



P.O. Box 1749  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
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**Item No. 15.1.9**  
**Halifax Regional Council**  
**May 3, 2022**

**TO:** Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

**SUBMITTED BY:** Original Signed

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Denise Schofield, Acting Chief Administrative Officer

**DATE:** April 28, 2022

**SUBJECT:** Homelessness and Encampment Approach

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**ORIGIN**

August 31, 2021 Regional Council motion (item 14.1):

MOVED by Mayor Savage, seconded by Councillor Mason.

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to implement a range of emergency supportive housing and emergency shelter accommodations for those who are unhoused in collaboration with and based on feedback from community-based social services providers and the Province of Nova Scotia to address immediate and emergent needs including measures such as the fit-up of spaces for temporary accommodations, renting of hotel and other spaces and further, and to coordinate and collaborate with community-based social services providers and the Province of Nova Scotia in that respect;

Direct that the Chief Administrative Officer be authorized to spend up to \$500,000 from Fiscal Services in respect of addressing these needs, and report on the use of said funds through monthly public updates as an information report at Regional Council meetings until the end of the fiscal year and then quarterly at a minimum; and,

Further direct the Chief Administrative Officer to work with Department of Community Services and community service providers on a needs-analysis including determining how many people are unhoused, how many of them are currently tenting or occupying other forms of shelter within parks and other public lands in Halifax Regional Municipality and how many can be accommodated in a safer manner.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED

August 31, 2021 Regional Council motion (item 14.3):

MOVED by Councillor Lovelace, seconded by Councillor Kent

THAT Halifax Regional Council request a staff report and recommendations with respect to the establishment of a "Lived Experience Advisory Committee on Homelessness for HRM" designed collaboratively with community partners. This report and recommendations must be based on the principle that systemic problems need systemic solutions inclusive of those most impacted by homelessness and

**RECOMMENDATION ON PAGE 3**

include provisions that would make training opportunities available to Halifax Regional Municipality staff and Regional Council on the impacts of mental health, addictions, and trauma.

**MOTION AS AMENDED PUT AND PASSED**

November 9, 2021 Regional Council motion (Item15.1.9):

MOVED by Councillor Mason, seconded by Councillor Blackburn

THAT Halifax Regional Council direct that the Chief Administrative Officer be authorized to spend up to \$3.2 million from Fiscal Services to purchase, install and maintain modular units at two sites and to address suitable temporary housing to address needs of unhoused residents. Regular updates to Regional Council will occur monthly until the end of the fiscal year and then quarterly at minimum.

**MOTION PUT AND PASSED**

November 9, 2021 Regional Council motion (Item15.1.4):

MOVED by Councillor Cuttell, seconded by Councillor Kent

THAT Halifax Regional Council direct that the Chief Administrative Officer be authorized to spend up to an additional \$1,200,000 from Fiscal Services to purchase and install modular units at two sites and to address suitable temporary housing to address needs of unhoused residents.

**MOTION PUT AND PASSED**

March 1, 2022 Regional Council Motion (Item 15.1.5):

MOVED by Deputy Mayor Lovelace, seconded by Councillor Stoddard

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

3. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to allocate the \$205,601 to the Emergency Housing Fund as a contingency to purchase, install and maintain modular units at two sites and to address suitable temporary housing to address needs of unhoused residents.

**MOTION PUT AND PASSED**

**LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY**

The *Halifax Regional Municipality Charter*, S.N.S. 2008, c. 39 provides:

7A The purposes of the Municipality are to ...

- (b) provide services, facilities and other things that, in the opinion of the Council, are necessary or desirable for all or part of the Municipality; and
- (c) develop and maintain safe and viable communities

Halifax Regional Municipality By-Law P-600 *Respecting Municipal Parks*

**Camping**

- 8. (1) Camping is prohibited in a park unless otherwise posted or by permission.
- (2) No person shall erect or place in a park anything for the purpose of temporary or permanent accommodation without permission.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended that Halifax Regional Council:

- 1) Direct the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to continue to support the province and other partners to ensure individuals have safe, supportive and affordable housing,
- 2) Direct the CAO to continue efforts to increase availability of affordable housing as described in the body of this report,
- 3) Direct the CAO to formalize criteria and locations for the designation of overnight sheltering sites in parks consistent with the criteria and locations described in the body of this report,
- 4) Direct the CAO to continue to review options to add non-park sites to inventory of outdoor sites available for overnight sheltering,
- 5) Authorize the Chief Administrative Officer to negotiate and enter into a contribution agreement with the United Way to convene a lived experience committee to advise staff, and
- 6) Direct the CAO to return to Council with a subsequent report with additional analysis and recommendations for actions.

## **BACKGROUND**

This report represents an interim update on the municipality's approach to homelessness and encampments based on a reassessment over the last 6 weeks. This reassessment is ongoing, and a further report will be completed and brought to Council in the summer. This interim report provides a "what we heard" summary of feedback from stakeholder engagement and focuses on a few short- and medium-term activities and approaches. Ongoing engagement, analysis and preliminary evaluation of the proposed activities flowing from this report will inform the report to be delivered to Regional Council in the summer.

Halifax is in an emergency shelter crisis on top of a housing crisis. The city is growing at an unprecedented rate and increased homelessness is one result. There are approximately 200 shelter beds in Halifax and over 547 people experiencing homelessness as of April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2022, a rate of one shelter bed for every 2.7 people experiencing homelessness. In addition, the city's rental vacancy rate is below 1%, the minimum wage is \$13.35 and the average cost of a 1-bedroom apartment is \$1600. According to figures published by the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia (AHANS), the number of chronically homeless individuals rose 13% in the first three months of this year.

The formal mandates for housing, health care, and social supports such as income assistance are held by the Province of Nova Scotia (PNS). Through a service exchange process (including legislation and agreements) in 1995 and 1996, PNS assumed responsibility for social services, including affordable housing and child welfare, nursing homes and homes for the elderly. Municipalities were required to make contributions to PNS for education, social housing and corrections and a series of grants in lieu of taxes, formerly payable to municipalities by PNS were eliminated. Without a mandate for social services including social housing, the municipality lacks expertise and resources in this area, aside from expertise related to planning and development. However, recognizing the severity of the crisis and its impact on the municipality and its residents, Regional Council over the past two years has created two temporary positions, assigned multiple existing resources to assist and supported a variety of actions to help address the needs of people facing housing challenges.

In the past two years, the municipality has:

- Built 2 modular sites with shelter housing with capacity for 64 persons,
- Approved funding for 6 affordable housing projects with a total of 157 units for Adsum for Women

- and Children, Mi'kmaq Native Friendship Centre, North End Community Association, Affordable Housing Association of NS, Akoma and Souls Harbour,
- Supported the Province to provide emergency shelter space for those experiencing homelessness at recreation centres during times of public health restrictions associated with COVID, overnight sheltering at the Gray arena, and for emergency overnight sheltering at George Dixon and the Pavilion,
  - Provided funding to a coalition of 11 community service providers (COPSO) for crisis hotel stays for approximately 140 persons experiencing homelessness. The province has since reimbursed the municipality for costs associated with these hotel stays.
  - Contributed \$6M annually to social and non-profit housing
  - Worked with the Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth to approve 17 safe emergency shelters with heat, electricity and access to washrooms, occupants of which are supported by parish teams.

While the three orders of government continue to invest in rapidly built new housing, including supportive housing options, the homelessness crisis persists and is likely to worsen due to rising housing prices related to population growth and rising inflation, among other factors. In addition to insufficient housing availability and limited shelter supply, many in our community are struggling to find a safe and stable home with supportive services as needed. In general, people sleep outdoors for a variety of reasons including:

- Existing shelter space is full,
- Feeling unsafe in a shelter or other housing option,
- Having been banned from shelter or other housing options,
- Having insufficient supports to remain successfully housed,
- Personal choice.

While unhoused persons have slept outdoors in Halifax for many years, there has been an increased movement of unhoused persons into urban parks in the last two years. This was supported by the construction of emergency shelters by Halifax Mutual Aid (HMA). HMA shelters are not built to the building code and the location of some HMA shelters increases the likelihood of conflict between shelter occupants and neighbours / parks users. In 2021, the municipality received 413 complaint calls related to encampments. So far in 2022, that number is 243. While the shelters have raised the profile of homelessness in the community, in many cases they do not represent a safe or sustainable solution for even emergency housing.

New approaches are needed to ensure access to emergency shelter until an adequate amount of affordable housing, as well as supportive housing, is made available.

## **DISCUSSION**

Over the past six weeks, the municipality has been revisiting its approach to homelessness and has engaged (or in some cases reengaged) with various stakeholders to understand the complex issues related to homelessness and gather input on the potential role of the municipality. This report represents an interim update on findings from these engagements and identifies initial recommendations on the municipal role in homelessness. Some recommendations are presented for immediate action, while others require additional research or analysis and will form part of a final report in the summer of 2022.

Highlights of key feedback and messages from stakeholder discussions are noted below. A more complete report on key findings is included as Attachment 1. It is important to note that these findings are a paraphrased and abbreviated but largely unfiltered representation of stakeholder feedback and their inclusion in this report does not represent an endorsement of any of the information presented.

### Housing & Poverty

- Shortage of building stock and poverty are the core issues of the homelessness and affordable housing crisis.

- The shortage of housing stock includes a lack of various types of housing, including supportive housing.
- Increasingly service providers are seeing people who are homeless or precariously housed whose only need is financial.

#### Sleeping Rough

- While the goal should be for everyone to have a safe and suitable home that is sustainable for them in the long term, there will always be some people sleeping rough.

#### Municipal Activity

- There is a range of feelings about the municipality's history in dealing with homelessness. These feelings include optimism, disappointment, frustration, and anger. There is anger among many stakeholders related to the actions of the municipality on August 18, 2021.

#### Landlord Role

- The rental market will not provide truly affordable housing without some form of public subsidy.

#### Persons in Care

- Stakeholders identified issues for people coming out of some form of care; whether children ageing out of care, patients released from in-patient mental health care, or people being released from incarceration. In many cases, people are set up for failure by not having supportive housing plans before they return to the community.

#### Mental Health

- Some people who are experiencing homelessness also struggle with mental health issues and, as currently structured, the mental health system is not sufficient to meet the needs of the homeless in HRM.

#### Role of Halifax Regional Police and Halifax Regional Fire & Emergency

- Stakeholders indicated the perception of police by those experiencing homelessness as being predominantly negative. Conversely, some service providers reported good relationships with police. The fire department is generally viewed more positively with some suggestions there could be a role for the fire department in some activities such as wellness checks.

#### Encampments

- Most stakeholders indicated that the practice of not forcing out those sleeping in deep woods areas and providing supports as possible to them is an approach that should be continued. There was clear feedback from a range of stakeholders that the municipality needs to provide an option for people who need to sleep on public land.

#### Communications

- Stakeholders identified several opportunities for improved communications from the municipality.

#### Racism and Bias

- Various stakeholders shared examples of blatant racism, classism, ableism and sexism that impact those they work with to find housing. There is a disproportionate number of Indigenous persons and persons of African descent within the precariously housed and homelessness community.

#### Roles for the Municipality

- Stakeholders suggested a wide range of roles for the municipality to play from assuming responsibility for housing support from the province to filling funding gaps, to participating in discussions about housing and homelessness to establishing a first voice advisory committee to inform decision-making and actions.

### **Highlight of Recommendations**

Based on the above feedback as well as examples from other jurisdictions, several immediate measures are recommended to be taken:

- That the municipality designate public spaces where sheltering overnight is permitted. This is described further below and should be approached as a provisional measure that will be implemented through the spring and summer and evaluated and adjusted as needed.
- That the municipality work to ensure washrooms and potable water are available to persons experiencing homelessness.
- That the municipality establish a first voice advisory committee.
- That the municipality require the removal of, or remove, tents, shelters, or other structures in parks outside of designated areas.

The following should continue as on-going measures:

- The establishment of a resource(s) in the municipality focused on helping address issues of homelessness.
- Continue efforts to support the province and other partners to ensure individuals have safe, supportive, and affordable housing.
- Continue efforts to support development of affordable housing.

The municipality will continue to engage with stakeholders to evaluate the success of the above actions and identify sustainable, longer-term approaches to support those in our community experiencing homelessness.

### **Designating Public Spaces for Overnight Sheltering**

In recognition that some individuals will be unable or unwilling to accept indoor shelter and that demand for indoor shelter beds exceeds capacity, it is proposed the municipality designate spaces for outdoor overnight sheltering. The preferred option remains to support individuals to be connected to indoor housing or shelter options. In recognition of a continued gap between shelter supply and need, this option is being proposed as part of a range of actions.

Designated spaces, rather than permitting sheltering anywhere in parks is proposed because it will help in the provision of supports for persons experiencing homelessness and makes servicing sites (e.g., with portable toilets, water or garbage collection) more manageable. If successful, it also reduces the likelihood of conflict between users and helps to retain green spaces for recreation. Urban green spaces in particular provide needed space for physical activity, relaxation, recreation and social connection for all HRM residents. As cited in Medical News Today, "Multiple studies have shown that these spaces reduce stress and boost mental and physical health. Green spaces are also associated with better air quality, reduced traffic noise, cooler temperatures, and greater diversity."

The Parks By-Law (P-600) generally prohibits camping in parks, unless otherwise posted or by permission. Staff propose to proceed under this authority in the short term to permit overnight sheltering in parks while continuing to investigate longer term options for parks and other sites.

Two types of spaces are proposed to be designated. The first is for one-night only stays, where an individual can set up a tent after 8 pm but must remove it and move on from that location by 8 am the following morning. The second is multiple-night stay locations where an individual can pitch a tent and leave it standing for multiple days and nights. In both instances, designated sites are only meant to provide a space for those experiencing homelessness to shelter, not recreational camping

The following criteria are proposed to evaluate park sites to determine suitability. This would include prohibiting placement in or near sites such as the following:

- Schools, daycares, or adult care facilities
- Active sport fields, dug outs or bleachers

- Horticultural displays or gardens
- Cemeteries
- Environmentally or culturally sensitive areas
- Blocking a path or right of access
- On bridges, docks, or wharfs
- Playgrounds, pools, splash pads

A maximum of 4 tents per site is proposed in order to contain the size and complexity of management of the locations. Depending on site configuration, some locations may only be able to a smaller number of tents.

For locations designated as sheltering places for multiple nights, some form of toilet facility should be provided and, if possible, a water source. These sites should have garbage cans and regular collection and an option for dry goods storage, such as a play box. Anyone sheltering in a park will be expected to comply with applicable laws, including provincial and HRM burning restrictions.

Staff are working on finalizing this approach through policy development, creation of communications tools, and preparation of designated sites (where required). Staff will bring sites on-board once these pieces are prepared and as site preparation allows.

In the medium term, the municipality will work with PNS and others to attempt to establish additional locations where those who have no other option but to sleep rough can do so and to amend the list of available sites as needed. Additional supports will need to be identified including how to address the needs of residents in the winter months.

With the establishment of designated outdoor shelter spaces, there will need to be support available to monitor locations and provide direction on where people can shelter in parks. Some support with respect to provision of information can be provided by the municipality's housing and homelessness coordinator and BID Outreach Street Navigators but these roles should remain focused on providing support to those experiencing homelessness, rather than compliance activities. In the short-term, site compliance will be conducted with existing compliance officials, of whom a small team (2-3 staff) have a focus on parks compliance. Depending on need, additional compliance staff may be required, either within the existing structure or through the creation of a dedicated compliance function within parks.

### **Public Washrooms & Potable Water**

The municipality should ensure that washrooms and potable water sources are available to persons experiencing homelessness. Without accessible options, people experiencing homelessness are forced to use the bathroom on the street, on private property, or in a park. This is neither healthy nor dignified. Access to safe drinking water is a necessity for life. Washrooms and sources of water should be placed in areas where people experiencing homelessness frequent where possible. This would include approved outdoor sites for sheltering. Additional options could include access to existing park washroom facilities, service provider facilities, other municipally owned buildings, portable toilets, or outdoor handwashing stations with faucets. The specific locations for these features will be determined in consultation with the community.

### **First Voice Advisory Committee**

As noted in the origin, Regional Council requested a staff report and recommendations with respect to the establishment of a "Lived Experience Advisory Committee on Homelessness for HRM" designed collaboratively with community partners. The report and recommendations would be based on the principle that systemic problems need systemic solutions inclusive of those most impacted by homelessness and include provisions that would make training opportunities available to Halifax Regional Municipality staff and Regional Council on the impacts of mental health, addictions, and trauma.

Staff are working on a more complete analysis of the above for inclusion in the final report but recognize that lived experience will need to inform current activity and as such are proposing to engage the United Way to have them convene a committee that will provide advice to staff on municipal policies and actions to address issues related to homelessness and housing. The United Way would select members to ensure representation from a range of backgrounds and follow its practices with respect to compensation to participants, provision of childcare, provision of transportation, and accessibility supports.

In addition to the committee, staff also plan to host ad-hoc community talking circles around key issues and topics. The community talking circles could be hosted in various settings with the support of community stakeholders and partners. An experienced facilitator, familiar with homelessness and housing issues and able to host a trauma-informed space, would be engaged to lead these sessions. This approach will also ensure that the municipality is hearing from those communities that are disproportionately experiencing homelessness including African Nova Scotian and Indigenous communities.

### **Adequate and Sustained Support**

With a recent realignment of the municipal approach to homelessness to Parks and Recreation, staff have begun to consider what supports are required to appropriately support HRM's role in homelessness going forward. Staff's considerations recognize that the primary mandate for social housing and homelessness rests with the Provincial Government but also that demand for adequate indoor shelter currently exceeds supply. To support these efforts, the municipality must have sustained relationships with service providers, adequate internal coordination among business units, a point of contact for community members to engage on issues related to homelessness and a degree of expertise in the area of homelessness. The municipality has also significantly benefited in the past few months from the skills and experience of a housing and homelessness coordinator whose role is to do outreach directly with those experiencing homelessness and to help connect them to available supports. This outreach function is critical to ensuring the municipality is talking directly with those experiencing homelessness. Support of these two functions is recommended to continue on an ongoing basis.

This is an interim report, part of the final report will include recommendations on how the municipality best organizes its resources to help to address issues of homelessness and approaches to encampments.

### **Removal of Shelters**

As noted above, there are many reasons that some persons sleep outdoors. Depending on a variety of factors, including location, outdoor sheltering can lead to conflict between those sheltering and neighbours and other users of spaces. While sheltering is a fundamental need, it is better for those experiencing homelessness and other residents that those who need to shelter outdoors, do so in spaces that reduce the likelihood of conflict with adjacent or nearby uses and neighbours. Parks have many uses and there is an expectation from residents that parks be available for a range of uses and not for the exclusive use of any one group. As noted above, parks are particularly important for health and recreation opportunities in urban areas.

Where tents or shelters have been set up on municipal land that is not designated for the purpose and is likely to lead to conflict, the municipality should require the removal or itself remove the tent, shelter or other structure.

In approaching the removal of encampments, staff will be guided by the following principles:

- We will seek to engage people in decisions that will impact their life.
- In our approach to homelessness, we put the person or people first.
- We want everyone to have a home.
- HRM prefers people reside in building structures meant for human habitation on property zoned and serviced for the building or structure.
- HRM has a duty of care to enforce building and fire codes.
- People living in encampments have strengths and rights that should be leveraged and respected

- in the engagement process and, when necessary, closure.
- Voluntary closure of an encampment is preferred over enforcement.

The municipality intends to follow the following process, where possible, when identifying and preparing to remove a tent, shelter or other structure.

- Councillors or residents who see a new tent or shelter on municipal land will be encouraged to call 311
- Navigators or a service provider (through the province of Nova Scotia) will be connected to the shelter or tent occupant
- If a tent or shelter can be confirmed as unoccupied by navigators or service providers, staff will arrange removal of the tent/shelter. Whenever possible, people's belongings will be held for a period of time. Shelter materials will not be held.
- If occupied, the first approach will be to work with individuals, gathering information about them, gauging interest in and ability to be connected to housing or shelter options, and sharing this information, consistent with privacy requirements, among HRM, the Province and other service providers, to attempt to identify options for suitable housing.
- If the occupant of a tent, shelter or other structure is in an area not designated for sheltering, individuals may be required to move to a designated space while housing is sought. In these situations:
  - Though navigators and/or service providers the municipality will continue to work with the person experiencing homelessness (if willing) to attempt to find alternate shelter,
  - The municipality may provide support to individuals to move, such as boxes, bags, and transportation and temporary storage of personal items.
- If the occupant of a tent, shelter or other structure in an area not designated for shelter refuses to move and the occupant has been offered a suitable housing alternative or space in a designated area, the municipality may require the occupant to move through enforcement actions.

To support the above the municipality will:

- facilitate access to a services inventory to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness (211)
- provide information on where someone who is sleeping rough can go to shelter outdoors
- provide plain language and highly visual communications tools for persons experiencing homelessness
- produce a list of designated overnight shelter sites in the community
- organize internally to take a coordinated approach to encampments and homelessness

Staff also recognize the need to develop an approach to address shelters that are placed in designated locations or locations that fit the criteria to be designated but are considered unsafe as they do not meet building code. This will form part of the municipality's work in the coming months.

### **Supporting Affordable Housing**

The Municipality should continue its efforts to incentivize and reduce barriers to the development of affordable housing. Stakeholders identified a range of proposed activities in this area including:

- Providing municipal land and assets for the purpose of affordable and deeply affordable housing development
- Advocating to the Province of Nova Scotia and the Government of Canada to provide land and assets to create affordable and deeply affordable housing stock

- Increasing the speed and ease of getting development approvals
- Reducing fees and costs for the construction of affordable and deeply affordable housing. Advocate to the Province of Nova Scotia for similar support.
- Making zoning and bylaw changes

The municipality has taken and is taking a number of steps to help encourage the development of affordable housing. Highlights of some recent steps taken to date include:

- Adoption of AO 2020-008-ADM to facilitate grants for affordable housing
- Adoption of amendments to By-law M-201 to require registration of residential rental accommodations
- Policy and bylaw amendments to waive municipal related construction fees for affordable housing developments
- Amendments to AO 50 to create a surplus land category for properties for affordable housing purposes
- Amendments to AO 2014-001-ADM to provide streamlined and predictable multi-year property tax relief for registered charitable or non-profit housing groups
- Less-than-market value sale of two surplus municipal properties to facilitate development of affordable housing projects.

A number of other Council directed staff reports are also being advanced including, as directed by Council in November 2021:

- A comprehensive update of the HRM housing needs assessment to be undertaken every 5 years,
- An affordable housing strategy, and
- A review of municipal housing organization models.

Further to this, the municipality is also working on the following:

- Developing an approach to Community Land Trusts
- Advancing work on Inclusionary Zoning
- Advancing work on an Interim Density Bonus Program
- Advancing work on considering how Private Businesses might qualify for affordable housing projects/funding

A more complete inventory of municipal activity related to affordable housing can be found here:

<https://www.halifax.ca/about-halifax/regional-community-planning/affordable-housing>

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Funding for identified activities such as support for a United Way convened Advisory Committee, community circles, supports for designated sheltering spaces can be accommodated within the approved emergency housing funding in Fiscal Services.

<b>2021/22 Emergency Housing Funding and Expenditures</b>	
2021/22 Council Approved Funding	\$ 5,105,601
Net expenditures (includes \$835,000 in funding from the Department of Community Services)	\$ (3,899,993)
<b>Funding to be carried forward to 2022/23</b>	<b>\$ 1,205,608</b>
<b>2022/23 Funding and Estimated Expenditures</b>	
Funding carried forward	\$ 1,205,608
2022/23 Budget	\$ 500,000
Capital expenditures and utilities and maintenance for the modular units	\$ (573,446)
Temporary position for the development of supports for homelessness	\$ (60,000)
Lived Experience Committee with United Way and additional community engagement and consultation	\$ (50,000)
<b>Uncommitted Balance</b>	<b>\$ 1,022,162</b>

*Note: The temporary Housing and Homeless Coordinator position was budgeted in 2022/23*

Staff will monitor the implementation of designated sites and return to Council should additional resources be required associated with the management of those sites.

Staff are assessing the level of municipal resources expected to be required to support the municipal role in homelessness on an on-going basis. Specific resources as described in the discussion section have been identified and are currently supported on a temporary basis in the form of two staff positions. Staff anticipate this will be a minimum level of resource required on a permanent basis. Additional resources required will be identified in a report to Council expected in the summer of 2022.

**RISK CONSIDERATION**

Recommendation:				
Risk	Likelihood (1-5)	Impact (1-5)	Risk Level (L/M/H/VH)	Mitigation
Legal & Compliance – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- that permitting some overnight sheltering will draw individuals to parks that are no experiencing homelessness</li> <li>- that existing encampments will continue and continue to arise in undesignated locations</li> <li>- persons at designated locations do not follow posted rules</li> <li>- size of groups at designated locations exceeds allowable numbers</li> </ul>	4	2	H	Evaluate compliance issues and be prepared to revise approaches
Reputational <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reputational risks are associated with both recommendation action and inaction)</li> </ul>	4	4	VH	Strong communications Work with Province, Service Providers and Others
Health & Safety <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- persons at designated locations do not follow posted rules</li> <li>- that size of groups at designated locations exceeds allowable numbers</li> </ul>	4	3	H	Provision of supports  Compliance efforts  Work with Province, Service Providers and Others
Service Delivery/Infrastructure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- That park infrastructure is damaged and/or unable to be used for recreational purposes.</li> </ul>	3	2	M	Compliance efforts  Restoration efforts
Environmental <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- That unsanitary conditions and excessive use could have impact on green spaces.</li> </ul>	3	2	M	Provision of supports  Compliance efforts  Work with Province, Service Providers and Others  Restoration efforts

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

There was extensive community engagement in the development of this report. The “What We Heard” findings represent discussions with dozens of service providers, stakeholders, staff, and residents.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

No environmental implications were identified.

## **ALTERNATIVES**

Halifax Regional Council may:

- 1) Direct the CAO to return to Council with amendments to the Parks By-law to either:
  - a. permit sheltering anywhere in municipal parks, or
  - b. remove the authority to permit camping in parks with permission
  - c. vest in Council the authority to give permission for camping in parks and set associated criteria and locations.
- 2) Request the CAO to amend the criteria or the locations as outlined in the staff report
- 3) Not to authorize the Chief Administrative Officer to negotiate and enter into contribution agreement with United Way to convene a lived experience committee to advise staff, and require the CAO to convene a lived experience committee

## **ATTACHMENTS**

Attachment 1 – Interim “What We Heard” report

Attachment 2 – List of Proposed Designated Sites for Overnight and Multi-Night Sheltering

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A copy of this report can be obtained online at [halifax.ca](http://halifax.ca) or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 902.490.4210.

Report Prepared by: Max Chauvin, Special Projects Manager, Park & Recreation, 902-456-7420  
Maggie MacDonald, Executive Director, Parks & Recreation, 902-490-4933

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**Municipal Strategy for Homelessness and Housing  
Community Consultation  
Interim What Heard Report – April 28, 2022**

Prepared for: Maggie MacDonald, Executive Director of Parks and Recreation

By: Max Chauvin, Project Manager, Parks and Recreation

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Halifax Regional Municipality is in the midst of a housing crisis. There have been dramatic increases in the number of homeless in our community. This is not a short-term phenomenon and will persist. Coupled with a severe shortage of affordable housing options, many in our community are and will struggle to find a safe, supportive, and stable home.

The formal mandates for housing, health care, and social supports such as income assistance are held by the Province of Nova Scotia. Based on this, homelessness could be viewed as not a municipal problem. However, residents of our city not having a home is a problem we all must be concerned about, and there are opportunities for the Municipality to help. The actions of Regional Council over the past two years indicate a desire for the Municipality to take action to help address the needs of its residents facing housing challenges.

Staff have undertaken a series of activities to help address housing needs in HRM and identify further opportunities for the Municipality to improve the situation for those residents experiencing homelessness or at high risk of becoming homeless. As part of this work, staff have reached out to various stakeholders to understand these issues from multiple perspectives and gain their input on how they feel the Municipality could help.

At this time, staff have gathered a considerable volume of information. This report is a preliminary review of what people have shared. It is important to note that these consultations are ongoing and additional information and analysis will be provided in a future report.

## **WHAT WE HEARD**

Staff have participated in many hours of interviews to learn about the state of homelessness and affordable housing in HRM. These interviews have been held with Government employees at various levels, service providers who support those who are homeless or precariously housed, community advocates, and general residents whose lives have been impacted by housing issues.

The information in this section is a partial summary of what staff have heard, sorted into significant themes. This information has not been extensively filtered, and, as expected in any community consultation, there are multiple opinions on various aspects of the situation. This summary of what we heard includes the diversity of views expressed and is not meant to be an endorsement of any viewpoint or opinion.

### **Homelessness and affordable housing crisis**

Many stakeholders used the word crisis to describe the current state of homelessness and the lack of affordable housing. There are dramatic increases in the number of homeless in our community. According to figures published by the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia, the number of chronically homeless individuals rose 13% in the first three months of this year. Additionally, several service providers indicated that they are not placing some names on the By Name list as they know there are no housing options for those clients. All stakeholders said that they believe the number of homeless will continue to rise dramatically in the future, especially when the Provincial cap on rent increases is removed.

### **Core Issues**

The core of the homelessness and affordable housing crisis is a lack of suitable housing stock. With an exceptionally low vacancy rate and a population growing faster than the community can build housing, there are simply not enough suitable and affordable places for people to live. Housing support workers indicated that in the time it takes to find one person an apartment, they could have located 5 or 6 people homes three years ago.

One size fits all thinking does not work in addressing the needs of people experiencing homelessness. People's needs are dramatically different. Some need intensive support to remain safely housed, while others simply need a place they can afford. The shortage of housing stock includes various types of housing, not simply a lack of 1-bedroom apartments.

The other core issue that stakeholders identified was poverty. Increasingly service providers are seeing people who are homeless or precariously housed whose only need is financial. They

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simply can't afford market rent. This lack of ability to afford rent will continue to be a challenge as the cost of living continues to rise without matching increases in income. Most stakeholders expect the number of people in financial need to continue to grow and will soon start to include more and more families. Service providers already see examples of people spending up to 90% of their income on housing costs and multiple families sharing a space that is barely enough for one.

Stakeholders noted that it is essential to realize affordability is used to describe several economic states. The term affordability for some is moderately reduced market rent. While the average rent in HRM is between \$1,500 and \$1,800, some describe affordable at \$1,300. While this will be accessible to some, this is no more affordable than the market rent for many people and families. For rent to be affordable for some, it needs to be a few hundred dollars a month.

### **Sleeping rough**

Sleeping rough is defined in the Oxford Dictionary "as a person who has no home and sleeps outside, especially on the streets of a town or city." There have been people sleeping rough in our communities for decades. As the homeless crisis builds in HRM, and without additional housing stock, more people will likely be forced out of homes and into shelters or to sleep rough. It is also essential to understand that while the goal is for everyone to have a safe and suitable home that is sustainable for them in the long term, some people will always be sleeping rough. This is due to multiple reasons, including:

- A lack of emergency shelter space.
- People who have suffered traumas and have mental health challenges to the extent that they do not feel safe in a shelter or other housing setting. While it is hard for some to understand this choice, sleeping rough is preferred by some people, and we must respect it.
- Others would move inside but cannot do so as they have been banned from shelters and other options due to behavioural issues. For these residents of HRM, there currently is no other option for them, and they must sleep outside.

Not everyone sleeping rough wants the same experience. Some wish to be on their own, interacting with as few people as possible in an isolated setting. Others want to be with people in a community where they feel safer, have meaningful connections, and want easier access to other services.

Finally, while people sleeping outside in tents or huts are the most obvious of those sleeping rough, service providers noted that people and families are sleeping in cars, recreational vehicles, and other settings. These people are sometimes overlooked when discussing sleeping rough, but they are present throughout HRM. There are also people sleeping on a friend's

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couch that do not appear as homeless but do not have a safe, suitable, and supportive place to call their home.

### **Pending additional supports**

Stakeholders identified various supportive housing options that will open later this year. Some of these projects were expected to be open earlier, but state of repair and supply change issues have delayed them. The Halifax Modular site, able to host 38 people, and run by the Province of Nova Scotia through their service partner, Out of the Cold, will open in May. Six other facilities will open later in the year, including the Overlook. This facility will support some of the hardest to house in our community. Pending housing stock also includes options for indigenous residents of HRM and trans individuals. Additional Government of Canada funding is expected to be provided this year and create more opportunities for people. These resources are desperately needed and will help address the needs of many individuals, but they will not be enough to handle the housing crisis.

### **Thoughts about HRM**

There are a host of impressions and thoughts about the Municipality and homelessness or affordable housing. Feelings range from cautious optimism to disappointment, frustration, and anger.

There is optimism from some service agencies and community members that HRM is committing to a more structured, informed, and long-range approach to addressing the needs of people experiencing homelessness and at risk of homelessness. People are pleased that the homelessness file is being placed under a single Executive Director.

People are, however, cautious. While this commitment and a round of community consultation are good first steps, people are holding off any formal judgment until they see more details and changes in what and how the Municipality moves forward. The community is also looking to understand what HRMs vision is around this work, what type of city Regional Council wants HRM to be, and what they specifically see the Municipal role in this work.

There is disappointment in the time it has taken for these steps to happen. Various stakeholders noted promises around development permits, land-use changes, and commitments to other activities that have not yet come to fruition. People are disappointed in what they see as a lack of transparency on this and related issues and the lack of communication with service providers, stakeholders, and residents.

There is anger over some of the actions of the Municipality, primarily stemming from the August 18, 2021, response to the encampments. Everyone identified that people who were moved from the encampments suffered trauma. Trauma was also suffered by those that serve

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and support the homelessness, and as several stakeholders noted, likely by the first responders involved in the event and subsequent actions. Some stakeholders also said that it was not only HRMs actions that day that contributed to the collective trauma. Many people felt that if healing from this is to begin and trust rebuilt, HRM must apologize for their role in how August 18 unfolded. The Municipality must listen and learn from this and improve communication and response systems.

### **Role of the for-profit landlord**

Members of the commercial rental and development market have indicated that building a new apartment building costs between \$300,000 and \$400,000/unit. Considering these costs amortized over 15 – 20 years at commercial lending rates, the for-profit landlord can't offer units at truly affordable rates without public support or other opportunities to cover the costs. This support can be in the way of rent supplements or development incentives that allow a landlord to recoup some of the costs on some units in their portfolio.

While some landlords are not interested in these issues, the majority are deeply concerned about the loss of affordable housing in their community and would like to be involved in the solution.

### **Crisis for people living in care**

Stakeholders identified several issues that lead to homelessness for people coming out of some form of care. Once they reach the age of 19, children in the care of the Province are no longer covered under the support for children and youth. They are left with few resources, and many are forced to turn to the shelter system, and some end up living rough. It is estimated that 60% of the men currently in the shelter system are former Children in Care.

Upon being released, some people incarcerated in our judicial system do not have homes or families to go to. Without a home to go to, these former inmates are forced into the shelter system, and some are at a higher risk of re-offending than they need to be.

Similarly, there are patients released from inpatient mental health care that do not have a place to go and are forced into the shelter system.

In all these cases, people are set up for failure by not having supportive housing plans before they return to the community.

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### **Mental health**

Some people who are experiencing homelessness are also struggling with mental health issues. As it is currently structured, the mental health system is not sufficient to meet the needs of the homeless in HRM. People can't get help in a timely manner, nor is it available at the frequency or duration that people need to make meaningful improvements in their mental health.

Without dramatic improvements to both access and the amount of care available, the mental health needs of the homeless population will not improve.

### **Role of Halifax Regional Police and Halifax Regional Fire Department**

The perception of the Police by those experiencing homelessness is predominately negative. Those experiencing homelessness feel the Police are targeting and harassing them. When they see an officer approaching, defensive postures and attitudes are adopted, and encounters are rarely positive. While everyone recognizes the need for police involvement when criminal activities occur, stakeholders shared that the police presence and approach feel stifling and oppressive. Some stakeholders noted that the Police are not well equipped to be trying to help people experiencing homelessness and that other respondent models in North America and Europe are more successful.

Some service providers reported good to excellent relationships with the Halifax Police Department. They have found them to be strong partners and helpful to them. Businesses and the associations that serve them reported that their districts' loss of beat patrols was keenly felt. Business district associations shared multiple examples of the officers' actions, preventing situations from escalating.

The perception of the Halifax Regional Fire Department is significantly different. Firefighters are not seen as an arm of enforcement or in a negative light. Firefighters are people there to help, and HRFE has reported positive interactions with persons experiencing homelessness. Several stakeholders felt that there might be a role for the fire department in activities such as wellness checks.

### **Encampments**

It is critical to remember that there will always be people needing to sleep rough in the community. Failure to recognize this and therefore plan for it is problematic. Service providers, volunteers who serve the homeless, and even law enforcement are challenged when there is no place for people to go. Stakeholders argue that without public spaces where people can shelter when they have no other option, we force some of the most vulnerable into a position where they are in violation of the law.

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It is helpful to consider some of the differences in the desired experiences of those sleeping rough. Some wish to shelter in a place away from others. Some residents of HRM are currently living in deeply wooded areas, at times unknown to anyone else in the community. There are those sleeping rough who only need to do it for a night, and then they will access other personal or institutional support. Finally, some need to have a place to shelter outdoors for a more extended period. It is always the goal to provide someone with a safe, supportive, and sustainable home, but that does not always happen quickly.

For the persons sleeping in the deep woods, HRM's practice has been to generally leave these residents where they are, encouraging street navigators to check-in and provide what support they can. Most stakeholders feel that this approach is acceptable and should be continued. For the person who needs to sleep on public land either overnight or for multiple nights, the Municipality needs to provide an option for them. Suggestions range from allowing people to camp on any municipal public or park space for any period to designating or sanctioning a single location outside of the city with transportation support.

What is clear is it is unacceptable and simply ignores the reality in our community to say that there are no approved, safe options for people who need to sleep outside.

Some stakeholders feel that addressing the needs of these residents will require a staged approach. The needs of these residents in the Spring, Summer, and early Fall are very different from Winter. A short-term option must be put in place with long-term solutions being explored with the people experiencing homelessness, service providers, and the Province of Nova Scotia.

Several stakeholders also addressed the hut structures that have been placed in various areas of the Municipality. The shelters placed by the Archdiocese seem to have been very successful. These shelters meet the building code and have extensive support networks for residents. Due to safety concerns, some stakeholders questioned why the community-built shelters are permitted to stay up. Other stakeholders suggested that as a short to medium-term option for those who need it, shelters such as the ones built by the Archdiocese be used, even to replace some of the community shelters. Some indicated that putting these in places to create small shelter communities where supports could be placed and concentrated would be part of a suitable response.

Finally, some stakeholders shared the negative impact of encampments in their community. Some neighbours surrounding an encampment site feel unsafe in their community and homes, especially at night and when drugs and alcohol are present. Neighbours have reported assaults between encampment residents. Community members have reported issues with open fires and smoke that have meant they can't use their back yards. Community members have also reported abuse both around their homes and in the community from advocates and volunteers who, from their perspective, are simply attempting to help residents of the encampment.

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These community members have all noted that there needs to be a safe place for these residents of HRM. They understand that some will choose to sleep rough, and some have no choice. They believe there are better options than some of the current encampment sites.

### **Communication**

Every stakeholder identified communication as an issue. The list of opportunities for improved communication are many and include, but are not limited to:

- Stakeholders wanted a clear vision for the Municipality in this work. This would help them address issues appropriately and identify gaps that need to be filled.
- The three levels of Government should connect to align where possible their programs and services to save time and frustration for service providers who must work with all three.
- While service providers have connections with each other, some noted that there are few formal structures for information sharing and support. This would be helpful to staff providing direct support to residents.
- When the Municipality needs to act, it would help homeless residents and service providers if navigators and support staff knew what was happening before it occurred. Stakeholders noted that even if they disagreed with the Municipality's direction, the outcome would be better for the resident if they were able to be involved and support them.

### **Racism and Bias**

Various stakeholders shared examples of blatant racism, classism, ableism and sexism that impact those they work with to find them housing. The research clearly shows a disproportionate number of indigenous, black, and other groups within the precariously housed and homelessness community. No solution to homelessness and housing can ignore these issues and addressing them must be cornerstone of any future strategy.

### **Roles for HRM**

Every stakeholder has suggestions for a role or roles the Municipality could play to help address issues of homelessness, precarious housing, and lack of affordable housing. Some the Municipality is already pursuing, and others are new suggestions. Ideas range from the Municipality taking over the housing responsibilities from the Province to micro-grant programs. Below is an abbreviated list of suggestions provided:

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- A vital community development principle is nothing for us without us, which applies to work around homelessness. The best experts in the homelessness experience are those who have and are living it. The Municipality does not have significant expertise in homelessness and should establish a first voice advisory committee to inform staff and Municipal decisions and actions. In a similar vein, HRM should seek the advice and counsel of service providers and other experts in the homelessness and housing sector to advise staff.
- HRM to assume the responsibility for housing support from the Government of Nova Scotia. While several stakeholders suggested this, they all understand that this would be a long-term strategy requiring extensive planning, consultation, and support.
- Increase the speed of development approvals and permits. One stakeholder suggested HRM needs to get to a point where the Municipality can approve 11,000 permits per year.
- There need to be accessible washrooms and potable water sources available in the downtown core and Spring Garden Road areas.
- Stakeholders identified multiple funding gaps that HRM could fill through grant programs.
- The Municipality should meet with the Government of Nova Scotia and the Government of Canada and develop a collaborative response in areas where all three interact or could support each other.
- The Municipality should invest in hiring social planners to be part of its planning and development team.
- Champion the launch of the land bank being created by the Halifax Housing and Homelessness Partnership and United Way Halifax.
- Support the development of a or multiple tiny homes projects.
- Do anything to incentives the construction of affordable and deeply affordable housing options.
- The enhancement of outreach services. Suggestions include providing additional support to MOSH, other service providers who focus on outreach support, and the funding of an assertive community treatment team (ACT Team).
- HRM must participate in discussions about housing and homelessness. Most stakeholders identified that HRM is not at these tables. Several stakeholders pointed out that HRM has not been invited to some of them.
- Consider supporting a rent bank to help prevent people from being evicted. Such programs already exist within some service providers.
- Provide surplus land or other assets for development purposes. Encourage the Governments of Nova Scotia and Canada to do the same.
- The Municipality has a host of development tools that they could better leverage to encourage the construction of affordable housing.

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- The Municipality could buy property as it comes on the market and provide it to the non-profit community.
- Create a communication structure that ensures that everyone is aware of what is being done and can support the people being impacted by various actions.
- Provide advocacy and homelessness training for staff and Council.
- Provide support spaces for people experiencing homelessness to go during the day.
- Take the lead on addressing extreme weather responses for the homeless.
- Pilot or test innovative housing solutions that may support the housing of high acuity needs.

## Attachment 2 – List of Proposed Designated Sites for Overnight and Multi-Night Sheltering

### Proposed Parks– EAST overnight

Name of Park	District	Classification – overnight or long term	Close to Public Washroom
Albro Lake	EAST	Overnight	Yes
Cole Harbour Common	EAST	Overnight	Yes
Green Road	EAST	Overnight	Yes
Penhorn	EAST	Overnight	Yes
Unnamed Site 29 (Sackville Dr.)	EAST	Overnight	No

### Proposed Parks – EAST long term

Name of Park	District	Classification – overnight or long term	Close to Public Washroom
Crathorne Park	EAST	Long term	No
Geary St.	EAST	Long term	Yes
Woodside Area Park	EAST	Long term	No

### Proposed Parks – WEST overnight

Name of Park	District	Classification – overnight or long term	Close to Public Washroom
Balcom	WEST	Overnight	No
Beaufort and South (Beaufort Avenue Park)	WEST	Overnight	No
Bi-Hi Park	WEST	Overnight	Yes
Chocolate Lake	WEST	Overnight	Yes
Mainland Commons (open space area)	WEST	Overnight	Yes
Saunders Park	WEST	Overnight	No

### Proposed Parks – WEST long term

Name of Park	District	Classification – overnight or long term	Close to Public Washroom
Barrington (near trail, diagonal from Barrington/Cornwallis site)	WEST	Long term	No
Ravenscraig Drive Park (on the other side of Purcell's Cove Road from the Frog Pond)	WEST	Long Term	No