



## SOCIAL SERVICES DIVISION

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| <b>REPORT TO:</b>        | <b>CHAIR AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS</b>                       |
| <b>DEPARTMENT:</b>       | <b>HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION &amp; CHILDREN'S SERVICES</b> |
| <b>PREPARED BY:</b>      | <b>Valerie Colasanti, General Manager</b>                |
| <b>REVIEWED BY:</b>      | <b>Ronald G. Van Horne, Chief Administrative Officer</b> |
| <b>MEETING DATE:</b>     | <b>October 21, 2020</b>                                  |
| <b>INFORMATION ITEM:</b> | <b>Homelessness System Response to COVID-19 Update</b>   |

### **BACKGROUND**

Further to the information report received by Committee in August 2020, this report provides an update on the Homelessness System Response to COVID-19 in Lambton County. COVID-19 has presented our 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 our community partner agencies. In particular, there has been a marked increase in the number of individuals presenting as experiencing homelessness.

Typically there are approximately 60 emergency shelter beds amongst youth, adult and family spaces available for use in Lambton County. While this emergency housing system can often be near capacity, the instances our system has 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. A business case for additional funds under the SSRF Phase 2 has been submitted to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing and a response is expected shortly.

## **DISCUSSION**

The below Homelessness Response Plan outlines the various contingencies our 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 continues to be no known cases of COVID-19 amongst individuals experiencing homelessness.
- There have been no outbreaks in congregate homelessness settings such as emergency shelters.
- Numerous 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.

Diversion is a tool used to prevent the use of emergency shelter by providing individualized supports before families and individuals enter the shelter system. Diversion programs help individuals and families seeking shelter to identify immediate alternate housing arrangements and, if necessary, connect them with services and financial assistance to help them return to permanent housing. In early March of 2020 when the COVID -19 pandemic was declared, the diversion process had not been implemented and many individuals entered the homeless shelter system without going through diversion first. In order to ensure that every individual within the shelter system had an opportunity to go through a diversion process as well as an acuity assessment, individuals living at the overflow shelter sites were moved to the Lodge at the Inn of the Good Shepherd to better assess them. This assisted staff in developing a “rapid rehousing plan” for each individual and family. In some circumstances after this assessment individuals with lower acute needs were moved back to the overflow shelter site.

The following list includes the recent contingencies used to meet the challenges COVID-19 presented to our homelessness system of care:

- In strong partnership with the Inn of the Good Shepherd and Sarnia - Lambton Rebound, the overflow/isolation site for individuals experiencing homelessness

which includes multiple staff working 24 hours a day, seven days a week, along with supports to better connect individuals with permanent housing, continues to operate.

- The collaborative outreach program with Lambton Public Health, community paramedics and social services reduces barriers to accessing health care and enabling services such as harm reduction to individuals experiencing homelessness has expanded within the community.
- Diversion practices and monitoring among County staff and community partner agencies continues.
- In partnership with Bluewater Health and Lambton Public Health, mass testing for COVID-19 is offered to individuals experiencing homelessness and relevant front-line staff is conducted as necessary.
- We have increased case-management capacity through the hire of an additional Homelessness Community Support Worker to work with individuals who have identified as Indigenous, in partnership with the Sarnia-Lambton Native Friendship Centre.
- We continue to work with and develop local landlord partnerships for permanent rental units.
- We have expanded the availability of the Short-Term Rental Supplement Program, giving people short term access to funds to help them secure and keep housing.
- We have and continue to leverage Provincial Social Service Relief Funds 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 Phase 1 is expected to be fully spent by Fall 2020 and a business case for the SSRF Phase 2 has been submitted to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. The recently received Reaching Home COVID-19 Funding will also be utilized to fund the above programs. The County of Lambton will continue to express the requirement for additional Provincial and Federal funding in the coming months.

## **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 and the Reaching Home Community Advisory Board.

## **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 our communities, and made marked gains towards the long-term goals outlined in the County's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan (2014-2023).