

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of Committee of the Whole

From: Katherine Chislett
Commissioner of Community and Health Services

Date: June 2, 2023

Re: Homelessness in York Region

York Region is one of 47 Service Managers across Ontario responsible for the planning, development, implementation and delivery of housing and homelessness services as required by the *Housing Services Act, 2011*. As Service Manager, the Region administers and delivers homelessness prevention and housing stability supports, including funding for community agencies to provide services. The Region is also responsible for managing emergency and transitional housing, delivered in partnership with non-profit agencies. These collective efforts are aimed at helping people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness to find and keep housing and to achieve housing stability.

As reported to Council in [June 2022](#), a Homelessness Service System Plan will be developed in consultation with stakeholders as a key component of the next 10-year Housing and Homelessness Plan coming forward for approval in 2024

The Plan will consider the current landscape as well as the longer-term needs of York Region residents, including creating more emergency, transitional and affordable housing. Emphasis will be placed on priority areas including homelessness prevention, early intervention, housing stability, and designing a coordinated system response needed to address the issue holistically.

This memorandum provides some of the data obtained so far in support of developing the system plan. It sheds light on the complexity and the critical state of homelessness and is intended to stimulate discussions among stakeholders and inform the development of the service system plan.

It is imperative to understand the underlying causes and implications of the current state to work towards solutions

As the Region addresses the growing and complex needs of people experiencing and at risk of homelessness, it is imperative to understand the underlying causes and implications of the current state to work toward solutions. With rising housing costs, a scarcity of deeply affordable housing options, and the far-reaching impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for immediate attention to homelessness has reached critical levels. On [March 23, 2023](#), York Region Council joined the Association of Municipalities Ontario in calling on the provincial government to do more to end homelessness and recognize homelessness is becoming a crisis throughout the province. The Province announced in its 2023 Budget that it increased its total Homelessness Prevention Program funding to municipalities by \$202 million.

Lack of housing affordability continues to be a key issue for York Region residents and is a roadblock to reducing homelessness

Housing supply has not kept pace with population growth. Like other urban centres, York Region is seeing increasing housing unaffordability including unaffordable levels of rents. Prior reports have detailed housing affordability issues in York Region, most recently in [May 2022](#), with an updated report to be shared in June 2023. Council also declared a housing crisis in [February 2021](#).

From York Region's Spring 2023 Community Opinion Report, the cost of housing was among the top five single most important issues cited by York Region residents.

- The [average rent for all unit types of purpose-built apartments](#) as reported by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation for York Region in 2022 was \$1,489, up 9% from 2019. The current asking prices for York Region rents are approximately 30% higher than the average rents Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation reports. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation average rents are typically well below market rates because CMHC surveys purpose-built rental stock, which tends to be older than rental units in condominiums, including units rented for years at much lower amounts
- The limited supply of rental housing is contributing to higher rents and the challenges with accessing housing. In 2022, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation reported the average vacancy rate for purpose-built rentals in York Region at 1%, well below the 3% benchmark for a healthy rental market
- The 2021 census shows the Region had the highest proportion of renter and owner households spending 30% or more of their gross income on housing costs in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area
- The cost for room rentals in shared accommodation across the Region range from \$800 to \$1,000 per month, well out of reach for people on Ontario Works (a maximum of \$390/month for a single person provided for housing costs) or the Ontario Disability

Support Program (a maximum of \$522/month for a single person provided for housing costs)

Continuously rising cost of living is leading to more residents relying on financial assistance and social supports to make ends meet

In 2022, annual inflation as measured by [Statistics Canada's consumer price index](#) ranged from 5.7% to 7.9% in Ontario.

The [Ontario Living Wage Network](#) calculated the Greater Toronto Area's living wage rate, which is the minimum income level required to enable an individual to afford adequate shelter, food and other basic necessities, was \$23.15 an hour in 2022. This is the highest living wage in the province due primarily to the high costs of food and shelter.

The following trends contribute to an increased need for financial assistance and social supports:

- From 2018 to 2023, the number of York Region residents receiving Ontario Works benefits increased by 55% from 10,651 to 16,467. A single person on Ontario Works receives a total of \$733 for both basic needs and housing costs. These rates are set by the Province and have not increased since 2018.
- In [Feed Ontario's 2022 Hunger Report](#), 587,000 people accessed a food bank in Ontario, visiting more than 4.3 million times between April 1, 2021 and March 31, 2022. This is a 15% increase in the number of people going to a food bank, and a 42% increase in the number of visits. Between January 2022 and September 2022, the number accessing food banks increased 24% over the previous year, with 1 in 3 people being first-time visitors.
- York Region Public Health has published its annual [Nutritious Food Basket survey](#). This tool calculates the cost of healthy eating for families and individuals. For 2022, the survey found healthy eating is not affordable for low-income households in the Region. For example, a family of four whose main income is Ontario Works would have to spend 40% of their income to buy food. The most recent Canadian Income Survey, in 2020, found approximately 15% of York Region households experienced food insecurity in the past year.

The 2021 Point-in-Time Count in York Region revealed several key trends regarding homelessness in the Region

The [2021 Point-in-Time Count](#) in York Region was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and required a change in methodology that scaled back the scope and reach of the count to comply with public health guidelines. For example, fewer locations were visited to ensure safe physical distancing. Despite this, the 2021 count found 329 people experiencing homelessness

between June 1 and 2, 2021. In comparison, 389 people were counted in 2018, and 263 in 2016.

Point-in-Time counts are known to significantly undercount people experiencing hidden homelessness. [The Ontario Report of the Expert Advisory Panel on Homelessness in 2015](#) estimated up to 80% of homelessness is considered hidden or provisionally accommodated across Canada.

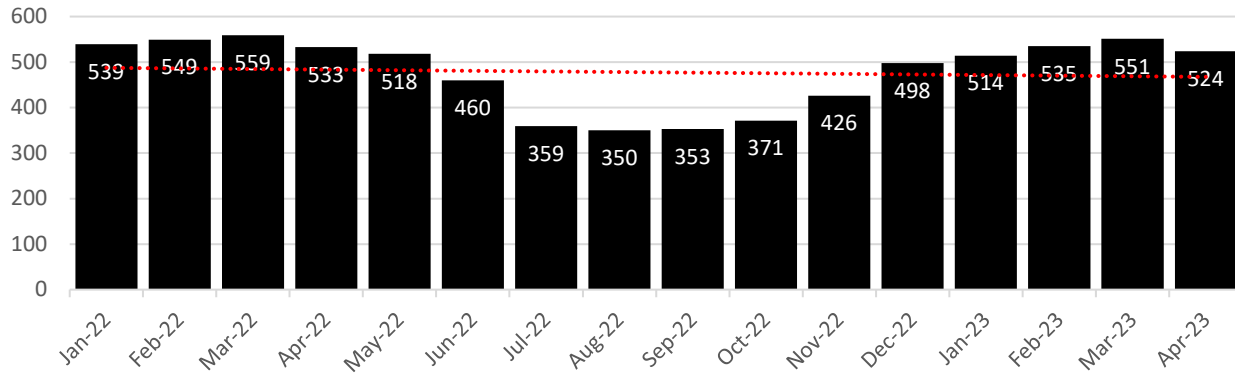
The 2021 count found:

- Almost 22% of survey respondents reported insufficient income for housing as their top reason for experiencing homelessness (other reasons included unfit/unsafe housing, family breakdown, abuse or conflict with spouse/partner, and landlord/tenant conflict)
- Rates of mental health issues among people experiencing homelessness who were surveyed, increased from 48% in 2018 to 64% in 2021
- The rate of chronic homelessness continues to increase. In the 2021 count, 53% of survey respondents self-identified as chronically homeless, meaning being homeless for longer than six months in the past year, compared to 45% in 2018 and 33% in 2016. 60% of chronically homeless people in 2021 were men
- Men made up the majority of people experiencing homelessness, while members of the LGBTQ2S+ community, persons who self-identified as Black or Indigenous were overrepresented among the Region's total population

York Region program data confirms the number of people experiencing homelessness in the Region is not decreasing

Trends on York Region's By Name List (a real-time list of known individuals experiencing homelessness who have connected with a service) have remained constant since January 2022. This shows even as people receive supports and leave the list, other individuals in urgent need are constantly and consistently being added to the list (See Figure 1).

Figure 1
Number of Unique People on York Region's By-Name List,
January 2022 – April 2023



Source: HIFIS, version 4 as of May 26, 2023

Data reflect the number of unique people experiencing homelessness during each calendar month

Persons experiencing homelessness in more than one month are reflected more than once (i.e., counted in each month they experienced homelessness)

Monthly By-Name list may vary by report extraction date based on retrospective housing history updates in HIFIS

The number of people identified as experiencing chronic homelessness has also been increasing, from 124 people in 2019 to 202 people in 2022. People experiencing chronic homelessness tend to have more complex and intense needs related to mental and physical health issues, addictions, legal and justice issues, and discrimination. Chronic homelessness is defined as people who have been experiencing homelessness for six months or longer in the past year or someone who has experienced homelessness for 18+ months in the past three years.

Data from Access York shows a 22% increase in calls for homelessness services or supports information or space in emergency and transitional housing, from 4,888 calls in 2021 to 6,003 calls in 2022. Calls regarding rent and utility assistance, and emergency and transitional housing ranked first and second for the highest number of inquiries.

Through York Region's Emergency Housing Central Intake Line, an average of 745 calls were received monthly between September 2022, when the service was first implemented, and April 2023. During this period, 85% of calls were to request an emergency housing bed.

Outreach Services are currently supporting approximately 45 unsheltered people to find appropriate housing York Region's 24/7 Emergency Housing Central Intake Line started in September 2022. Since implementation, approximately 35% of callers were not able to access emergency housing. If there are no available emergency housing beds, individuals are provided with information or other resources, which can include a referral to another emergency housing location and transportation.

When people experiencing homelessness cannot access a safe, suitable housing option, they may be forced to live unsheltered, including in an encampment. Unsheltered refers to a person experiencing homelessness with no shelter, and an encampment refers to outdoor locations where people experiencing homelessness may shelter that are not intended for human habitation, such as public parks.

In York Region, there has been an increase in the number of people living unsheltered. Between 2021 and 2022, York Region’s Outreach Services saw a 39% increase (97 to 135 people) in the number of unsheltered individuals accessing support. Outreach Services are currently supporting approximately 45 unsheltered people to find appropriate housing.

The need for housing and homelessness services and supports continues to increase in York Region

The caseload for York Region’s homelessness programs increased by 6% between 2020 and 2022, from 4,448 people provided with support and assistance in 2020 to 4,701 people in 2022.

York Region has 185 emergency housing beds and 48 transitional housing beds, with 10 new transitional housing beds to be added in the Town of Georgina in Summer 2023 (see Table 1). From November to April of every year, York Region’s emergency housing system increases bed capacity to provide additional space during the cold weather season. In 2022, 1,239 unique individuals accessed emergency and transitional housing, including the Region’s temporary Self-Isolation and COVID-19 Transitional shelters (closed in April 2022 and July 2022 respectively) and seasonal shelters.

**Table 1
York Region’s Emergency and Transitional Housing System Capacity (May 2023)**

Service Provider	Type of Facility	# Total Beds
Emergency Housing		
Belinda’s Place	Women	28
Leeder Place	Family	60
Porter Place	Men	30
Inn From the Cold	Men and Women	25
Sutton Youth Services	Youth	16
Youth Hub	Youth	14
Kevin’s Place	Youth	12
Total Emergency Housing		185
Transitional Housing		
Belinda’s Place	Women	9
Sutton Youth Services	Youth	10

Service Provider	Type of Facility	# Total Beds
Youth Hub	Youth	11
Passage House	Men	18
The Bridge	Youth	8
(Expected to open Summer 2023)		
Total Transitional Housing		56
Seasonal Shelters		
Blue Door's Mosaic Interfaith Out of the Cold		26
Total Seasonal		26

Source: HIFIS 4

Data Notes:

* Leeder Place Family Shelter has 15 family rooms with multiple beds. Some beds may be vacant depending on the family size

** Kevin's Place is being used as a COVID-19 self-isolation facility as of May 1, 2022

The high number of individuals and families seeking support has meant York Region's emergency and transitional housing facilities are consistently operating at, or near, full capacity. Combined with the inability to access homelessness supports and services, this may push people to seek shelter outdoors, increasing the visibility of homelessness as well as its complexity.

The average length of stay in emergency housing in York Region nearly doubled between 2018 and 2022, from approximately 25 days to 49 days

The emergency and transitional housing system is meant to be a short-term shelter option for people experiencing homelessness. It is designed to offer temporary accommodation and a range of life stabilization supports and resources to assist people to recover from crisis and transition to stable permanent housing.

Primarily due to the lack of affordable housing options, people are staying longer in emergency housing. The average length of stay in emergency housing in York Region nearly doubled between 2018 and 2022, from approximately 25 days to 49 days. Longer stays mean there is less capacity overall in the system to provide emergency housing and fewer people are transitioning to longer term housing. Among residents supported in emergency and transitional housing during 2022, 31% (381) transitioned to longer-term housing in the broader community compared to 41% (543) in 2021.

More applicants are being housed on the subsidized housing wait list than before however with 2,421 new applications to the subsidized housing waitlist in 2022, the need continues to outpace supply

In 2022, the Region housed 629 applicants from the subsidized housing wait list, the highest number of households housed in a single year since the wait list was established in the early 2000s. Of the 629 applicants housed, 272 (43%) accepted offers for a subsidized unit, while 356

(57%) accepted a portable benefit under the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit or the York Region Portable Housing Benefit.

In 2022, York Region received and approved 2,421 new applications to the subsidized housing waitlist; on average between 2008 and 2022, about 371 applicants were housed annually, while the wait list grew by an average of 645 applicants each year.

Upstream homelessness supports and services are increasingly being accessed by people at risk of homelessness

The number of residents who accessed the Region’s homelessness prevention and housing stability programs increased by 7% from 1,852 in 2021 to 1,979 in 2022. York Region’s homelessness programs and supports are designed to help people at risk of homelessness before they reach the point where emergency housing is required. This data is an indication more residents are increasingly at risk of becoming homeless.

York Region’s Homelessness Prevention Program and Housing Stability Program help eligible residents experiencing or at risk of homelessness with financial assistance for rent, utilities and other housing costs to stabilize their housing and prevent homelessness. As shown in Table 2, the programs are very effective at keeping people housed, even though the number of people supported has increased.

Table 2
Number of people provided financial assistance by York Region (2021 to 2022)

	Number of people that received financial assistance		Housing Retention After Six Months
	2021	2022	
<i>Housing Stability Program – people receiving Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program</i>	744	784	98%
<i>York Region Homelessness Prevention Program – people not receiving any provincial income supports</i>	245	262	68%

Council approved a 2023 budget of \$31.8 million for programs directly addressing homelessness plus an additional \$12.8 million to improve critical social infrastructure

In [February 2023](#), York Region Council approved a gross expenditure budget of \$31.8 million for programs that directly address homelessness, with \$13.3 million funded through regional tax levy. This equates to approximately \$26 per capita on homelessness services and supports.

Council also approved an additional [\\$12.8 million](#) for two years, provisionally funded by annual draws from the Pandemic and Recovery Management Reserve Fund, in February 2023. This funding will be put towards improving critical social infrastructure to address issues impacting residents related to housing, homelessness, community investments and mental health. Of this amount, \$4.1 million was allocated to directly address the needs of residents experiencing homelessness. So far this funding has allowed York Region to:

- Extend Inn From The Cold shelter operations from seasonal to year-round operations in 2023, adding 25 ongoing emergency housing beds to York Region emergency housing capacity. These beds were historically seasonal shelter beds, closed between April and October
- Continue and expand the Community Paramedicine Outreach Response Team pilot. Many unsheltered people have untreated acute and/or chronic medical conditions due to barriers to accessing medical care resulting in costly emergency services. Community Paramedicine Outreach Response Team is a partnership of physicians, Community Paramedics and Outreach Workers who deliver mobile, low-barrier primary care, mental health and addictions services to people experiencing homelessness. From March 1, 2021, to April 30, 2023, the Team provided services over 1,800 times to 676 unique people, either experiencing homelessness or at emergency and transitional housing buildings and in encampments
- Initiate work to establish a new heat relief program, and begin to provide housing stability solutions to people from the By Name List through the Region's expansion of the Rapid Rehousing program

In [September 2022](#), York Region committed \$1 million to the Inn From The Cold capital fundraising campaign to build a new emergency and transitional housing building to replace their existing site. The building will feature 26 emergency housing beds and 18 transitional beds and is expected to open by early 2025.

Regional Council approved the replacement of Porter Place through its [capital budget](#) since 2016. Porter Place is the Region's only year-round men's emergency housing facility, and is reaching the end of its useful life. The proposed new facility will be fully accessible with 68 beds, 37 emergency housing and 31 transitional housing beds, for men— more than double the capacity at Porter Place. The building will accommodate a range of services to support life stabilization and skills development, and to provide suitable space for community programs. The proposed new facility is currently in the planning approvals phase of development.

Ontario increased Provincial Homelessness Prevention Program funding by 77% to \$36.7 million in 2023, from \$20.8 million in 2022

The 2021 Ontario Auditor General's report found the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing allocated provincial homelessness funding to municipalities based on outdated data; using updated data, the Ontario Auditor General found York Region should have received

approximately 40% more funding. York Region received \$12.28 per capita in provincial funding, putting it in the bottom 10 of the 47 service managers.

In the 2023 provincial budget, the Province increased total Homelessness Prevention Program funding by \$202 million. As a result, York Region's allocation increased to \$36.7 million. This is an increase of 77%, or up to \$15.8 million, from the 2022 to 2023 funding allocation of \$20.8 million. The additional funding provided by the provincial Homelessness Prevention Program will help to address the shortfall identified by the Ontario Auditor General's report.

Staff will present a Homelessness Service System Plan for York Region to Council in 2024.

York Region's Homelessness Service System Plan will focus on responding to the immediate and longer-term needs of York Region residents. The system plan will be developed using a data-informed approach guiding the Region's homelessness investment in the coming years. Engagement with local municipalities, community partners, and people with lived experience will be key in developing the system plan.

The Region is not alone in having to respond to unprecedented growth in homelessness and new issues:

- The Region of Waterloo is also developing a Homelessness Master Plan that will focus on longer-term priorities and investments that prevent and end homelessness. To address the recent increase in homelessness, Waterloo Region funded [a new hybrid shelter model](#), opening 50 tiny homes in a community hub on municipal property, where people living unsheltered will be prioritized. The Region has 458 adult shelter housing spaces (including the 50 tiny homes), 38 youth shelter spaces (10 of which are overflow that will close at the end of June), and 80 adult transitional housing spaces.
- The City of London announced its [transformational plan](#) in 2023. The plan will establish 24/7 homelessness shelter hubs throughout the city, each serving up to 30 people, and will add 600 new housing units over three years with supports to help people who were experiencing homelessness find and remain successfully housed. London estimates there were [1,868 people experiencing homelessness](#) by the end of 2022, an increase from 966 people in 2020. London currently has 305 emergency shelter beds (20 of these are rooms to accommodate families) and 110 transitional rooms, co-located with emergency shelters.
- The Regional Municipality of Peel has [identified the need for 590 emergency and 870 transitional housing beds](#), well above their current supply of 442 emergency and 72 transitional beds. Peel Region recently approved the development of a permanent, integrated model of care to provide healthcare services to Peel's homeless population. [Implementation of this program](#) for up to 19 months would cost approximately \$6.6 million.

- In Hamilton, [City staff reported](#) homelessness increased from 1,024 people in 2020 to 1,536 by the end of 2022. In [March 2023](#), staff recommended proactive approaches and a comprehensive set of investments for consideration in 2023 and future years that would address gaps and opportunities in their homelessness system. An additional \$20 million per year of municipal investment has been requested to reach the City's goal of ending chronic homelessness by 2025. If fully resourced, this would create approximately 1,400 homes for people exiting homelessness and add 240 more emergency housing beds to its existing stock of 408 shelter beds.
- Throughout the City of Toronto's recent budget deliberations, there was an emphasis on how to address homelessness in the city. Pre-pandemic, the [City of Toronto](#) had 6,000 shelter beds, which increased to 9,000 shelter beds in 2023. The number of people experiencing homelessness in Toronto has increased by [1,300 people to 10,800](#) from 2022 to February 2023. Toronto is facing a shortfall of approximately \$317 million to continue operating its emergency and transitional housing

Partnership and collaboration is the key to addressing homelessness

Homelessness is a growing and complex challenge requiring collective commitment, planning, ongoing education, and partnerships. It requires a whole-of-community approach, including recognizing and leveraging collaborations and partnerships with other systems and organizations that impact homelessness.

Addressing homelessness also requires evidence-based-decision-making. Staff will continue to gather data, monitor new approaches in other jurisdictions for applicability to the Region, and will continue to engage with local municipalities, service providers and other stakeholders to develop a York Region Homelessness Service System Plan for Council approval in 2024.



Katherine Chislett
Commissioner of Community and Health Services



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