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REGIONAL HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION PROGRAM UPDATE

The Community and Health Services Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendation contained in the following report dated April 28, 2010, from the Commissioner of Community and Health Services.

1. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that this report be received for information.

2. PURPOSE

This report provides Regional Council with an update on the following homelessness prevention initiatives: the Homelessness Prevention Program, the Rent Bank Program, and the Emergency Energy Fund.

3. BACKGROUND

The Homelessness Prevention Program provides one-time financial assistance to low income residents facing homelessness.

The Homelessness Prevention Program was established in 2001 as a pilot program to provide one-time financial assistance to low income individuals and families who were facing homelessness and were not in receipt of Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program assistance. The Program was approved by Council on May 2001, through the adoption of Clause No. 14 of Report No. 3 of the Community Services and Housing Committee.

The Salvation Army-Northridge Community Church, located in the Town of Newmarket, was selected to deliver the program to the community. In December 2002, Council approved the annualization of the program with a budget of \$200,000 through the adoption of Clause No. 4 of Report. No. 7 of the Community Services and Housing Committee. Subsequently in March 2003, the base funding was increased to \$250,000 to reflect the growing need and demand for assistance as approved by Council on March 25, 2003 through the adoption of Clause No. 2 of Report No. 4 of the Community Services and Housing Committee.

In 2009, funding for the Homelessness Prevention Program was enhanced. An additional \$250,000 in funding was provided annually under the Multi-Year Plan – Early Investment Option as approved by Council on March 26, 2009, Clause No. 2 of Report

No. 2 of the Community Services and Housing Committee. In order to expand the availability of the Homelessness Prevention Program to the southern area of the Region, Jewish Family & Child was selected to deliver the Program specifically to the south. The Salvation Army-Northridge Community Church in the Town of Newmarket continues to provide the Program to northern York Region.

The Homelessness Prevention Program, with a total funding allocation of \$500,000, continues to be a unique York Region program that provides wrap-around supports to vulnerable York Region residents. The Program provides funds for rent, mortgage and utilities arrears, first and last month's rent, ID replacement, urgent medical needs; expenses that strain the household budget and often push low income residents to the edge of homelessness. The Homelessness Prevention Program is complemented by the Province's two programs, the Rent Bank Program and the Emergency Energy Fund, which provide funds for targeted areas of need such as rent and utilities arrears only. The Homelessness Prevention Program is a supportive program that is accessed as a last resort by people in the Region who are at risk of homelessness and enables them to remain housed.

The Rent Bank Program provides assistance to low income residents who need funds to keep rental housing

The Region has been delivering the Rent Bank Program since 2004, with 100% funding provided by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (the Ministry). The purpose of the program is two-fold: to provide immediate assistance to low-income households that are in short-term arrears and facing eviction, and to divert people from the emergency shelter system. In 2009 the Ministry annualized the program and revised the eligibility criteria to exclude rent-geared-to-income households. A total of \$234,458 in annualized funding was received from the Province in November 2009. Between November 2009 and March 31, 2010, over \$92,000 was spent. The Province directed that any remaining funds could be carried over to the 2010 fiscal year.

On average, 170 York Region households are assisted annually through this program to avoid eviction and keep their housing. Residents can be assisted not more than once every two years and must be at proven risk of eviction due to rental arrears. Rent Bank only supports rental arrears and does not take into consideration other factors such as medical expenses that may be impacting an individual's ability to stay housed. Both Homelessness Prevention Program providers also administer Rent Bank funds.

The Emergency Energy Fund supports low income households who need funds to pay for utilities

The Emergency Energy Fund was established in 2004 with one year of funding provided 100% by the Ministry of Community & Social Services. In 2005 these funds became annualized and have remained consistent at \$125,070 per annum. The Emergency Energy Fund supports low income households with energy related emergencies. Each applicant

can only receive funding once. This fund is also administered by The Salvation Army-Northridge Community Church and Jewish Family & Child. In 2009, 73 households were assisted through this program and the funds were fully spent.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

Expansion of the Homelessness Prevention Program is helping to address increasing need in the community

The Homelessness Prevention Program offers a broad array of support to residents with complex and long-term challenges. The assistance that the Program provides does not resolve all of the issues faced by the residents. However, the Program does eliminate the greatest stress, namely, the threat of housing loss through the provision of financial assistance to those at risk of eviction, foreclosure or homelessness. As the individuals accessing the Program have multifaceted challenges that often cannot be resolved in the short-term, it is imperative that residents are able to access this program. The Homelessness Prevention Program serves low income clients who cannot access support through the two provincially funded programs for any of the following reasons: they have already accessed these programs, are in receipt of rent-geared-to-income, have incomes that are above the limits set for Rent Bank, have rental arrears that exceed the maximum allowable under Rent Bank, or require supports that are not provided by the provincial programs.

Over the past year, there were many indicators that some residents were requiring additional social services supports. The social housing wait list reached 6,667 households as of February 2010; Employment Insurance Claims rose between 2006 and 2009, from 94,923 to 248,687 individuals, representing an increase of 262%. The Ontario Works year to date average monthly caseload has increased from 4,535 in 2008 to 5,399 in 2009, a 19.05% increase, and the year to date average number of beneficiaries is 9,606, including 3,489 children.

Another indication of growing need is reflected by the increasing number of individuals requesting Homelessness Prevention Program support. During the first year of service in 2001, 350 individuals received support through the Homelessness Prevention Program. In 2009, 530 residents from 213 households received Program support and an average Program payment of \$883 per person was made. This Program however, remains cost effective. In 2009 the average monthly cost to house a person in an emergency shelter, which would include food, shelter and a personal needs allowance, was \$1,420. The Homelessness Prevention Program is a far less costly method of sustaining shelter for at-risk residents of York Region. It also keeps families stable and in their homes.

Since the inception of the Homelessness Prevention Program in 2001, applicants have only been eligible for a one-time payment. The Program is seeing the growing needs of these individuals at risk; it is unique in that its focus is on homelessness prevention that

“wraps around” the other programs to provide financial support to keep a resident housed.

Homelessness Prevention Program eligibility criteria under review

In order to assist the most vulnerable of York Region’s population, a change of Program eligibility is being considered as we are beginning to see evidence that the existing criteria may need to be revised. From October 2009 to February 2010, 134 requests for Homelessness Prevention Program funding were denied. Of these, 11 requests were from people who had previously received Program assistance. The option to allow residents to access the program more than once in a lifetime is being considered.

Despite indications of an economic recovery in 2010, the impact of the economic downturn is still being felt, particularly by the working poor. Residents that lost their jobs and qualified for Employment Insurance benefits are now running out of these benefits putting pressure on community agencies. It is anticipated that readjustment to a new economy will take time. The Homelessness Prevention Program will be monitored closely in 2010 to review the impact this will have.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The expansion of the programs to two service providers has already increased the accessibility of the programs to many more vulnerable residents, particularly in the south and it is expected that the demand for program dollars will increase in 2010. These homelessness programs include funding from the Region and the Province and are included in the 2010 Budget. The details of these budgets are shown in the table below.

Table 1
Approved 2010 Budget Allocations

Program	Regional Funding	Provincial Funding	Total Allocation
Homelessness Prevention Program	\$434,061	\$ 65,939	\$500,000
Rent Bank Program		234,458	234,458
Emergency Energy Fund		125,070	125,070
Total	\$434,061	\$425,467	\$859,528

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

Housing, employment and transportation are key to promoting family stability, quality of life and having residents who can contribute effectively to York Region's economy and communities.

The homelessness programs strengthen York Region's quality of life by helping vulnerable residents in York Region stay housed or obtain housing.

7. CONCLUSION

The provision of homelessness services through two agencies in York Region enables all residents to access service without undue hardship. The two service providers, Salvation Army-Northridge and Jewish Family & Child work in harmony to ensure consistent high quality service delivery to the residents of York Region. In 2009, the three homelessness programs served 383 households and 1,016 individuals.

The Region's continued participation in homelessness initiatives supports its commitment to working with other levels of government and the community to prevent and alleviate homelessness and the effects of poverty. A change in the Homelessness Prevention Program funding eligibility may ensure that the Region's most vulnerable residents will be able to better access the support required to remain housed.

For more information on this report, please contact Cordelia Abankwa-Harris, Managing Director Strategic Service Integration and Policy, ext. 2150

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.