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ALLOCATION OF THE PROVINCIAL RENT BANK PROGRAM FUNDING INITIATIVE

The Community Services and Housing Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report, September 8, 2004, from the Commissioner of Community Services and Housing:

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. The Region enter into the Provincial Rent Bank Program Grant Agreement with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing to access one-time funding of $639,133.00 and the Commissioner of Community Services and Housing be authorized to execute the agreement on the Region's behalf; subject to the prior review of the Regional Solicitor.

2. The Region enter into a funding agreement with the Northridge Church of the Salvation Army for the purposes of allocating a portion of the funding to operate the Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP) and the Commissioner of Community Services and Housing be authorized to execute the agreement on the Region's behalf; subject to the prior review of the Regional Solicitor.

3. The balance of the funding be allocated to the Social Assistance Division to support Ontario Works/Ontario Disability Support Program (OW/ODSP) recipients in accordance with the Community Services and Housing Department's policies and objectives.

2. PURPOSE

This report seeks Regional Council's approval of the implementation of the Rent Bank Program funding allocation as a part of a broader delivery model of homelessness prevention supports. The delivery model promotes fair, equal access and seamless service to residents facing risk of homelessness due to an inability to pay rent.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 Provincial Rent Bank Program

In March 2004, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing announced the Provincial Rent Bank Program. This program is intended to:

- Promote housing stability by assisting low-income people who have short-term rental arrears avoid eviction.

- Divert people from emergency shelter systems, thus creating cost savings for the Province and Municipalities who share responsibilities for shelter costs.

The Province has not specified a period of time in which the funding must be used. The funding allocation for The Regional Municipality of York is one-time funding of $639,133.00.

For Consolidated Municipal Service Managers that have established a rent bank, this money can be used to expand their services to reach even more tenants. The provincial funding is not intended to replace the municipal funding that currently supports the rent bank.

For further details on this Provincial funding initiative and related requirements see *Attachment 1*.

3.2 Current Programs in York Region that Assist with Rental Arrears

The Community Services and Housing Department's Social Assistance and Housing and Residential Services Divisions share the common goal of meeting York Region's residents' basic need for shelter. They both also assist at-risk households to maintain their residence and work towards financial independence.

Both divisions often provide services to the same clientele. The Provincial Rent Bank Program provides a unique opportunity to address gaps in existing service systems and enhance the integration of supports to households at risk of homelessness.

Currently, households facing eviction due to rental arrears can apply for support through the following programs: the Homelessness Prevention Program and Social Assistance.

3.2.1 Homelessness Prevention Program

Since 2001, York Region has provided funding to the Salvation Army in Newmarket to operate the Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP). The goals of the HPP are:

- To provide one-time assistance to people who are at risk of losing their home and individuals who are homeless or residing in a temporary shelter. In addition to rental arrears, a household can apply to HPP for other types of financial assistance such as first and last month's rent or emergency medical expenses.
- To aid people in obtaining and maintaining affordable housing by:
    - Providing support to people in need of further assistance by linking them to other programs and agencies, such as budget counselling, and/or the trusteeship program.
    - Monitoring the stability and success of households who have received assistance through program follow-up.

In 2003, HPP provided services to 193 households. Out of those who received assistance 60 were for rental arrears.

3.2.2 Social Assistance

Ontario Works (OW) can assist recipients with financial supports for extraordinary expenses over and above their basic needs through the provision of discretionary benefits (80:20 cost shared provincial/municipal funds) or through 100% municipal funds. This assistance can include funds for rental arrears to prevent an OW recipient from eviction. The current provincial technology does not track the number of cases issued rental arrears for OW recipients however, feedback from caseworkers indicates there are regular requests for rental arrears.

Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) recipients can also access OW discretionary benefits for special needs that can include funds for rental arrears. Manual tracking of ODSP discretionary benefits completed by OW staff from January to May 2004 found that three ODSP recipients received funds for rental arrears.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

4.1 Recommendations for Funding Allocation

It is recommended that the one-time provincial funding initiative be divided between Social Assistance and the Northridge Church of the Salvation Army, who operate the Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP). This will be optimal given that:

- This is one-time funding from the province.
- There is already infrastructure in place that responds to the needs of both OW/ODSP clients and low income households.
- There is already a working agreement in place with the Northridge Church of the Salvation Army.

Based on available service data, it is recommended that Rent Bank Program funding be allocated over two years (2005 and 2006) and that initially funding be divided with 75% going to HPP and 25% to Social Assistance. This funding arrangement and annual allocations can be revised as needed over the next two years based on usage in each program area to meet changing community needs, work within provincial requirements and maximize the use of provincial funding.

4.2 Recommendations for Program Design

The current program design for both Social Assistance and HPP will need to be adjusted in the following ways to promote a consistent approach and enhance current customer service:

- Current program policies including eligibility criteria and amount of assistance provided will be updated. Program policies will need to be consistent and incorporate provincial requirements.
- A tracking and reporting system will be developed that meets provincial requirements and minimizes the administrative workload associated with managing the funding.

- Front-line staff will be trained on policies and procedures to allow for a consistent approach to approving applicants who apply for financial assistance for rental arrears.

4.3 Relationship to Vision 2026

The proposed use of the Rent Bank Program and this "made in York" program design will help York Region work toward the goals outlined in Vision 2026 such as "responding to diverse needs of our residents, creating quality communities and promoting stable housing".

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The Provincial Rent Bank Program is 100% provincial funding and does not impact the municipal tax levy. The Province allows up to 10% of the funding to be spent on administration; therefore no additional administrative costs are anticipated. The provincial funding initiative will complement Social Assistance administered Ontario Works discretionary benefits as well as the existing rent bank program.

Current levels of municipal funding allocated to the Homelessness Prevention Program will continue to be required so that the program can provide the range of supports to York Region residents facing a housing crisis.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

There are no local municipal impacts.

7. CONCLUSION

This funding will allow York Region to build on the programs currently in place and to better serve York Region residents at risk of becoming homeless due to rental arrears.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.

(A copy of the attachment referred to in the foregoing was forwarded to each Member of Council with the September 15, 2004, Community Services and Housing Committee agenda and a copy is on file in the Regional Clerk's office.)