

Urgent Petition: Demanding Action to Address Housing Insecurity and Community Safety in Waterloo Region

To: Regional Chair Karen Redman and Waterloo Regional Councilor Berry Vrbanovic,

Councilor Colleen James, Councilor Michael Harris, Councilor Kari Williams, Councilor Robert Deutschmann, Councilor Dorothy McCabe, Councilor Jim Erb, Councilor Chantal Huinink, Councilor Jan Ligget, Councilor Doug Craig, Councilor Pam Wolf, Councilor Sue Foxton, Councilor Joe Nowak, Councilor Natasha Salonen, and Councilor Sandy Shantz

We, the undersigned residents of Waterloo Region, urgently demand immediate and decisive action from Waterloo Regional Council to confront the escalating housing crisis and prioritize community safety. Infrastructure construction and development cannot come at the cost of violating fundamental human rights and dignity. Our community is in crisis, and the time for half-measures and empty promises has passed. As concerned citizens deeply invested in the well-being and safety of our community, we demand our leadership take urgent action to address these critical issues:

#1. Freeze budget increases for Waterloo Regional Police Services (WRPS) for at least 5 years and reallocate funding to essential public services supports:

The WRPS categorically causes systemic harm within our region. WRPS has killed 2 Black men in less than four years and three people in crisis in less than ten years. Black people are 4x more likely to be stopped by WRPS and 3x more likely to experience use-of-force incidents than white people. Ample data from the Service's own reports reveal the prominence of systemic racism, particularly anti-Black racism. Distress calls to the police result in use-of-force incidents more than all other calls to 911. WRPS has an unfounded rate of 27% for sexual assault cases, which is nearly 10% more than the National Average. Since 2017, WRPS haven't cleared more than 39% of their occurrences – meaning 60% of the time, WRPS do nothing about the calls they receive. WRPS waste time and resources evicting unhoused community members and forcing them to move from location to location, sometimes as often as every 24 hours. It is reprehensible that the WRPS is aware of these monumental issues, yet continually fails to sufficiently address them in a safe, accountable, reasonable, transparent, and timely manner.

Disappointingly, Waterloo Region has consistently prioritized excessive funding for the police, with their budget skyrocketing exponentially each year, while neglecting these crucial issues and failing to prioritize meaningful systemic change.

The community of Waterloo Region demands that Regional Council must: stop rewarding and enabling WRPS for their incompetence immediately; stop increasing the police budget yearly; reallocate a portion of the overfunded police budget toward essential public services and resources in the community, particularly prioritizing the housing crisis; and implement non-police, community-led approaches to safety and well-being such as community crisis support service. Our community needs to adopt both a supports-first model and a housing-first approach with wrap-around supports, rather than relying on the dangerous policing-first model employed by the unaccountable WRPS.

#2. Halt transit hub construction at 100Vic (100 Victoria St. N.) until there are sufficient solutions for all current and future encampment residents: In Waterloo Region, over 1,700 people are currently unhoused. Of those, approximately 579 people are chronically experiencing houselessness. As a result, encampments have emerged as a valid survival response by those facing housing insecurity, barriers, and/or inadequate shelter conditions.

While promising enhanced connectivity, currently planned construction at 100Vic can only come at the expense of displacing and dispossessing vulnerable community members who are still looking for viable alternatives. We call on the Region of Waterloo to halt all proceedings at the 100Vic encampment related to the construction of the King-Victoria transit hub indefinitely until sufficient and sustainable housing solutions are in place for individuals experiencing houselessness in Downtown Kitchener. This includes: stop using Regional funding to surveil, sabotage and evict encampment residents; stop the constant security surveillance of the residents and reallocate these funds to housing supports; and stop the policing of community-driven solutions and instead collaborate with community. demand a comprehensive plan and the necessary resources to prioritize all community members' dignity, safety, well-being, and self-determination.

#3. Conduct a meaningful review and overhaul of the shelter system and community housing crisis: There are 8,325 people on the wait-list for Waterloo Region Community Housing, a wait of seven to 10 years. Indigenous people, men, and seniors are overrepresented on the Region's PATHS list of people experiencing houselessness.

The current state of the emergency shelter system, interim housing, transitional housing, and subsidized housing in Waterloo Region is unacceptable and requires fundamental restructuring to meet the diverse needs of individuals experiencing housing insecurity. Reviewing shelter systems is not a new idea—Barrie conducted one in 2019, Toronto in 2022. In both cases, emergency service provision was demonstrated to be an important part of the overall housing continuum and purported plans for increasing the efficacy and efficiency of emergency service provision. Waterloo Region has a duty to ensure they are providing sufficient staff

training and support to ensure that our shelters operate free from punitive measures, focusing on respect for the rights, dignity, and care of all service users. We call for an immediate and comprehensive review of the shelter system in Waterloo Region, with a clear commitment to implementing safe, person-centered service provision enhancements and tangible proactive measures

As Waterloo Region residents and voters, we believe in upholding the values of equity, compassion, care, and community engagement. We are appalled by the lack of critical action and accountability from our elected officials to meet the needs of the most vulnerable members of our community. We refuse to accept a future where infrastructure projects come at the expense of addressing the urgent needs of our most vulnerable neighbours. We stand united in urging Waterloo Regional Council to prioritize humanity and take decisive action to confront community safety and the housing crisis by addressing the structural barriers and causes of these dire issues head-on.

Therefore, we call upon the members of Waterloo Regional Council to listen to your constituents and implement these demands immediately. Failure to act decisively will only exacerbate the suffering of our most vulnerable community members, something our community will remember during the next municipal election. We refuse to accept lip service and empty gestures instead of substantive action; please take action now!

Sincerely,

Your Constituent.

FightBack! KW

Queer Youth Defense

Alan Ryan People's Defense Brigade

Sex Worker Action Network of Waterloo Region

Black Fox Brigade

GroundUp Waterloo Region

Laurier Student Workers

Agenda Item 6.1 - Katherine Wombwell

Climate Justice University of Waterloo

Community Fridge