

Region of Waterloo
Community Services
Housing Services

To: Community and Health Services Committee
Meeting Date: September 12, 2023
Report Title: The Plan to End Chronic Homelessness Key Findings

1. Recommendation

For Information.

2. Purpose / Issue:

To provide an update on the work completed since the first update to Council in April 2023 on The Plan to End Chronic Homelessness (The Plan) and provide the resulting Key Findings Report. In addition, this report will set the stage for the final recommendations to be shared with Regional Council on November 7, 2023.

3. Strategic Plan:

This report addresses Strategic Priority 1: Homes for All, in the Region’s newly approved Corporate Strategic Plan 2023-2027. We will invest in affordable homes and economic opportunity for all that are part of inclusive and environmentally sustainable communities.

4. Report Highlights:

- The Mid-Project Key Findings Report, attached as Appendix A, summarizes the current state of the Housing Stability System in Waterloo Region and compiles the feedback received from the Community Engagement phase of The Plan. Key learnings from the broader community, the Co-creator group and the Social Development Centre Waterloo Region (SDCWR) “Lived Expertise Prototyping Project” are outlined below:
 - It is necessary to integrate people, with living/lived experience of homelessness, into developing transformational solutions that address root causes of chronic homelessness.

- The important prototype from the SDCWR “Lived Expertise Prototyping Project” is building relationships among Region staff, service providers and lived experts to inform and implement The Plan. More time is needed to build trust and safety for people with living/lived experiences of homelessness to work with Housing Stability System partners.
- There are accelerating levels of worker burn-out that threaten the collapse of the Housing Stability System.
- Homelessness is an equity issue. Currently, the Reconciliation, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (REDI) lens in the Housing Stability System is not fulsome and more engagement is necessary with marginalized groups (e.g. Indigenous peoples, seniors, 2SLGBTQIA+, African/Black/Caribbean communities, people with disabilities).
- There is a rising level of community awareness as well as complexity of opinions of housing instability and chronic homelessness, and its negative effects on individuals, families, and communities in Waterloo Region.
- Housing alone will not end chronic homelessness. Healthcare must be further integrated into the housing journey. Housing outcomes must be supported in the health journey of individuals experiencing chronic homelessness.
- The Region of Waterloo’s Supportive Housing program accommodates approximately 570 individuals, consistently encountering maximum capacity. The program needs to double in size to meet current needs.
- The hyper-financialized capitalist model of housing cannot be reconciled with housing as a human right.

5. Background:

As part of the Interim Housing Solutions strategy approved by Council in August 2022, staff were directed to create a Plan to End Chronic Homelessness.

As outlined in CSD-HOU-23-011, The Plan required a new way of working to actualize a community-centred approach:

- The SDCWR “Lived Expertise Prototyping Project ” was subsequently funded to provide a lived expertise lens on unsheltered and hidden homelessness.

- A dedicated group of Co-Creators was established to support decision-making throughout the process. The Co-Creator Group is a collection of key system interest-holders, including SDCWR, providing guidance, input, and support to the Core Team to create key recommendations for The Plan.

Recent developments in The Plan efforts entail the Needs Assessment and Community Engagement phases along with the SDCWR’s “Lived Expertise Prototyping Project.”

The Needs Assessment phase consisted of an environmental scan overviewing the current Housing Stability System (HSS), as well as a survey of system experts (Delphi Survey), and interviews with key informants. The Plan’s Community Engagement phase engaged the broader community through a public survey hosted on the Regional “EngageWR” web page, pop-ups at community sites, events and festivals and the facilitation of in-person and virtual “engagement labs”. These engagement efforts resulted in the distribution of 1,000 flyers and postcards throughout the community, over 55 engagement lab attendees, over 150 connections at community pop-ups, and almost 500 survey responses.

The SDCWR “Lived Expertise Prototyping Project” went through a process of “Co-Initiating”, “Co-sensing” and “Co-creating” (see Appendix A) to listen, understand, and create dialogue on chronic homelessness shaped and led by lived experts.

In August 2023, Community Engagement outputs were synthesized into key themes. This synthesis and the Needs Assessment output, along with the SDCWR “Lived Experts Prototyping Project” are the basis of the Mid-Project Key Findings Report attached as Appendix A. The Key Learnings from the work thus far are grouped into 4 categories:

1. Centering Lived Experience
2. The Housing Stability System
3. The Community
4. Causes of Homelessness

These Key Learnings will inform recommendations in the forthcoming Plan to End Chronic Homelessness including policy levers, integration and financial models, resulting in a comprehensive roadmap for 2024 (See Appendix A for the complete list of Learnings).

6. Communication and Engagement with Area Municipalities and the Public

Area Municipalities: Communication and consultation with area municipalities was a targeted part of engagement efforts. The community engagement phase started with a pop-up booth at the All Councils meeting on June 23, 2023 to gather input from

Regional and area municipality councils. As the project continued through the engagement phase dedicated engagement sessions were facilitated for area municipality staff, and a project update was provided to Regional council and area municipalities through email.

Public: To support the community engagement phase, a multi-channel communications campaign launched at the end of June and ran for five weeks until the end of July. Broad messaging encouraged residents to “Join the conversation”, “Share your voice,” and participate in community engagement activities. The EngageWR project webpage served as a landing page for all traffic. Communication efforts resulted in over 850 social media engagements, 4,000 website visits, and an 80 percent e-news open rate. As work towards developing The Plan recommendations takes place, communication strategies will continue to be used to keep the community and area municipalities engaged and informed.

7. Financial Implications:

The financial implications of The Plan recommendations will be presented to Council for their direction and the approved recommendations will be incorporated into the 2024 budget process.

8. Conclusion / Next Steps:

There is a need for urgent, transformative change within the Housing Stability System in the Region of Waterloo. Since January 2020, the number of people experiencing chronic homelessness in Waterloo Region has increased by 129%. If these numbers continue to rise, it will approximately triple the current number of chronically homeless residents by 2028. This is a concerning reality for the entire community as well as for workers in the Housing Stability System due to the accelerating levels of worker burn-out that continues to threaten the collapse of the system.

By the end of 2023, approximately \$40 million will be invested into the Housing Stability System in service areas such as outreach, prevention/diversion, emergency shelter, supportive housing, etc. Based on the current state and future projection, this investment will not keep pace with the growing resources and supports needed to end chronic homelessness. Given that housing is a key social determinant of health, chronic homelessness is a cause for public health concern and intersectoral action is vital.

The key findings of community engagement provide a foundation for informed decision-making and upcoming recommendations for The Plan. The work of The Plan will require the balancing of many intersecting tensions as further outlined in Appendix A.

Next steps call for immediate action, planning, and collaboration including:

- Returning to Council in November 2023 for 2024 budget recommendations of significant investments required related to implementation of The Plan
- Continuation of Co-Creator group to create recommendations
- Compiling learnings of SDCWR's lived expertise prototypes
- Continued development and diversification of community partners' voices
- Co-implementation of The Plan through community processes

See Appendix A for a detailed list of next steps.

9. Attachments:

Appendix A: Mid-Project Key Findings

Appendix B: Presentation (to be distributed on addendum)

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