



SOCIAL SERVICES DIVISION

REPORT TO:	CHAIR AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS
DEPARTMENT:	HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES
PREPARED BY:	Valerie Colasanti, General Manager
REVIEWED BY:	Stéphane Thiffeault, Chief Administrative Officer
MEETING DATE:	November 15, 2023
INFORMATION ITEM:	County of Lambton's Position on Sanctioned Outdoor Encampments

BACKGROUND

At its City Council meeting on October 27, 2023, staff at the City of Sarnia received a verbal request from City Council to review the opportunity for a centralized location within the City of Sarnia that could be utilized as a sanctioned encampment for individuals experiencing homelessness. Consequently, Sarnia administration staff called a meeting with Lambton County staff and City of Sarnia police to consider the request.

Lambton County staff, together with Sarnia Police Services, met with the City of Sarnia staff on November 2, 2023.

The purpose of this report is simply to inform County Council of the City of Sarnia's request and Lambton County's staff's position thereon that was conveyed to the City of Sarnia on November 2, 2023.

DISCUSSION

In short, Lambton County staff communicated that it was not in support of establishing an encampment for homeless individuals. This position was supported by the representatives of the Sarnia Police Service and Sarnia administration staff, who expressed concerns related to their respective areas of jurisdiction.

The following briefly explains Lambton County staff's position on this matter.

In reviewing best practices used in assisting those experiencing homelessness, it is very evident that encampments are only created when no other options are available.

In November 2023, Lambton County Council received a report that provided an overview of the Homelessness Community Outreach services and the Out of the Cold program.

Amongst other things, the report noted emergency housing solutions have temporarily been made available to meet local needs. Currently in Lambton County – including Sarnia, there are an adequate number of shelter spaces available to accommodate local needs.

Of note, the Out of the Cold emergency shelter program opened on October 23, 2023, with 28 beds available in the shelter. The program is operated by the Inn of the Good Shepherd, who also manages the Good Shepherd's Lodge, the emergency overflow shelter, transitional housing and the Halfway to Home program. The Inn of the Good Shepherd can move individuals within the shelter system to ensure there is adequate space within the system for everyone who requires accommodation.

The recently released interim report from the Federal Housing Advocate's ("**Advocate**") review of homelessness encampmentsⁱ also states that encampments are only created once all options have been exhausted. That report stresses that encampments must include adequate conditions for protecting the right to life such as measures designed to ensure access for individuals to, without delay, essential goods and services such as food, water, shelter, health care, electricity and sanitation, as well as other measures designed to promote and facilitate adequate general conditions, such as the bolstering of effective emergency health services and social housing programs. These elements will come at a considerable cost when provided in an encampment setting.

At this time, any sanctioned encampment would result in a duplication of the supports being provided at the Housing and Homelessness Resource Centre and the Out of the Cold Program.

Moreover, it should be noted that residents of encampments frequently experience harassment and violence. While the Advocate's report noted that many unhoused people find that living in encampments is safer than alternatives such as shelters or living alone on the street, the conditions are still precarious. Many described losing their possessions, including government-issued identification, during enforcement actions. Most do not have access to basic services like clean water or heat. Some have suffered physical harm or have died as a result of exposure, fire, overdose, and other threats to life and safety.

The Public Health inspection criteria for encampments provided by Health Protection (Appendix A) state, "When considering exposure to the cold, plans for the encampment should include access to heat, and should include a plan for accessing a warming centre or emergency shelter when required (inclement weather)." The encampment would not remove the requirement for individuals living in an encampment to have an emergency shelter available to them during the winter months.

Staff were not able to find any examples of sanctioned encampments in Ontario, other than the Waterloo Region's (the "**Region**") sanctioned "hybrid" or managed encampment. The encampment is located at the Region's Emergency Services Training and Research Centre campus. The shelter is home to up to 50 people, each with their own small cabin, equipped with electricity, heating and air conditioning. A main cabin complex provides running water, washrooms, laundry services and space for meals. It was developed as

Waterloo Region had seen a huge increase in individuals experiencing homelessness and had several large encampments within the Region, but, unlike in Lambton County, without shelter space to accommodate them. The estimated costs for the managed encampment are over two million dollars.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications resulting from this report.

When developing plans to deal with the increase in individuals experiencing homelessness, staff utilized all available funding under both the Homelessness Prevention Fund and the Reaching Home fund to operate the Out of the Cold Program and the increased needs at the Housing and Homelessness Resource Centre. Purchase of service agreements are in place with many agencies to provide those supports including, The Inn of the Good Shepherd, Canadian Mental Health Association, and North Lambton Health Team. There are no additional provincial or federal funds to provide the supports that would be required at a sanctioned encampment.

CONSULTATIONS

The following individuals were consulted in formulating the County of Lambton's response to the City of Sarnia's encampment review request as well as the subject matter of this report:

- County of Lambton: Manager, Homelessness Prevention Department; CAO, General Manager, Public Health Services Division, Medical Officer of Health, General Manager, Cultural Services Division,
- Executive Director, Inn of the Good Shepherd;
- Sarnia Police Services; and
- Improvement Advisor with Built for Zero Canada.

STRATEGIC PLAN

In keeping with the Mission Statement of the County, the programs provided by this department promote an enhanced quality of life in Lambton County through the provision of responsive and efficient services.

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

- Advocating in a manner that raises the profile of the County and its needs in order to secure improved government supports, funding, grants, and other resources.

- Developing programs and initiatives that address poverty reduction and promote social belonging.
- Planning for and responding to the ever-changing needs of an aging population, homelessness and retaining young people in the community.
- Actively pursuing joint opportunities with community partners that contribute to the well-being of the Lambton Community.

CONCLUSION

There is enough capacity and flexibility within the present homelessness emergency shelter system in Lambton County to provide adequate shelter for those experiencing homelessness during the upcoming winter months. In addition, the outreach programs and support programs provided by both the Homelessness Prevention Department and the many community agencies in Lambton County will continue to provide the supports necessary to meet the needs of those individuals.

ⁱ The Federal Housing Advocate's Review of Homeless Encampments