



SOCIAL SERVICES DIVISION

REPORT TO:	CHAIR AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS
DEPARTMENT:	HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES
PREPARED BY:	Ian Hanney, Supervisor
REVIEWED BY:	Melissa Fitzpatrick, Manager Valerie Colasanti, General Manager Stéphane Thiffeault, Chief Administrative Officer
MEETING DATE:	August 16, 2023
SUBJECT:	Homelessness Community Outreach Services

BACKGROUND

In July 2023 Council received a report which provided an overview and update on the County of Lambton's Housing and Homelessness Plan 2020 – 2024. The update offered a fulsome annual report on the overall progress towards the four strategic directions outlined by the plan to achieve the vision that "every person has an affordable, suitable and adequate home". This report provides greater detail on the County of Lambton's homelessness community outreach services offered within this strategic framework.

Since the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, there has been a dramatic increase in households experiencing housing precarity in Lambton County, particularly among vulnerable populations. Despite extensive multiagency coordinated efforts to offer preventative interventions, and a multitude of new supports and resources to progress hundreds of households from homelessness into more permanent housing, the rates of homelessness in our community remain drastically elevated. This has increased visible homelessness, including those that are unsheltered, also referred to as absolute homelessness. As part of an expansive, community-wide response, Council approved the introduction of several new positions including a temporary community outreach worker to the Social Services Division in May 2022. An additional temporary community outreach worker was added in August 2022. They have been conducting homelessness community outreach for the past year.

DISCUSSION

Homelessness Community Outreach Overview

The community outreach workers provide assertive community outreach to households experiencing homelessness. The team's efforts are primarily directed toward individuals that are experiencing absolute homelessness. The housing case management provided through this team is brought to households experiencing homelessness, wherever they are, and is often delivered outside. Assistance is concentrated on progressing the household along the housing continuum for long-term success. While addressing the basic needs of this vulnerable population is a vital component of the service, the primary goals of engagement are housing centric. Tools for engagement are commonly used to meet immediate needs including food security, temporary shelter, hygiene, health, and sanitation.

The homelessness outreach team frequently engages the same approximately 10-20 individuals that have limited permanent housing solutions available to them and sleep outside almost every night. On average, the team also engages 60 unique individuals each month who had to sleep outside at some point. *Appendix A* further demonstrates the monthly rates of engagements, count of unique individuals, and instances of harm reduction supplies offered. In total, since August 2022, the homelessness outreach team has engaged and supported more than 220 unique individuals who have slept outside at some point. *Appendix B* further demonstrates the reasons cited by individuals for sleeping outside, where the most common reason is choosing not to stay in available emergency housing due to substance use.

Strengthened Relationships

Effective community outreach relies upon relationship building with individuals who have experienced extensive trauma and are at a drastically elevated risk for health and social harms. These include infectious diseases, mental health issues, including substance use disorders, cognitive impairments, foot issues, chronic diseases, and injuries. For years, many of these individuals have frequently been unable to access or directly denied the necessary services to address these outcomes. Resultantly, establishing a trusting relationship can take time, consistency, and reliability. The homelessness outreach team has made tremendous gains in both identifying individuals experiencing absolute homelessness and establishing trusting relationships to enable effective case management. Hot-spot mapping, common intake and assessment, in addition to offering trauma-informed and client-led care, have further enabled the consistency and reliability necessary to generate positive housing outcomes since the inception of the team.

Mobile Housing Case Management

Services provided through assertive community outreach include housing document readiness, such as ensuring proper identification, rental history documentation, gathering references, completing private and social housing applications, and assisting in completing up-to-date tax filing. These documentation steps are necessary to become eligible for subsidized housing and are often required before consideration by private market landlords. These steps commonly serve as barriers to housing for households

experiencing homelessness, who are instead focused on survival through constant crises due to being unsheltered.

The outreach team has completed over 30 intakes for newly identified households into the local Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) and administered more than 20 common assessments for the purposes of matching and referring to existing available housing resources. Further, the outreach team serves as a mobile point of access for individuals served through the Social Service Division homelessness integrated team. Resultantly, the outreach team has greatly contributed to the 111 individuals experiencing homelessness that have progressed into more permanent housing since the introduction of the community outreach workers. Of those housed, 40 were placed into permanent housing directly from living outside, including seven households with child dependents.

Collaborative Approach

Along with progressing into more permanent housing, supports from various specialized service providers are often necessary to promote the health of individuals experiencing absolute homelessness and progress unsheltered households towards life stabilization. The homelessness outreach team frequently partners with allied social and health professionals to conduct coordinated engagements for direct delivery of service, or assists in lowering barriers to accessing services including harm reduction supplies and supports, addiction and substance use treatment, clean and cover care, mental health services and more. This includes joint trips with other mobile teams including Lambton Public Health, the North Lambton Community Health Centre, and the Sarnia Police Service IMPACT. The collaborative approach taken by these teams improves service delivery for individuals experiencing homelessness, including coordinated care, better response times and more frequent engagements.

While most engagements are direct follow-ups with known individuals, or elicited through hot-spot mapping, on average the homelessness community outreach team addresses almost 20 community referrals per month. Further, on average, the homelessness community outreach team makes more than 22 community referrals to allied agencies including harm reductions teams or Bluewater Health, such as Assertive Community Treatment or acute withdrawal management bedded services.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There is no financial impact on the County Budget as a result of this report. It is estimated that the permanent staff positions will result in an annual operating budgetary requirement of \$200,000, which is fully funded from the Homelessness Prevention Program through the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing and the Federal Government under the Reaching Home Agreement.

CONSULTATIONS

Consultations have taken place with members of the County of Lambton Housing and Homelessness Advisory Committee, the General Manager of Social Services, internal Social Services Division staff, and numerous social services agencies in the community.

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's homelessness community outreach team provides a lower-barrier, highly demanded service to support the most vulnerable individuals in our community. This service greatly contributes to promoting households experiencing homelessness into more permanent housing, and further towards life stabilization. It assists staff in continuing to meet the goals and objectives of the County of Lambton's Housing and Homelessness Plan.

RECOMMENDATION

That given the positive outcomes achieved by the temporary Outreach Community Workers, Council approves making these two positions full-time permanent within the Homelessness Prevention and Children's Services Department.