



SOCIAL SERVICES DIVISION

REPORT TO:	CHAIR AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS
DEPARTMENT:	HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION AND SOCIAL PLANNING
PREPARED BY:	Ian Hanney, Manager
REVIEWED BY:	Valerie Colasanti, General Manager Stéphane Thiffeault, Chief Administrative Officer
MEETING DATE:	February 19, 2025
INFORMATION ITEM:	Out of the Cold Shelter Security Services

BACKGROUND

At its meeting on February 5, 2025, County Council supported the following motion:

#4: McRoberts/Dennis: That County Council direct staff to contact Sarnia Police Service to inquire into the cost of hiring a Sarnia Police officer to provide additional security at the overflow shelter and report back to Council at the February 19, 2025 Committee of the Whole meeting.

Carried.

This report provides background information regarding this request, including relevant empirical evidence, third-party expert insight, and costing.

DISCUSSION

Accessing Out of the Cold Shelter and the Housing and Homelessness Resource Centre

The Housing and Homelessness Resource Centre (“**HHRC**”) and the Out of the Cold Shelter provide essential housing and health services to the most vulnerable members of our community. Accessing any fixed-site institutional service for this subpopulation can take months or even years of trust-building with highly trained, specialized staff. Utilizing best-practices such as trauma-informed care and strength-based case management, social service staff have made tremendous gains to support unsheltered individuals to access shelter and the HHRC. The more stable environment, multidisciplinary services, and housing-focused practices at these fixed sites have enabled our community to realize housing outcomes at a scale that has stabilized our By-Name List for more than a year despite unprecedented demand for service.

Using multiple iterations of standardized surveys and semi-structured interviews, the large majority of HHRC participants report that the low-barrier practices taken by social service staff at the site offers a safe space free of judgement where even the hardest to serve feel comfortable in enacting productive case plans. The regular presence of consistent security guards who take a non-judgmental approach in supporting a safe environment is also cited as a prominent reason for participants to access the site. The current composition and approach to service delivery taken at the Out of the Cold Shelter and HHRC are directly responsible for the increased access to shelter, the decrease in unsheltered homelessness, and the long-term housing obtained by hundreds of individuals previously experiencing homelessness.

The central goal of local homelessness services is progressing individuals experiencing homelessness along the housing continuum, from unsheltered, to shelter, and into more permanent housing. Since inception, the County of Lambton outreach team has progressed 88 individuals directly into more permanent housing from an experience of unsheltered homelessness. This team also focuses on supporting households to access shelter, in strong partnership with other local outreach teams including the Lambton EMS Community Health Integrated Care (“**CHIC**”) team, the North Lambton Community Health Centre outreach team, Lambton Public Health, and Sarnia Police Services Integrated Mobile Police and Community Team (“**IMPACT**”).

Use of Police Services at Shelter

Within the Community Support Division of Sarnia Police Services, IMPACT has served as a valuable partner with Social Services in developing rapport with priority populations, utilizing a community policing approach to promote local safety and security. Over many months, this unique team has earned the trust of individuals that reside in either emergency housing or unsheltered settings with a focus on relationship building in place of enforcement. Clients readily recognize this team and report to social service staff that they have greater trust in working with IMPACT compared to other police services. However, in general, there exists strong empirical evidence that various vulnerable populations, including those with mental health and addictions, have increased mistrust of police services. [1][2][3][4][5][6]

Recently, social service staff engaged individuals currently residing in emergency housing and those still not accessing emergency housing to ask their perceptions of this potential intervention. Specifically, individuals were asked if a regular scheduled police presence would affect their accessing emergency housing. Many individuals, both currently in care and residing unsheltered, reported that this would impact their access to emergency housing. This included numerous individuals saying they would leave shelter to live unsheltered, or that they would not access shelter at all in this instance. Resultantly, it can be reasoned that utilizing pay duty police officers in place of even a portion of the existing security services would limit the number of individuals accessing service, decrease the number of housing placements, and increase unsheltered homelessness and encampments.

The Canadian Shelter Transformation Network (“**CSTN**”) is a national collaborative of homelessness leaders and organizations that facilitates the promotion of evidence-informed best practices to emergency housing providers across Canada. The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (“**CAEH**”) is one of the foremost national agencies on homelessness content expertise, including its Built For Zero Canada branch that promotes the implementation of proven practices and continuous improvement directly with communities. In response to the motion in question, individual communication was sought from these leading agencies to gather the best available evidence and expert recommendations for this potential intervention. In both cases, these expert agencies strongly recommended against the use of police services as part of regular ongoing shelter operations. Specifically, the CAEH offered a letter detailing how this potential measure directly challenges numerous established shelter operation best practices (see Appendix Item A).

In consultation with Sarnia Police Services, utilizing duty officer services rather than the security guard would increase current costs by \$8,274 per week. This would result in an additional annual increased cost of \$430,253. The annual cost to hire one duty officer for 8 hours a day for an entire year would be \$681,158, compared to \$250,905 for the existing security guard.

Staff will continue to work with Sarnia Police Services on potential alternative preventative measures, such as, potentially point-in-time patrols if it is determined that such measures will assist with deterring unwanted/unwelcome behaviours, community relations and safety. Recently the Police completed a Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) review and all suggestions have been implemented at the site. Staff also engage regularly with the Sarnia Police IMPACT both at the site and at various encampment sites.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The homelessness prevention budget is fully allocated. Any additional costs from the introduction of this new intervention would be supported through an increase to the municipal levy.

CONSULTATIONS

Consultations have taken place with leadership at the Inn of the Good Shepherd, the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, Built For Zero Canada, the Canadian Shelter Transformation Network, Sarnia Police Services, the internal Social Services Division team, a significant number of service users, and numerous social service agencies in the community.

STRATEGIC PLAN

Delivering emergency housing and the multidisciplinary health and housing services at HHRC is in keeping with the County's Mission to promote an enhanced quality of life through the provision of responsive and efficient services accomplished by working with municipal and community partners.

The activities of the Division support the Community Development Area of Effort #3 in the County of Lambton's Strategic Plan, specifically:

- Strengthening the County's advocacy and lobbying efforts with other levels of government to raise the profile of the County and its needs to secure improved senior government supports, funding, grants, and other resources to meet emerging infrastructure and service needs.
- Consulting with the community and stakeholders on ways to increase housing options and affordability, and innovative programs and initiatives that focus on poverty reduction and promote social belonging.
- Supporting the development of a variety of affordable housing to meet demand.
- Implementing, monitoring and updating community health and wellness-related plans and priorities, including, but not limited to, the Housing and Homelessness Plan, Community Safety & Well-Being Plan, the Long-Term Care division's mission, vision, and values, Age Friendly Community Planning framework, Lambton Public Health's strategic priorities, Lambton Drug & Alcohol Strategy, Lambton EMS Master Plan, and Child Care and Early Years 5-Year Service System Plan; and
- Advocating for, and supporting access to, mental health and addiction services.

CONCLUSION

The use of hired police services at the Overflow Shelter goes against various best practices that have contributed to the success of existing services. Information gathered directly from service users indicate that it would decrease the number of individuals that utilize the shelter and HHRC. This would increase the number of individuals residing outside and limit the ability of our community to address local encampments. Staff recommend proceeding with the current use of security and the broad multidisciplinary health and human service partner agencies that operate the Overflow Shelter and HHRC, in addition to further consultations with the Sarnia Police Services regarding the site.

REFERENCES

- [1] Lipperman-Kreda S, Wilson I, Hunt GP, Annechino R, Antin TM. Substance use among sexual and gender minorities: Association with police discrimination and police mistrust. *Sexuality, gender & policy*. 2020 Nov;3(2):92-104.
- [2] Van Craen M. Explaining majority and minority trust in the police. *Justice quarterly*. 2013 Dec 1;30(6):1042-67

[3] Hereth JE. "I don't think the police think we're human": Legal socialization among young transgender women. *Journal of homosexuality*. 2024 Jul 28;71(9):2175-99.

[4] Geistman J, Smith BW. Juvenile attitudes toward police: A national study. *Journal of Crime and Justice*. 2007 Jan 1;30(2):27-51.

[5] Holmes MD, Painter MA, Smith BW. Citizens' perceptions of police in rural US communities: a multilevel analysis of contextual, organisational and individual predictors. *Policing and society*. 2017 Feb 17;27(2):136-56.

[6] Stotzer RL. Law enforcement and criminal justice personnel interactions with transgender people in the United States: A literature review. *Aggression and violent behavior*. 2014 May 1;19(3):263-77.

APPENDIX

Item A: Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness Letter