



SOCIAL SERVICES DIVISION

REPORT TO:	CHAIR AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS
DEPARTMENT:	Homelessness Prevention and Children's Services
PREPARED BY:	Ian Hanney, Supervisor Melissa Fitzpatrick, Manager
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MEETING DATE:	August 19, 2020
INFORMATION ITEM:	Homelessness System Response to COVID-19

BACKGROUND

COVID-19 has presented Lambton County citizens with an unprecedented challenge in meeting basic needs including housing. As a result, there has been extraordinary strain put upon many of the social services delivered by the County of Lambton and community partner agencies. In particular, there has been a marked increase in the number of individuals presenting as experiencing homelessness.

Individuals experiencing homelessness are particularly vulnerable to contracting communicable diseases such as COVID-19 and are more likely to suffer adverse outcomes from such diseases. Experiences with previous epidemics have demonstrated that COVID-19 is a significant threat for people experiencing homelessness. Higher rates of complicating preconditions and relevant comorbidities are among the many contributing causes. For example, according to the Canadian Network for the Health and Housing of People Experiencing Homelessness, approximately 30% of people experiencing homelessness reported a cough at baseline, and 40% report shortness of breath with exertion.

The nature of experiencing homelessness prevents an individual or family from ensuring they have a single private bedroom for isolation or quarantine including a private bathroom that circumstances created by COVID-19 may require.

The single best approach to protecting individuals experiencing homelessness from COVID-19 is by offering safe, affordable, appropriate and permanent housing. The recently updated County 10 -Year Housing and Homelessness Plan (2014-2023) outlines the strategies the County of Lambton will take to ensure that everyone has safe, affordable, appropriate and permanent housing. However, anyone can experience homelessness on a given night. Until the County's homelessness system of care can

successfully prevent homelessness and ensure these experiences are brief and non-recurrent, there is need for limited emergency housing solutions.

Typically there are approximately 60 emergency shelter beds between youth, adult and family spaces available for use in Lambton County. While this emergency housing system can often be near capacity, the instances it's in need of large amounts of overflow spaces are few. Overflow spaces are created by utilizing local Motel and Hotel beds. The number of individuals accessing emergency housing solutions in Lambton has been as high as 200 during the pandemic.

Emergency housing should be seen as the last resort in the housing continuum and as a temporary solution. Investments in more upstream and affordable housing solutions are a pointed goal in the County's 10 -Year Housing and Homelessness Plan (2014-2023). The recent drastic increase in the number of individuals presenting as homeless due to COVID-19 in Lambton County has led to the expansion of the need for overflow spaces and for preventative and upstream solutions. Through ongoing partnerships with local Hotel and Motel owners, individuals that have no other option for housing can potentially utilize overflow spaces to receive emergency housing. Concurrently, through a host of strategies, people experiencing homelessness in Lambton County are now more easily connected to permanent housing and supports.

To assist Service Managers and local partners respond to the above-mentioned increase in demand for services, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing introduced the Social Services Relief Fund (SSRF). Lambton County was allotted \$2,816,000 via the SSRF. This investment was utilized to implement the below Homelessness Response Plan, including meeting needs such as emergency housing via overflow spaces and increased funding to food banks.

Separately, Lambton County was recently selected through a highly competitive process as a new designated community for the federal Reaching Home Strategy. The Reaching Home Strategy is designed to enable communities to make significant gains towards a real-time evidence-informed homelessness system of care with the end goals of implementing Coordinated Access and ending chronic homelessness. Through the coordination of efforts made under the SSRF investments and those made through Reaching Home, the County of Lambton has sought to minimize the impact of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable members of the community, while continuing towards the long term goals outlined in the County's 10 -Year Housing and Homelessness Plan (2014-2023).

DISCUSSION

The below Homelessness Response Plan outlines the various contingencies the County's homelessness system of care has employed to limit the effects of COVID-19 on those individuals experiencing homelessness. These contingencies seek to support individuals in securing the necessary isolation during the pandemic.

Key accomplishments to note:

- There have been no known cases of COVID-19 amongst individuals experiencing homelessness.
- There have been no outbreaks in congregate homelessness settings such as emergency shelters.
- 14 individuals have been connected to permanent housing from the emergency housing system.
- There has been over 30 successful diversions whereby an individual was supported in making alternate housing arrangements instead of accessing emergency housing.

The following include many of the contingencies employed to meet the challenge COVID-19 presented to the County's homelessness system of care:

- Through strategic Knowledge Translation in partnership with Lambton Public Health and utilizing provincial guidelines and best-practices, strict physical distancing, sanitization, monitoring, screening and PPE measures were employed in emergency shelters.
- Expansion of emergency shelter overflow program to provide isolation for individuals experiencing homelessness.
- In strong partnership with the Inn of the Good Shepherd and Sarnia - Lambton Rebound, coordinated the introduction of an overflow/isolation site for individuals experiencing homelessness that includes multiple 24/7 staff and supports to better connect individuals with permanent housing.
- Introduction of new collaborative outreach program with Lambton Public Health, community paramedics and social services reducing barriers to accessing health care and enabling services such as harm reduction to individuals experiencing homelessness.
- Facilitated training for enhanced diversion practices and monitoring among County staff and community partner agencies.
- Developed and employed new intake and data tracking in-line with best-practices to ensure more real-time accounting of relevant homelessness metrics.
- In partnership with Bluewater Health and Lambton Public Health, conducted mass testing for COVID-19 to individuals experiencing homelessness and relevant front-line staff.
- Facilitated Provincial Pandemic Pay to front-line workers in congregate care settings.
- Increased case-management capacity through the hire of two Homelessness Community Support Workers.
- Increased coordination capacity of the County through the hire of a Homelessness System Coordinator.
- Redeployed several Social Service and Public Health staff to meet the increase in demand for overflow support staff and case-management.
- Increased the capacity to coordinate with and leverage local landlord partnerships for permanent units through the hire of a Landlord Engagement Worker.

- Leverage Provincial Social Service Relief Fund to offer a broader suite of tools to connect individuals with permanent housing.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There is no financial impact on the County Budget as a result of this report. The SSRF is expected to be fully spent by Fall 2020. The County of Lambton will continue to express the requirement for additional Provincial and Federal funding in the coming weeks.

CONSULTATIONS

Iterative consultations have taken place with members of the County Housing and Homelessness Internal implementation team, the membership of the Housing and Homelessness Advisory Committee, The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, other CMSM's and content expert groups such as OrgCode and the Canadian Network for the Health and Housing of People Experiencing Homelessness to meet this dynamic issue.

STRATEGIC PLAN

The activities of the Division 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 while supporting their transition to being employed community members and future leaders.
- Actively pursuing joint opportunities with community partners that contribute to the well-being of the Lambton Community.

CONCLUSION

The County of Lambton has utilized evolving best-practices, community partnerships and strategic investments to minimize the impact of COVID-19 on individuals experiencing homelessness in the community, and made marked gains towards the long-term goals outlined in the County's 10 -Year Housing and Homelessness Plan (2014-2023).