

# The Regional Municipality of York

Committee of the Whole  
Community and Health Services  
September 9, 2021

Report of the Commissioner of Community and Health Services

## Process Enhancements to Streamline York Region's Subsidized Housing Wait List

### 1. Recommendation

Council receive this report for information.

### 2. Summary

This report provides an update on ongoing process and technology enhancements to simplify management of York Region's subsidized housing wait list. The objective of this initiative is to improve the experience for applicants by allowing them to submit and manage their applications online, and more efficiently connect them to available rent subsidies through an online offer process.

Key Points:

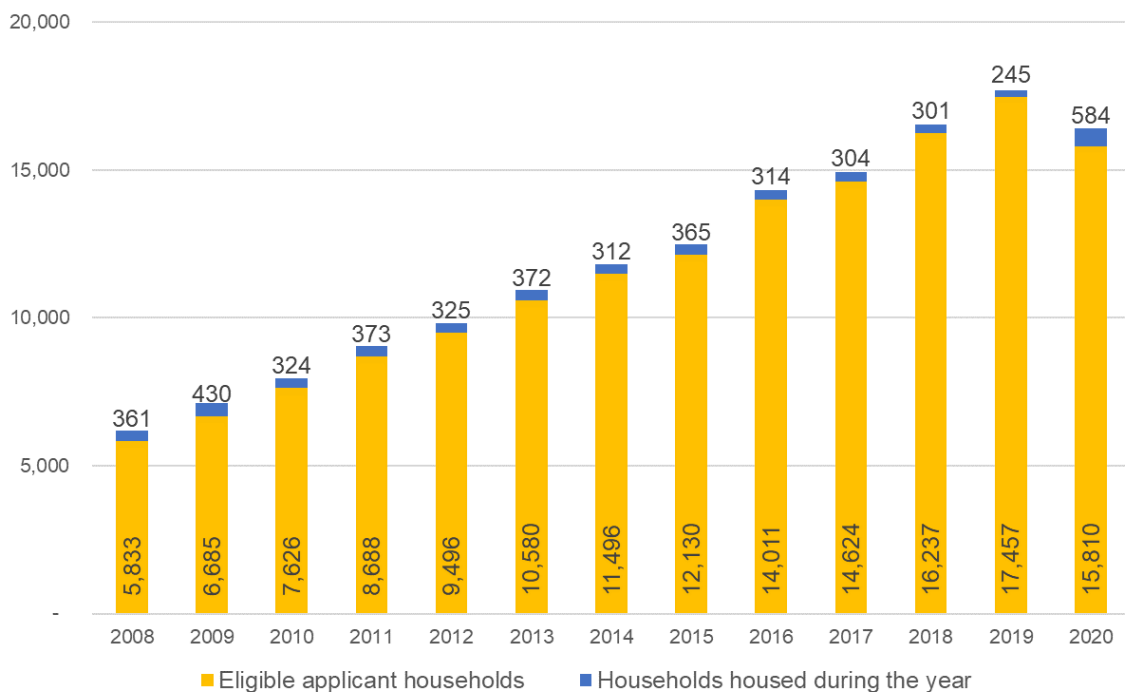
- York Region is streamlining wait list administration to better support applicants and community housing providers
- An online portal was launched in January 2021, enabling applicants to submit housing wait list applications electronically
- Beginning in June 2021, existing applicants are being notified of the requirement to register for the online portal to keep their applications up to date
- A new process to offer rent subsidies, including community housing units and portable housing benefits, using the online portal will be phased in beginning in fall 2021. Applicants will use the portal to view and express interest in available vacancies, giving them more information about available units and control over when and where they receive an offer of housing based on their needs and circumstances
- These changes will improve service for applicants, reduce vacancy loss and position the Region to meet future provincial requirements to use the wait list to access a wider range of housing assistance
- The Region is working with community partners and has dedicated resources to provide direct support for applicants who need assistance navigating the new process

### 3. Background

#### As Service Manager, York Region is responsible for maintaining a wait list for subsidized housing

Under the *Housing Services Act, 2011*, the Region must maintain a wait list to allocate subsidized housing units following provincially prescribed administration requirements and rules for selecting households. The wait list has grown over time to 15,810 households as of December 2020. Figure 1 illustrates wait list growth between 2008 and 2020.

**Figure 1:  
Subsidized Housing Wait List, 2008 to 2020**



Source: Housing Services, Centralized Waiting List Record 2020

On average, between 2008 and 2019, about 335 subsidized units became available each year through a combination of tenant turnover and new construction. During the same period, the wait list increased by an average of approximately 1,050 households per year.

The wait list decreased for the first time in 2020. The decrease was due to the one-time impact of removing 2,428 applicants who were ineligible for subsidy under the Region's income and asset limits, and a higher-than-average number of wait list households housed because of two new portable housing benefit programs – the [Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit](#) and the York Region Portable Housing Benefit.

## **The current paper-based process to manage the wait list is time-consuming for applicants and results in challenges keeping critical information up to date**

The Region administers the wait list using a dedicated software system also used by most other Service Managers in Ontario. Until January 2021, the system did not have a self-serve option for applicants. To apply for housing in York Region and remain active on the wait list, an applicant had to:

- Mail a paper application with supporting documents or apply by telephone, and mail supporting documents and a consent form to the Region
- Complete an update every 12 months and report changes in circumstances within 30 days, and submit supporting documents and forms by mail
- Select buildings where they want to live, and keep these selections updated by mail or telephone

All information had to be manually entered in the wait list software system. These processes were developed in 2002, when the wait list was significantly smaller. As the wait list has grown, it has become increasingly challenging for the Region to keep applicant information up to date, and communicate with applicants while relying on paper-based processes and manual data entry.

## **The process to offer rent subsidies is administratively burdensome for housing providers, including Housing York Inc., and contributes to applicant refusals and vacancy loss**

Currently housing providers with vacancies must contact applicants who have selected their building to offer units, and repeat the process one by one in order of application date, until an applicant accepts. Although applicants must have selected the building to receive an offer, it is common for applicants to turn a unit down because they are not ready to move, they no longer want to live in the building, or they do not want the specific unit. Some applicants do not respond to attempts to contact them causing further delays.

In 2020, to fill 326 subsidized units, housing providers made at least 880 offers; of these offers, 554 were refused by the applicant. Refusals prolong wait times for other applicants who are ready to accept a unit. They also have a financial impact on the Region, as the Region compensates housing providers for vacancy loss while the provider works to fill the vacancy.

Under a provincial “one-offer rule” which took effect [January 1, 2021](#), in most cases applicants who turn down a unit in a building they selected become ineligible and are removed from the wait list. Applicants can choose to reapply and will receive a new application date based on the date they reapply. Prior to the one-offer rule, applicants could refuse two units and would be removed from the wait list after refusing a third.

## **The Region has made improvements to the wait list over the past five years to better serve applicants and target subsidies to applicants in greater need**

While the new “one-offer rule” should reduce vacancy loss, the consequences for an applicant if they refuse an offer are significant. The Region has taken steps to help applicants avoid this risk, such as making detailed information about housing provider buildings available to inform their building choices, Other actions to improve wait list administration, reduce vacancy loss and better target subsidies toward households in greater need include:

- Implementing a “move-in ready” assessment in 2016 to pre-screen applicants near the top of the wait list and refine their building selections, and upgrading the wait list management platform in 2018
- Implementing income and asset limits for subsidized housing, approved by Council in [March 2018](#)
- Completing a comprehensive review of the wait list to better understand applicants’ needs, identify potential additional supports, and inform further enhancements to wait list administration. Reported to Council in [October 2019](#), recommendations included streamlining administration and processes, and enhancing communications with applicants, including more online information

Under the existing process, applicants receive limited information about specific units until they receive an offer for an available unit, which may increase their likelihood of refusing the unit. Process enhancements described in this report address this issue, and respond to findings of the comprehensive wait list review.

## **4. Analysis**

### **The online portal is now the primary way for people to apply for subsidized housing in York Region and manage their applications**

In January 2021, an online applicant portal launched as part of the existing wait list software system. The Region has updated communications, including York.ca, to direct new applicants to use the portal. While applicants can still access a paper application, they are encouraged to use the online portal as an easier and faster option. Between January 2021 and June 30, 2021, the Region received 1,205 new online applications and 716 paper applications. The Region reviews applications submitted online and determines eligibility before a household is added to the wait list.

The portal also allows applicants already on the wait list to register and link to their existing application. Once registered, applicants can complete many processes online that currently require documents to be mailed to the Region, including updating household members and contact information, submitting eligibility documents, and changing building selections.

In June 2021, the Region began to notify existing applicants of the requirement to register for the online portal, starting with those with the oldest application dates. As of August 10, 2021, approximately 50% of applicants contacted registered for the online portal. Applicants are supported during the registration process through a partnership between Housing Services and Access York. A dedicated team has also been assigned to conduct targeted outreach with applicants who do not respond to determine if they still require housing assistance and offer support if they are having challenges accessing the online system.

**The offer process is also moving online to provide applicants with more information about available units and programs and the ability to express interest in them**

Starting this fall, a new add-on module for the wait list system will support a more efficient process for offering units to applicants. Housing providers will be able to create vacancy postings with detailed information about available units through the online portal, similar to private market rental listings. The vacancy postings can include photographs, floorplans, accessibility features and details about building amenities and locations.

Vacancies will be posted on a regular schedule, available for applicants to view for a standard time determined by the Region (e.g., one week). The top ranked applicants for each building, according to wait list priority and application date, will be able review available units for which they are eligible and “express interest” if they would like to receive an offer. At the end of each cycle, a list of applicants who expressed interest in a unit is generated and ranked according to the existing wait list rules. The top applicant will receive an offer from the housing provider.

In addition to community housing units, portable rent benefit programs can be posted as vacancies when new spaces become available.

Table 1 summarizes the benefits for applicants of the online portal and new offer process, compared with the current system.

**Table 1  
Benefits of the Online Portal and New Offer Process**

	Current System	New System	Benefits
<b>Applying for Housing</b>	Applicants print and mail paper forms and documents for manual data entry	Applicants directly enter information in the portal and upload verification documents	Applicant information updated immediately Eligibility decisions can be made faster
<b>Building Selections</b>	Applicants review information online, submit building selections by mail or	Applicants can review building information and make and change	Easier and faster process for applicants to choose buildings and update selections, with

	Current System	New System	Benefits
	email, and call Access York or submit a new form to update selections	selections directly through the portal	more information provided on the portal
<b>Offer Process</b>	Housing providers contact applicants one at a time when they have a vacancy  Applicants do not know when they will receive an offer or for which housing location	Available vacancies are posted on a regular schedule and are available to review for one week	Housing providers can advertise and offer their units more efficiently  Applicants know when vacancies are posted and actively search for options that meet their needs
<b>Unit Information</b>	Applicants have limited information about the unit until they receive an offer, but must make a decision within two to four days to accept or lose their place on the wait list	Applicants have access to detailed information about available units including unit floor plans, photos, and parking availability, before they express interest	Applicants can make an informed decision to express interest in a unit or subsidy based on their current situation and needs
<b>Refusals</b>	Applicants often refuse offers, e.g., because they are not ready to move or do not want to live in the building or unit	Applicants express interest only if they are ready to accept an offer. Applicants do not have to express interest in a unit until they are ready	Applicants have more choice about when and where they receive an offer, leading to fewer refusals

### **Other Service Managers have already implemented similar online offer processes or are in the process of doing so**

Durham Region has successfully used a similar offer process since 2017 to offer vacant community housing units and portable benefits to wait list applicants. The City of Toronto piloted a similar offer process in [2014](#) and found it reduced the average time it took to fill a vacant unit, from 45 to 22 days, and the average number of applicants contacted before finding an applicant who would accept the unit, from nine to 1.5 phone calls to make a successful offer. The City of Toronto is now adopting the system for all applicants and housing providers and is in the process of contacting its approximately 79,000 applicants to register for the online system.

## **The Region will phase in the new offer process beginning in fall 2021**

Up to 10 housing provider sites will be selected to test out the new offer process in fall 2021. The Region has updated business practices and developed training materials to support implementation. The start date and the length of the test period are subject to change based on unit availability but is anticipated to run to early 2022.

During this period, other housing providers will continue to offer units using the current offer process. Once testing is completed, additional providers will begin using the new offer process, and the Region will also use it to advertise available portable housing benefits.

There will be a communications campaign to inform applicants about the new offer process, and their role to review and express interest in vacancy postings. The campaign will include a mix of virtual information sessions, information posted to [www.york.ca/housing](http://www.york.ca/housing) and the online portal, and targeted one-to-one follow up. Information will also be provided to community agencies to enable them to support applicants.

## **The Region consulted with internal and external partners and other Service Managers to design the new process and address accessibility**

The new offer processes and the phase-in plan were developed with input from stakeholders to ensure they meet the needs of applicants, community housing providers and the Region. In addition, Housing Services consulted with representatives from Durham Region and the City of Toronto to understand their implementation experiences.

Housing Services engaged key internal and external partners, including the York Region Accessibility Advisory Committee. Members of the York Region Accessibility Advisory Committee were also invited to participate in a user test to take place in August 2021. One key concern raised was the need to ensure applicants do not face barriers or disadvantages in accessing rent subsidies because of the move to online processes. Approaches to address this concern are described below.

From July to September 2021, Housing Services held virtual information sessions with community agencies, including the Housing Help Centre, Welcome Centres, emergency and transitional housing providers, and shelters supporting survivors of domestic violence, to inform them of the planned changes and identify additional ways to support their customers to use the online portal.

## **Applicants will have access to a wide range of supports to help them access the online portal and use it to express interest in rent subsidies**

The Region will use a range of strategies to ensure all applicants, including seniors, people with disabilities and people with limited access to technology, have equitable access to rent subsidies during and after implementation of the online portal and new offer process. Key supports include:

- A dedicated team to provide telephone-based support for applicants who need assistance to register for the online portal, working in partnership with Access York, and to conduct targeted follow up with applicants who do not respond to the notice to register
- Applicants will continue to have access to TTY and interpretation services through Access York to manage their applications
- Plain language instructions for applicants to register for the portal, including how to request assistance from the Region, are highlighted on [www.york.ca/applyforhousing](http://www.york.ca/applyforhousing)
- The Region will explore options for community agencies to use the portal to view vacancies to assist their customers

The Region will provide direct assistance to applicants who need support navigating the portal, including updating applicant information, providing information about available vacancies and expressing interest on applicants' behalf if they are unable to do so. The planned changes will give the Region additional capacity to better identify applicant needs and help connect them with housing resources and other forms of assistance, as less time will be spent manually managing the wait list system.

### **Enhancements to the wait list will enable the Region to allocate other housing benefits more efficiently and prepare for future regulatory changes**

The wait list was developed to allocate rent-geared-to-income units. Over the last decade, new types of rent subsidies have been introduced, including portable subsidies. When new programs become available, such as the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit, applicants currently must be manually contacted by mail or email, and significant time is needed to explain the program to each applicant so they can make an informed decision before accepting an offer.

As reported to Council in [March 2020](#), it is anticipated an increasing proportion of future federal-provincial housing investment will be directed to portable rent subsidies. Funding is allocated on a “use it or lose it” basis, making it essential for the Region to fill program spaces efficiently to help as many residents as possible. The new offer process will allow portable benefits to be posted online and applicants to express interest in them.

The province is also developing new regulations for Service Managers' housing access systems, as outlined to Council in [September 2020](#), that may require the wait list to be used to offer additional types of housing assistance. While details are not yet available, implementing the new offer process will allow the Region to effectively provide applicants with information about new programs as they become available.



## **Enhancements to the administration of the wait list support key objectives in the 2019 to 2023 Corporate Strategic Plan and the 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan**

Implementing the new offer process supports key activities identified in the 2019 to 2023 Corporate Strategic Plan related to delivering and promoting affordable housing by supporting residents in accessing affordable housing options. It also aligns with the Region's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness plan, supporting the goals of helping people find and keep housing and strengthening the homelessness and housing stability system, and was an identified action in the [2021 to 2022 workplan](#) endorsed by Council in [June 2021](#).

### **5. Financial**

The one-time cost to implement the add-on module to support the new offer process is estimated at \$44,200. This amount covers training, documentation, technical support during the go-live period, and post-implementation support. Implementation will be funded through the existing Housing Services budget. In addition, there will be an increase to the annual licensing cost for the existing software system of approximately \$8,000 per year, which can also be absorbed within the approved budget.

### **6. Local Impact**

Moving to the online applicant portal and new offer process will benefit applicants in all the Region's local cities, towns and township through improved communication and more control over their applications and housing offers. Community housing providers across York Region will also benefit from streamlining wait list administration and a more efficient way to identify wait list applicants when they have vacancies.

### **7. Conclusion**

Implementing the applicant portal and new offer process will improve service for applicants and allow community housing providers, including Housing York Inc., to offer units more efficiently to interested applicants. The new offer process will empower applicants to make informed decisions about their housing options. Transitioning to the online portal will also enable the Region to focus on providing direct assistance to applicants instead of managing paper files. These changes will improve outcomes for applicants, align with the recommendations made through the comprehensive review of the subsidized housing wait list, and support the goals of the 10-Year Housing and Homelessness plan.

---

For more information on this report, please contact Kathy Milsom, General Manager, Housing Services at 1-877-464-9675 ext. 72091. Accessible formats or communication supports are available upon request.



Recommended by:

**Katherine Chislett**

Commissioner of Community and Health Services



Approved for Submission:

**Bruce Macgregor**

Chief Administrative Officer

August 10, 2021

#12692729