

# 2020

## WATERLOO DAY OF ACTION

### *The Homelessness Crisis in the Region of Waterloo*

The narrative of homelessness is neither new nor adequately addressed in the Canadian context. Although efforts have been undertaken to tackle this systems-level issue, the **outlook of housing instability and homelessness in the Region of Waterloo remains grim**. It is challenging to estimate the magnitude of homelessness due to its transient nature and often lack of visibility. High estimates indicate that **up to 750 individuals are in need of housing support units in Kitchener alone** (*Housing Needs Assessment, City of Kitchener*). A survey by The Working Centre in late 2019 found that an estimated 500 people are homeless in the Region of Waterloo, including a large proportion of youth and those with concurrent disorders. Supporting this population is a regional Emergency Shelter System with a daily capacity of 245 people, though access can be limited based on shelter restrictions (*Region of Waterloo Housing and Homelessness Update Summer 2018*). Within the existing system, **110 and 181 individuals remain unsheltered in Cambridge and downtown Kitchener**, respectively. As shelter capacity is reached, other available beds in the system must be sought for those in need, followed by motel overflow spaces, which have insufficient capacity to meet winter needs. The **COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the gaps in our current system** for individuals experiencing homelessness.

While our asks are focused on emergency shelter requirements and the challenges presented by the coming winter months, it is important to note that **any long-term solutions to homelessness must emphasize a 'Housing First' model**, which is built on the principle that people must first be housed in order to maximally benefit from additional social supports and services, including healthcare, education, and employment.



## 1. Lower Barriers to Accessibility in Emergency Shelters

- At least 191 individuals were denied shelter access from the House of Friendship in September 2020
- Barriers currently exist for those with:
  - pets
  - substance use disorders (~60% of which occur concurrently with mental health disorders)
  - newcomers and refugees
  - those wishing to stay w/ an opposite sex partner
- The current referral policy for those prohibited access to shelters due to systems restrictions is **emergency lodging by the Waterloo Regional Police Services**
  - Substance use disorder is a high risk factor to chronic homelessness
  - **Redirection towards existing community resources** may increase contact with healthcare professionals and lead to further support

### Our Asks:

- Create Region-wide shelter standards to **lower barriers of shelter eligibility**, including acceptance of opposite sex partners, two-parent families, and persons with pets
- Recognize that substance use disorder is a high risk factor to chronic homelessness and **refer persons directly to existing harm reduction projects in community systems** in the event of service restriction
- Increase on-demand interpretation and/or translation services at shelters, housing search supports, and housing help hubs to **improve housing support to newcomers and refugees**

## 2. Increase Winter Shelter Capacity

- Inclement weather during the winter months presents unique challenges for homeless populations, many of whom spend the summer "living rough" on the streets
- The **COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates the need for increased shelter capacity this winter**
  - Overcrowded shelters and inadequate resources to maintain infection control practices make the unsheltered particularly vulnerable to infection
  - **Many people experiencing homelessness have pre-existing health issues** that create compromised immunity, the risks of which may be compounded by poorer healthcare access
- Regional shelters have cited "**ongoing capacity pressures**" over the past few years, all of which are over capacity most nights

### Our Asks:

- Support the **creation of temporary shelter spaces** to accommodate demand during winter months
- **Align shelter capacity expansion with public health efforts** to limit infection spread during the COVID-19 pandemic, as per the CDC guidelines:
  - **Overflow sites** to accommodate shelter decompression and higher shelter demands;
  - **Isolation sites** for people who are confirmed to be positive for COVID-19;
  - **Quarantine sites** for people who were exposed to, or are awaiting testing for COVID-19; and
  - **Protective housing** for people who are at increased risk of severe COVID-19

## 3. Support for Innovative Long-term Housing Solutions

- In the Waterloo Region, ~750 community members are in need of **supportive housing**
- The emergency shelter network, although necessary to ensure the safety of those unserved, does not represent a tenable long-term housing solution
  - This system fails to address the rights and expressed need for **stability, support, privacy, security, and autonomy** in this population
- In alignment with the 'Housing First' model, **creative solutions to the region's problem of inadequate transitional housing must be sought**

### Our Asks:

- **Legally authorize encampments** of individuals experiencing homelessness to facilitate increased access to food, water, washrooms, and primary healthcare services
- Utilize funding from the federal government's Rapid Housing Initiative to **support the creation of modular housing and innovative housing projects** such as Lot42