where safe to do so
- Overflow emergency shelter capacity is increased by a minimum of 90 beds.

- Overflow bed allocation:
 - St. George’s Church (St. Catharines): 50
 - Summer Street Shelter (Niagara Falls): 25
 - Ontario Road Shelter (Welland): 15
- All shelters funded by Niagara Region may open, and be remunerated for, additional emergency beds, above their normal contracted capacity, to support clients. The opening of such emergency beds is dependent on available staff.

- Shelters will be equipped with cold weather supplies to give to individuals if they are required to leave the facility. In such circumstances, every effort will be made to provide transportation to another safe location.

Transportation escalation

Niagara Transit allows individuals to ride the system free of charge during a winter weather advisory to support access to:

- Shelter sites
- Overflow shelter sites
- Municipal warming centres

Tier 3: Roles and Responsibilities

Shelter System

Operational Tasks	Niagara Region’s Role
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temporary overflow space will be created leveraging the common room areas, increasing capacity by approximately 40 beds in Niagara Falls and Welland combined • Temporary overflow shelter space will be created at St. George’s Church in St. Catharines, adding 50 beds in St. Catharines • All regionally supported shelters will be allowed to establish overflow spaces to the extent staffing and space are available • Restrictions for behaviours that do not pose a safety risk will be lifted system-wide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicates activation of Tier 3 and increased shelter space availability • Provide funding for all staffing, physical sites and supplies required to implement overflow

Niagara Transit

Operational Tasks	Niagara Region's Role
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free rides to all warming stations and shelters • Staff identify and refer individuals to NASO for assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication with Niagara Transit that Homelessness Services has activated the Homelessness Winter Plan.

NASO

Operational Tasks	Niagara Region's Role
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct daily wellness checks and provide winter weather supplies and support to all known encampments • Enhance hours and staffing during an advisory to the extent possible within staffing capacity • Distribute survival kits to those who choose not to access shelters/ warming centres • Ensure adequate stock of winter response supplies are on hand • Provide assistance with shelter placements for individuals who wish to seek those services • Respond to 211 calls from concerned citizens and individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness • Distribute Niagara Transit bus passes to support clients in accessing natural supports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide funding for additional staffing and supplies (including overtime reimbursement) • Coordinate supply readiness and replenishment • Provide Niagara Transit bus passes to NASO

Service Partners

Niagara Region works collaboratively with allied agencies across the homelessness, health, and community support system to ensure that individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness are informed when a Winter Weather Advisory has been activated and are aware of the resources and supports available during the advisory period.

Service Partners Include:

- REACH Niagara
- Welcoming Streets Initiative
- Positive Living Niagara/Streetworks
- Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Outreach
- Niagara Health
- Niagara Regional Police Service (NRPS): Community Oriented Response and Engagement (CORE) Unit
- Niagara Region Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities
- Niagara Transit

Role of Service Partners During a Winter Weather Advisory

Service partners support the Winter Weather Advisory by:

- Communicating with unhoused individuals regarding the Winter Weather Advisory
- Providing consistent messaging on available resources, including:
 - Shelters and overflow shelter locations
 - Municipal warming centres (where available)
 - Outreach supports through Niagara Assertive Street Outreach (NASO)
 - Transportation options and access supports (including free transit during an advisory, where applicable)
- Encouraging individuals to access safer indoor options and facilitating referrals to outreach (NASO) and shelter services when appropriate
- Health providers assess for care needs

Note:

Across Niagara Local Area Municipalities offer warming centres in their respective communities to support the public in periods of extreme cold. Each municipality identifies the hours of operation, access requirements and thresholds for opening the warming centres. Further details are available at **Extreme Cold - Niagara Region, Ontario**. (niagararegion.ca/emergency/hazards/extreme-cold.aspx)

