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PRELIMINARY FINDINGS OF A REPORT ON HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION IN YORK REGION

The Community Services and Housing Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report, August 22, 2003, from the Commissioner of Community Services and Housing:

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. The short-term recommendations as outlined in *Attachment 1* be approved in principle and referred to the 2004 Budget process for consideration.
2. Staff report back early in 2004 with options that address the short-term recommendations presented in this report (*see Attachment 1*).

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to outline the preliminary findings of an evaluation of homelessness prevention initiatives, which is scheduled to be presented to Council in early 2004. This report also seeks endorsement to move forward with short term recommendations that have emerged. The full report that will be presented in early 2004 will review what has been done to address homelessness in York Region since The Regional Municipality of York was designated as the Service Manager in 1998, describe the scope and risk of homelessness in the Region, and recommend future action to prevent homelessness from escalating as the Region continues to grow.

3. BACKGROUND

York Region has made significant gains since becoming service system manager for homelessness programs in 1998. As a first step, the Region, in co-operation with service providers and other stakeholders, undertook a series of initiatives to develop an understanding of the issue and agree on strategies to address homelessness in York Region (the Homelessness Task Force in 2000 and the Community Plan to Address Homelessness in 2001). Based on the findings of these initiatives, The Regional Municipality of York, other levels of government and community partners fund and/or administer a number of programs and services to support people who are experiencing homelessness and to prevent homelessness. Programs and services that respond to homelessness and risk of homelessness in York Region include:

- Transitional and supportive housing services including emergency shelters and community and housing support workers.
- Services and drop in centres for youth.
- The Housing Help Centre.
- Food banks.

- Prevention initiatives including Share the Warmth and the Homelessness Prevention Program.
- Outreach initiatives including the Crosslinks/Public Health outreach van.

Over the past several years, the demographics and make-up of the Region have evolved, and a comprehensive review of the range of regional programs and services was required. It is also necessary to begin planning strategically to ensure that initiatives continue to meet the needs of the Region, now and in the future. In April 2003, The Regional Municipality of York, in collaboration with a project team, began the process of evaluating current homelessness initiatives and programs in York Region. The final document will provide proposals for short and long-term strategies to address current and mitigate future homelessness and risk of homelessness in York Region.

A Reference Group made up of York Region senior staff, service providers, funders and other key stakeholders was established to provide advice on research methods and findings. In addition, over 200 stakeholders (including homeless individuals, service providers, funders, Regional Council members, and Regional employees) were consulted through 17 focus groups and a series of key informant and agency interviews. The stakeholders provided invaluable information, responded positively to the evaluation and demonstrated strong commitment to the issue.

Statistical data from a variety of sources (including Statistics Canada, service providers and Regional databases) was also collected and analyzed to develop a profile of the homeless and those at risk of homelessness, to identify trends that could impact on the prevalence of homelessness.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

4.1 Preliminary Findings

Preliminary findings demonstrate that:

- 1) York Region has invested well in its initiatives to date.
- 2) York Region can use other existing Regional investments and strategies to minimize risk factors for vulnerable residents.
- 3) Options exist and alternatives are offered to those who require shelter and cannot be accommodated within existing beds in York Region.
- 4) York Region is a strong community, but with the reality of changing demographics and population growth, needs a co-ordinated strategy to stay strong and prosperous. A crucial success factor is the Region's ability to meet the basic needs of those who are most vulnerable.

4.1.1 York Region has Invested Well in its Initiatives To Date

The project team assessed 22 funding initiatives to address homelessness. There was general agreement that though not all issues have been resolved, significant progress has been made in meeting the needs of those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness through the provision of:

- Shelter beds.

- Assistance finding affordable accommodations.
- The establishment of “safe beds” and ancillary services for persons with mental illness or developmental disability.
- Assistance to families to stay in their homes or move to more appropriate accommodation.
- Follow-up support to individuals and families once they find housing.
- Drop-in supports and services for youth.
- Assistance obtaining proof of identity that is necessary to access basic services.
- Outreach services.
- Assistance with winter needs (such as clothing or transportation).

Preliminary findings also indicate that the initiatives that have been funded to date have had a notable impact on the service system capacity to deliver services to address homelessness in York Region by:

- Strengthening the physical infrastructure of a number of agencies through funding major capital, repairs and maintenance, renovation, furniture and equipment;
- Leading to the development of innovative partnerships among agencies; and
- Providing training/support to front line workers to enhance their capacity to serve a diverse population.

4.1.2 York Region Can Use Other Investments to Minimize Risk Factors for Vulnerable Residents

In addition to these direct supports to homelessness, York Region is also engaged in a number of growth management initiatives that can indirectly support homelessness prevention if they are implemented with the needs of the most vulnerable residents in mind. Examples of these initiatives include the Housing Supply Strategy and the ten-year Capital Plan for Housing Programs; the Regional Growth Management Strategy; Rapid Transit Corridor and HWY 7 Vision; and the Transportation Master Plan. The on-going implementation of York Region's Human Services Strategy is helping to inform the extent to which funding by senior levels of government are responding to the human service needs of York Region's rapid population growth and changing demographics.

All of these initiatives have tremendous potential to support the Region's most vulnerable residents to secure housing and to ensure that they can get from where they live to the jobs and services they need. York Region has an opportunity to maximize the benefit of this large volume of work focused on growth management that is underway without adding to the cost through strategic co-ordination among Departments to consider the potential benefits of these initiatives to vulnerable populations.

4.1.3 Options Exist and Alternatives are Offered to Those who Require Shelter and Cannot be Accommodated within Existing Beds in York Region

York Region has people who would like to own or rent accommodation of their own and cannot. York Region, like every large municipality, does have some homelessness (persons who are completely without housing) however, no one who wants shelter needs to be absolutely without it. There are services in place for those who need shelter and anyone who cannot be accommodated in one of York's emergency shelters is offered

alternate shelter. There are also services to assist individuals and families in finding and keeping housing.

As a result of initiatives already in place to address homelessness directly and other strategic growth management initiatives underway, York Region is well positioned to act now to maintain a low rate of homelessness and even to reduce it. While this will require that some current service gaps (e.g. there is a need for a shelter dedicated to young women who are not victims of violence) be filled, the real key to success is an enhanced focus on prevention of homelessness.

4.1.4 York Region needs a Co-ordinated Strategy

York Region has demonstrated leadership in the development of co-ordinated responses to the needs of its residents. Building on this direction, York's growth management strategy must be co-ordinated across Departments specifically on homelessness to ensure that our most vulnerable residents are able to participate in and contribute to the strength of the community.

Despite the positive steps that have been taken to address homelessness and to support vulnerable residents, York Region is faced with a few challenges that must be addressed. The first is that its increasing population is leading to growing urbanization and a growing proportion of the Region's population that faces the risk of homelessness. Without a strategic investment in prevention, more people could become homeless in the future. A number of groups that are increasing with the growing population, including lone-parent families, low-income families, single people, seniors, persons with mental illness, youth and recent immigrants face higher degrees of vulnerability to the risk of becoming homeless. There are also some characteristics that are unique to York Region that traditionally increase risk and vulnerability, including:

- A lack of affordable rental housing.
- Dispersed urban areas and a developing transportation system can make services inaccessible.
- Rapid population growth that strains the existing service system.
- An underdeveloped service system to address homelessness and homelessness prevention.
- An affluent community image which can make it harder for low-income residents to participate in the high quality of life experienced by others, and reduces public understanding of the social issues that do exist in the Region.
- A lack of accurate, consistent data about homeless persons, those at risk of homelessness and the services they use. This hinders the Region's ability to plan strategically to address their needs.

These challenges can be mitigated by a co-ordinated, cross-sectoral implementation framework and action plan to address prevention of homelessness specifically, and to increase opportunities for vulnerable residents generally.

4.2 Implementing a Framework

The preliminary findings present a number of short-term recommendations that could be implemented in 2004, to fill gaps in the existing system of services available to those who are homeless, and to enhance the focus on prevention. These recommendations include:

- Enhance the Homelessness Prevention Program.
- Ensure that all program areas across Regional departments collaborate in the development of an implementation framework and that they include a “prevention of risk” lens in future planning initiatives and program design.
- Staff undertake work with community partners and other funders to collect and analyze consistent and sufficient data (including the development of data sharing protocols) to get the Region current profiles of at-risk individuals and households.
- Enhance the role of the recently established Funders’ Alliance to encourage collaboration to better meet local needs and to encourage funding processes that are clear and transparent.
- Continue to investigate and develop opportunities to create more affordable housing.
- Increase shelter bed capacity targeted to specific under-served populations such as young women and women who are not victims of violence.

Community Services and Housing Department staff will co-ordinate the development of a longer-term implementation framework for homelessness prevention initiatives and bring the framework forward in Spring/Summer 2004. The framework will propose a phased response to homelessness prevention, looking forward to 2026. The framework will also attempt to identify the process, estimated costs, and timelines for implementing:

- Actions to address homelessness prevention and support vulnerable residents directly.
- Steps to encourage other growth management initiatives to be viewed through a “prevention of risk” lens. This will maximize their ability to reduce the risks faced by vulnerable residents.

4.3 Proposed Next Steps

Proposed next steps:

- Upon approval by Council, implement short-term strategies.
- Report back on implementation of short-term strategies and release the full evaluation report in February 2004.
- Release implementation framework and action plan including an evaluation and projected costing of long-term recommendations proposed in the evaluation report. Seek approval to implement selected long-term strategies by Spring/Summer 2004.

4.4 Relationship to Vision 2026

York Region made a commitment that by 2026, they will support healthy communities, economic vitality, a sustainable natural environment and effective human services.

Investing in homelessness prevention and reducing risk faced by vulnerable residents will do this by:

- Helping to maintain the high quality of life and sense of belonging for all residents, which will make the Region attractive to new residents and businesses. Because the risk factors for homelessness are so broad, and because homelessness is the end result

of a number of other issues, the type of actions that prevent homelessness also prevent risk of other social and health issues.

- Providing a cost-effective, long-term strategy for the delivery of human services that enhances the quality of life of residents and helps to contain financial costs of service delivery.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Overall, a co-ordinated focus on homelessness prevention will promote a more efficient use of Regional resources. Investing in prevention has been proven to be far less costly than supporting an individual or family once they have become homeless. For example, in York Region the average cost to house a family of four in an emergency shelter is \$6,080 (\$40/person/day x 38 days) while the average cost to assist a household through the homelessness prevention program is \$1,367. In addition, preventing absolute homelessness from reaching the critical levels often associated with rapidly urbanizing cities will protect the current economic competitiveness of the Region by contributing to the maintenance of the high quality of life that brings skilled workers and business investments to York Region.

Because most of the short-term recommendations are a crisis response to absolute homelessness, there will be costs that will need to be incorporated in the 2004 Budget. Specific costs associated with each recommendation will be analyzed and included in the 2004 Community Services and Housing Department's Budget proposal. Costing consideration estimates can be found in *Attachment 1*.

The costs and benefits of the longer term implementation framework will be estimated and reported to Committee and Council when the full evaluation report is tabled in the Spring/Summer 2004.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

Implementation of the short-term recommendations will have a positive impact on all area municipalities in that they provide solutions to existing service gaps, and contribute to the protection of the quality of life and economic competitiveness of all parts of the Region.

The final evaluation report will confirm whether services are provided where they are needed, and will also identify areas in the Region that may be under-serviced to inform future funding decisions.

The longer term implementation framework will have a positive impact in terms of mitigating the risks experienced by vulnerable residents in all area municipalities. These benefits will be reported in more detail in Spring/Summer 2004.

7. CONCLUSION

York Region has consistently demonstrated a commitment to addressing homelessness and supporting vulnerable residents since taking on the service management role in 1998. The preliminary results of the report on homelessness prevention indicate that the Region has been on track in terms of the types of programs and services that have been provided and the priorities that have been set to date. The results also indicate that to stay strong, as another aspect of the growth management work that is already underway in the Region, there is a need to focus on homelessness prevention, and the prevention of risk generally. There is a significant amount of work yet to be done in this area, but the Region is well positioned to succeed based on past achievements, a demonstrated commitment to vulnerable residents generally and to homelessness prevention by both the Region and its community partners, and the volume of complementary growth management initiatives that are already underway.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.

(A copy of the attachment referred to in this report was forwarded to each Member of Council with the September 10, 2003 Community Services and Housing Committee agenda and a copy thereof is on file in the Office of the Regional Clerk.)