



## **Evaluation of Erb's Road Hybrid Emergency Shelter- Follow Up at 1 year** **Executive Summary**

### **Background and Purpose**

This evaluation took place within the shifting context of homelessness. The number of people living unsheltered have continued to increase, the acuity of mental health and addictions issues have grown, and the number of available Emergency Shelter spaces has fluctuated. As such, The Region of Waterloo initiated the Interim Housing Strategy and subsequently, The Plan to End Chronic Homelessness.

Launching April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2023, the Erb's Road Hybrid Emergency Shelter (ERHES) operates as a Hybrid Emergency Shelter and provides a safe, temporary place with 50 individual cabins where people stay while they work to find housing with support from The Working Centre (TWC). Building upon the 4- month Evaluation, this 1- Year Evaluation assesses the impact of ERHES and makes recommendations on the future, as the original intended operating timeframe was two years, with a commitment to evaluate before the two-year mark to determine the impact.

### **Results & Key Findings**

**Goal 1: Participants have stability and support for recovery:** From the participant feedback, ERHES has supported a mostly positive environment for recovery (62% positive). From the Lived Expertise (LE) Panel, "multiple people were able to stabilize and move further along their recovery journeys because they had access to specialized support and control over who could access their personal space". Although there was mostly positive feedback here, the LE Panel highlighted some challenges such as with the "no guest policy". As well, feedback from staff highlighted ongoing challenges with participant mental health and substance use reinforcing a need for increased supports in these areas.

**Goal #2: Participants Achieve Housing-Focused Outcomes:** ERHES has on-site dedicated Housing and Outreach workers who ensure every participant has an active housing plan and reinforce the temporary nature of this Emergency Shelter. Participant feedback shows an increase in active work on housing planning. External partners indicated that ERHES has taken a lead role in ensuring that people are moving towards "Document Ready" status with Housing Outreach Workers doing focused work in this area. At the 4-month initial Evaluation for ERHES, 3% of the total participants moved into permanent housing, which rose to 15% at the 1-year mark and rose again while drafting this report in July, 2024 to 18.4% or 19 individuals.

**Goal #3: ERHES Reasonably Supports the Safety of the Environment:** There is a remarkable consistency from participants in positive rating of 70% and 69% between the 1-year and 4-month Evaluations. ERHES has made progress in emphasizing the safety of the community while balancing the needs of individuals with deep traumas. The frequency and severity of incidents are less and staff have been quicker to recognize when people are not suited for the environment. Feedback highlighted the need for greater mental health and addiction supports, though the current processes for safety management and mitigation go a long way to maintain a net positive rating. Hoarding of personal belongings and fire hazards have been an ongoing area of focus, however, the work has begun to show improvement with support from Wilmot Fire. Participants

would benefit from increased storage space. This shouldn't overshadow the fact that participants do have safety concerns, and that incidents occur.

**Goal #4: ERHES Impact on Neighbourhood:** Waste Management and Paramedics highlighted a number of concerns such as trespassing, theft, and scavenging. Waste Management incurred significant costs to mitigate these issues along with staff time and resources. Areas of concern from residents and businesses were trespassing, loitering, and property theft, along with concerns about the lack of accountability of residents and feelings that ERHES participant rights trumped the rights of residents, businesses and their economic viability. As well, some residents and business did not feel their concerns were adequately addressed nor did they have proper forums of communication avenues.

**Goal #5: ERHES Impact on the Housing Stability System:** ERHES participant feedback found that 70% of participants found critical relief from their previous encampment as ERHES site was able to meet their basic needs. When comparing ERHES to other shelters, 64% indicated positive ratings, up 14% from the 4-month Evaluation. ERHES has been able to support 103 people from homelessness, mostly from encampments, since opening, with 71% indicating ERHES is an important resource for themselves and others in encampments. Anecdotally, people from encampments are highly marginalized, consistently having some of the highest needs with compounding complexities, carry the burdens of traumas, and come with pets. Many of these individuals have often found a place to shelter at ERHES to have their basic human rights met and had the opportunity to have support to find housing, with housing success noted for 19 participants (18.4%).

#### **Interim Housing Solutions Strategy**

Erb's Road Hybrid Emergency Shelter was originally proposed to Regional Council as a Hybrid shelter as part of the Interim Housing Solutions Strategy in Aug 2022, which was informed by a community engagement process, most notably gathering insights from about 100 individuals experiencing homelessness across the region, and most indicated they would be willing to relocate to an interim model such as an outdoor shelter. The Erb's Evaluation went back and found that Erb's Road Hybrid Emergency Shelter is providing exactly what those people from 2022 with living experience of unsheltered homelessness had indicated needed to be addressed in an innovative shelter resource that meets their needs. Those insights from 2022 identified:

- Reluctance to access Emergency Shelters for a variety of reasons, including violence, theft and lack of privacy, along with the restrictions faced by couples and those with pets.
- Being drawn to a sense of community and family that an encampment provides.
- People Seeking dignity, respect, washrooms, showers, electricity, food, water, and garbage removal at encampments.
- People seeking help to find and keep a home (life stabilization, affordability, own space), and are seeking support for mental health issues, substance use difficulties and connection with people they can trust

#### **Future of ERS Considerations**

**Working with the Township of Wilmot:** Sanitary servicing at the Erb's Road Hybrid Emergency Shelter is enabled by a holding tank which is emptied several times a week. The Building Code allows the Chief Building Official (CBO) of the municipality to approve a sanitary tank for this purpose and to allow for extensions of use of the tank. The CBO of Wilmot Township has extended the use of the tank from one year (allowed in the

Building Code) to two years. As the sanitary tank is not a long-term solution, Region staff have explored the opportunity to provide a permanent sanitary line from the Hybrid Shelter into the Waste Management Centre site as part of the redevelopment project, which will then carry those flows to the City of Waterloo's wastewater collection system.

**Waste Management:** In early planning stages of the Transfer Area Upgrade project beginning in 2026 which will notably upgrade traffic flow of the site. During this time, all truck and vehicular traffic will move through Gate 3 adjacent to ERHES from Erb's Road. This project presents health and safety concerns for the participants of the ERHES site.

### **The Emergency Shelter System**

Historically, the Region has had a reliance on temporary Emergency Shelter sites which has put a strain on the system, neighbourhoods and shelter occupants based on the opening and closing cycles that occur with the use of these temporary sites. Erb's Road Hybrid Emergency Shelter with a projected two-year operating timeframe, if not extended as a permanent site, continues this cycle and puts additional pressure on the Emergency Shelter system to transition and find alternative low-barrier spaces for individuals. With the implementation of the Plan to End Chronic Homelessness, wherever possible the Region is looking for opportunities to invest and support permanent options.

### **Erb's Road Hybrid Emergency Shelter Regional Council Recommendations**

The original intended operating timeframe for ERHES was two years, with a commitment to evaluate before the two-year mark (end of March 2025) to support Regional Council in a decision process. The following are the evaluation recommendations for Council with recommendation for ERHES improvements found in Appendix A.

**RECOMMENDATION: That Council ENDORSE Erb's Road Hybrid Emergency Shelter as a Permanent Emergency Shelter:** Participant and Lived Expertise feedback recommend that ERHES should NOT be closed as they view the site as a life saving intervention uniquely supporting Human Rights and Housing. With the success of ERHES, planning is underway for a second Hybrid Emergency Shelter similar to ERHES, pending a feasible site location;

**And** that Regional staff be directed to request a six-month extension related to waste water disposal at the Erb's Road Hybrid Emergency Shelter from the Chief Building Official (CBO) of the Township of Wilmot to accommodate the construction of the necessary infrastructure.

### **Summary & Conclusions**

A decision on the future of ERHES will be critically important to many. It is clear from the evaluation feedback that the Housing Stability System and people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, are getting great value from ERHES as many have found stability and safety and have been moving into permanent housing.

## **Appendix A: Recommendations for Improvements at ERHES**

**1) Continue to build on the Relational, Stability, and Recovery Successes:** Focus on increasing mental health and addiction supports on-site, including counselling, hoarding, trauma, tools for self-improvement and reinforce the skills of the staff teams

**2) Continue to progress with Safety Measures:** The work to balance the need to have low-barrier access with the safety of the participants is going in the right direction with continued attention.

**3) Community Engagement and Incident Response:** The Working Centre have offered a Community Engagement process which does not fully meet the needs and as well, accountability and incident response has room to improve. The Region and the Police will need to be significantly invested in supporting this community and all must make considerable efforts for this site to have long-term viability.

**4) Continue to Improve the Erb's Road Hybrid Emergency Shelter Participant Feedback and Response Mechanisms:** Numerous concerns were highlighted by participants indicating the need to further develop pathways to listen, acknowledge and have transparent discussions and responses.

## **Appendix B: Summary of Evaluation Markers**

### Summary of Evaluation

Individuals ERS supported from Encampments <b>103 +</b>	Believe ERS is Important for People from Encampment <b>71%</b> <i>Positive</i>	Comparing ERS to Previous Encampment <b>70%</b> Responded <i>Positively</i>
Have Help to Recover <b>62%</b> Responded <i>Positively</i>	Comparing ERS to Other Shelters <b>64%</b> Responded <i>Positively</i>	Feel Safe at ERS <b>69%</b> Responded <i>Positively</i>
Have Motivation to Find Housing <b>58%</b> Responded <i>Positively</i>	Have Moved From ERS into Housing <b>18%</b> April 2023- July 2024	Have Never Stayed in Shelters Before <b>14%</b>

## **Appendix C: Data Sources**

a) 14 ERHES Participant Surveys & interviews, Lived Expertise Review (35 interviews), 7 Staff interviews & surveys, 8 external partner surveys, 5 neighbour surveys, and 4 resident & business surveys.

b) Document review of Key Performance Indicators, Quarterly reports, Cabin inspections, Security Summaries, and Neighbour meetings.