



SOCIAL SERVICES DIVISION

REPORT TO:	WARDEN AND LAMBTON COUNTY COUNCIL
DEPARTMENT:	HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION AND SOCIAL PLANNING
PREPARED BY:	Ian Hanney, Manager
REVIEWED BY:	Melissa Fitzpatrick, General Manager Stéphane Thiffeault, Chief Administrative Officer
MEETING DATE:	November 5, 2025
INFORMATION ITEM:	Out of the Cold Overflow Shelter

BACKGROUND

At its July 5, 2023 meeting, County Council established shelter as part of its number one priority.

Motion #3: Bradley/White: That County Council publicly endorse making affordable housing and shelter the number one priority of County Council.

Carried.

At its May 7, 2025, meeting, County Council reaffirmed shelter as part of its number one priority, notably adding supportive housing.

Motion #8: McRoberts/Cook: That County Council publicly endorse making affordable and supportive housing and shelter the number one priority of County Council.

Carried.

On September 3, 2025, in a report entitled “Homelessness Prevention Update”, County Council received an overview of key homelessness prevention efforts and outcomes currently underway in the community.

Of note, the aforementioned report demonstrated an ongoing elevated demand for local housing and homelessness services.

However, through strong partnerships and integrated service delivery, Lambton County has of late experienced relative stability in overall levels of homelessness, and very low levels of unsheltered homelessness compared to most communities across Ontario. This has been driven by strong local housing outcomes, and an appropriate availability of emergency housing capacity.

The Out of the Cold Program (“**Overflow Shelter**”) located at 837 Exmouth Street, Sarnia, offers up to 35 shelter beds for individuals experiencing homelessness. Beyond overnight shelter services, this program offers associated basic need supports, including food security for shelter residents. Nearly 200 unique individuals have been supported through this program since inception.

The local need for shelter space was particularly highlighted in 2024 with the emergence of the Rainbow Park encampment in the City of Sarnia. The Overflow Shelter was available at that time to accommodate those experiencing homelessness and has since remained open to address the continued local need for shelter.

In correspondence dated May 8, 2024, the City of Sarnia asked that the Overflow Shelter remain open, that its hours of service be expanded, and any barriers to service lowered. The request was presented to the Committee of the Whole on May 15, 2024.

The Overflow Shelter has met that request ever since. The program has continued into 2025 and is the primary reason for the low number of encampments in the County of Lambton, that consists of approximately 20 individuals on any given night.

The County of Lambton is committed to closing the Overflow Shelter at the soonest available opportunity, but local demand for shelter services must guide the timing thereof. Otherwise, prematurely closing the shelter could lead to the emergence of encampments in the community.

In a continued effort to meet demand for housing, several new housing opportunities in the community are underway and may help reduce demand for shelter services. These new developments are specifically noted further below in this report.

Moreover, as of November 3, 2025, the day programming services that are co-located at the Overflow Shelter are expected to move to the current Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) office at 210 Lochiel Street Sarnia, thereby significantly reducing overall traffic and use of the facility.

DISCUSSION

The County of Lambton frequently receives referrals from the community, including Sarnia Police Services, social service partners, and member municipalities, inquiring about available shelter beds.

In the Spring of 2024, when the Rainbow Park encampment was at peak volume, Lambton County had approximately 100 unique individuals residing unsheltered on some nights. As noted above, at the Committee of the Whole meeting on May 15, 2024 County Council received and filed a letter from the City of Sarnia, dated May 8, 2024, wherein the City of Sarnia requested County Council to consider extending the Overflow Shelter to ensure available low barrier shelter beds for individuals. Despite this significant expense

and strain on the Inn of the Good Shepherd’s workforce, the Overflow Shelter program was extended throughout the summer of 2024 and continues to date.

Several local partner social services agencies, including Sarnia Police Services IMPACT, Lambton Public Health, Community Health Integrated Health Care (CHIC) team, the North Lambton Community Health Centre, and others have continued to deliver coordinated mobile outreach services to individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Many of these coordinated engagements focus on encouraging individuals to access services, and ultimately, progress along the housing continuum. As a result, the Overflow Shelter program has seen steady and high demand, social services staff have more easily facilitated housing placements, and rates of unsheltered homelessness have reduced substantially.

October 15, 2025

LAMBTON’S MONTHLY Homelessness Data

Total Homelessness (Individuals per Month)

284 **296** **314***
Jul. Aug. Sept.



*This includes everyone in shelters, transitional housing, living unsheltered, or precariously housed (e.g., couch surfing), tracked through a [comprehensive, real-time list](#). It is compiled using HIFIS, in strong collaboration with local agencies, and verified by information known to Social Services through our delivery of Ontario Works.

Current Service Demand

There continues to be significant demand for shelter services. The Overflow Shelter program has had an average occupancy rate of 85% over the past year. In most months within the past year, the average occupancy has been above 90%. Notably, even during the summer months of 2025 when shelters tend to have a decrease in use, the Overflow Shelter program saw an average of almost 25 individuals residing in shelter each night. To ease pressure on and use of the Overflow Shelter, intakes are handled by The Good Shepherd’s Lodge. Lodge vacancies are filled before the Overflow Shelter is used, and individuals do not present directly at the Overflow Shelter for intake.

Importantly, the individuals that comprise the local By-Name List (BNL), including the smaller subset that utilize emergency housing, is not a static group of individuals. While there is a significant cohort of individuals experiencing chronic homelessness in Lambton County, including those that utilize shelter, there is constant change in who our local providers serve, including individuals newly experiencing homelessness or returning to homelessness (inflow), and individuals progressing along the housing continuum or otherwise losing touch with our system (outflow).

The County's local housing outcomes are particularly strong compared to other communities. For example, our social service providers progressed 23 unique individuals from homelessness into more permanent housing in September alone, including some directly from living unsheltered. However, there continues to be significant demand for local housing and homelessness supports. In the same month of September, the inflow to the BNL was more than 50 individuals, with 33 of those individuals newly experiencing homelessness. This demonstrates how rapidly demand can increase on already strained local resources, and how sudden decreases in capacity could affect dozens of households experiencing housing precarity.

Impacts of Early Closure

The rate at which social service providers progress individuals along the housing continuum from homelessness and into permanent housing, is significantly higher when serving households residing in shelter compared to unsheltered homelessness. Any reduction in housing placements and decrease in outflow from our local BNL would result in a sudden increase in our local homelessness.

Ensuring adequate emergency housing capacity is necessary to avoid the level of significant encampments experienced in many other Ontario communities, including their negative impacts on neighbourhoods, increased burden on various local services, and significantly increased harm to individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Drastically heightened numbers of encampments across the province are why many communities, and most service system managers, are expanding emergency housing programming, despite its high cost. Comparatively, the County's existing emergency housing program is experiencing a steady inflow and outflow of individuals, which emphasizes that the County emergency housing capacity is adequate to meet current demand.

Should the Overflow Shelter program close, the number of individuals experiencing absolute homelessness will inevitably increase. At current demand, more than 30 individuals would likely resort to living in encampments throughout the City of Sarnia. This would more than double the number of people experiencing absolute homelessness across Lambton County based on current figures. A sudden rise in absolute homelessness would significantly increase the burden on municipal services, including police services, emergency medical services, By-Law enforcement services, hospital services, and related mobile outreach program services. Additionally, health outcomes and prospects for life stabilization for individuals experiencing homelessness would be

harshly impacted when transitioning to absolute homelessness from a sheltered setting. As 95% of the current shelter occupants are Sarnia residents, it is expected that this increase of absolute homelessness would most significantly impact the area of downtown Sarnia.

Further, the ability of all member municipalities to enforce local encampment protocols would be substantially impacted by this reduction of approximately half of the total available shelter bed spaces in Lambton County. A reduced number of shelter beds would impact the ability of local By-Law enforcement and police service officials to effectively address emergent encampments in otherwise prohibited locations.

Partnerships and Contingencies

Since its inception, the Overflow Shelter has directly addressed widespread public demand for increased shelter capacity, including from member municipalities. As has been previously reported, County staff have undertaken numerous mitigation strategies and made expert multidisciplinary partnerships with respect to the Overflow Shelter program and the day programming to ensure the efficacy of the program, and reduction of its impacts to the community. An overview of these efforts are outlined in Appendix "A".

The County of Lambton, The Inn of the Good Shepherd, Sarnia Police Services, and the Emmanuel Presbyterian Church continue to meet regularly with representatives from the surrounding Melrose Community Group to offer updates and respond to evolving concerns. The County of Lambton and the Inn of the Good Shepherd frequently engage the nearby neighbours of the Overflow Shelter, including making referrals as appropriate, responding to individual neighbour inquiries, and frequently offering direct mitigation efforts within our capacity as social service professionals. The dedicated on-site staff consistently strive to support and provide solutions to neighbouring residents within the scope of their roles as social service professionals, despite regularly facing challenging conditions, including threats, verbal abuse, harassment, and, at times, physical aggression from the community.

Sarnia Police Services is an active partner in facilitating requests and feedback from the community. This includes shared outreach services, including frequent and regular on-site attendance through their IMPACT team, participation in regular meetings with the Melrose Community Group, performing Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) assessments of the property, and completing proactive patrols of the area. Community feedback, and the several CPTED's performed by Sarnia Police Services have informed extensive, and adaptive mitigation strategies employed at the property, including across the last several months. Steps taken to reduce traffic on site, including relocation of some services, are among the more recent strategies employed. Data provided by Sarnia Police Services shows a consistent decline in officer-tagged events related to the shelter within its surrounding area since June 2025.

This trend is also reflected in the County's Emergency Medical Services Department ("**EMS**") data that demonstrates a notable decrease in calls regarding behavioral

concerns, including those related to alcohol or drugs. There was a 60% reduction in such calls to EMS in the first three quarters of 2025, compared to the last three quarters of 2024. The EMS CHIC team frequently conducts proactive engagement at the Overflow Shelter, to reduce harm for clients, and reduce reliance on emergency services.

Impending Housing Opportunities

The following is a list of impending housing opportunities in the community, which may reduce the overall demand for shelter services:

1. Maxwell Park Place is currently under construction with occupancy expected this month. Tenants residing in existing community housing units have been offered units at Maxwell, thereby creating vacancies in existing community housing buildings. Eight units have been dedicated to individuals from the By Name List who will receive support from a Community Support Worker with the Homelessness Prevention team. These units should be available for occupancy in early 2026.
2. The HART Hub includes supportive housing units supported by a new local Indwell team. It includes 12 units in existing community housing buildings that will be supported by a multi-disciplinary team of Indwell staff. Funding for this program is still pending Provincial confirmation. Pending funding confirmation, it is anticipated that these units will be available for occupancy in early 2026. Also included in the HART Hub suite of new services, are 14 units in private market rentals supported by Canadian Mental Health Association staff. Funding for this program is still pending Provincial confirmation. Pending funding confirmation, it is anticipated that these units will be available for occupancy in early 2026.
3. Further dedicated rent supplements are being negotiated for 10 additional units. It is anticipated that individuals considered for these units would be on the By Name List as well as the Centralized Waiting List. Individuals housed in these units will receive dedicated support from the Social Services Division. It is anticipated that these units will be available for occupancy in early 2026.

The above 44 units will be available in early 2026 and have the potential to positively impact demand for shelter services. At this time, it is unknown how many individuals housed in these 44 units will be from the shelter system, as the support available for these units may not match those required to stably house each individual.

Potential occupants will be assessed to ensure that the support available to them once housed is believed to be sufficient to meet their needs. Further, for several of the above opportunities, the final decision regarding prospective tenancies rests with the private market landlord.

Long-term, supportive housing projects are being developed in the community. These supportive housing projects will provide high needs support at a level not currently

available in the community. Supportive housing is needed to truly address the homelessness crisis in the community.

Overflow Shelter Closure Outlook

The County's timeline for the closure of the Overflow Shelter is unclear at this time as the timeline is dependent on several factors, some of which are outside of the County's control. The County will continue to assess shelter demand and seek to close the Overflow Shelter at the earliest possible opportunity.

Subject to developing need for shelter spaces, the County will review the possibility of closing the Overflow Shelter in the spring of 2026, it being understood that the closure date cannot be guaranteed. Local demand for shelter services would need to be met entirely through existing permanent shelter spaces before the Overflow Shelter could close.

The County has and continues to take steps towards an eventual closure and has taken steps to mitigate impacts to the surrounding neighbourhood. These steps include the following:

- closing the day programming operations, coinciding with the opening of the HART Hub on November 3, 2025;
- seeking all impending affordable and supportive housing opportunities to progress individuals from shelter into more permanent housing; and
- leveraging all programming within the HART Hub suite of services to reduce shelter demand. This includes the long-term transitional recovery beds facilitated by Bluewater Health that will provide a safe, structured recovery environment for individuals transitioning from withdrawal management and stabilization programs.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Not Applicable to the update provided in this report.

CONSULTATIONS

Consultations have taken place with the Manager, Homelessness Prevention and Social Planning; Manager, Housing Services; General Manager, Social Services, County Solicitor/Deputy Clerk, and the Chief Administrative Officer

STRATEGIC PLAN

Delivering emergency housing 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 County of Lambton remains firmly committed to closing the Overflow Shelter program at the earliest feasible opportunity. However, the timeline for this closure is dependent on local demand for emergency shelter services, which remains the primary determining factor. The County continues to monitor this demand closely. Several upcoming housing initiatives are expected to alleviate some pressure on the shelter system by increasing access to stable, long-term housing for individuals currently experiencing homelessness. The County and the Inn of the Good Shepherd have implemented extensive mitigation measures for the Overflow Shelter operations and are frequently directly engaging the neighbours to adapt to changing needs.