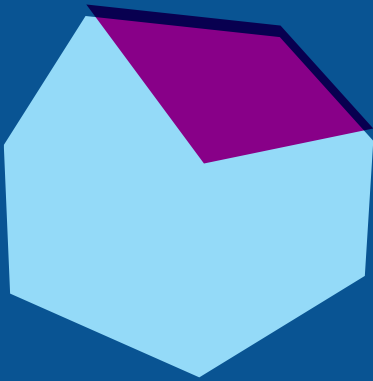




Durham Region Policy Paper:

Addressing Homelessness and Related Challenges

Durham Region is experiencing a homelessness, mental health and addictions crisis. Like other cities and towns across the country, Durham has seen a significant increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness and struggling from mental illness and addictions. The needs are outpacing our ability to provide support. Our community is suffering and no one agency or organization can address the problem alone. The homelessness, mental health and addictions crises are complex and the risk factors leading people to crisis often intersect. People with poor mental health are more susceptible to the factors that can lead to homelessness. People with mental illness are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness. Homelessness, in turn, amplifies poor mental health. This is a cycle that Durham Region is working to end.



This paper:

1. Describes the challenges that the Durham community faces
2. Highlights the 'bright spots' – the Durham models and programs that are making a difference
3. Identifies the areas where collaboration and investment by provincial and federal governments can address the challenges

In this paper, we identify solutions that will improve the outcomes of people experiencing homelessness and struggling from mental illness and addictions. The solutions have been informed by staff, workshops with community agencies, engagement with local municipalities, and alignment with relevant associations including the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, Ontario Big City Mayors, and the Canadian Urban Transit Association.

Everyone around the table agrees that further action is needed by the Region, the province, and the federal government to support our community and so many others. These challenges cannot be addressed alone. We must all work together to ensure every resident of Durham Region feels safe and has a sense of belonging. We can do this by ensuring their needs for education, health care, food, housing, income, and social and cultural expression are met. Durham Region looks forward to working on solutions with our government partners. Together we can make change in our communities.

Homelessness

Overview

Homelessness is growing in our community. In 2022, on average, there were 42 additional people who began experiencing homelessness every month. Durham's data shows a 67 per cent increase in people experiencing unsheltered homelessness over the past year.

The people experiencing homelessness have varied, complex needs and require multifaceted supports. In 2021, 54 per cent of people experiencing homelessness in Durham had high acuity or high needs. This increased to 64 per cent in 2022.



Durham's Bright Spots

- Despite increasing inflow, Durham's coordinated access system was able to maintain relative stability throughout 2022. The system was able to house 218 people in 2022
- Durham has expanded client-facing Regional teams to provide on the ground support for people in need through the:
 - Transitional Support Program
 - Primary Care Outreach Program
 - Mental Health Outreach Program
- Durham Regional Council dedicated \$75 million of the property tax budget towards Housing and Homelessness in 2023. Almost \$6 million is dedicated to homelessness specifically but with the growing needs in the community
- The former Housing Service Development Charge funded new projects in the community such as the 52 new affordable units in Clarington in 2022
- The Social Services Relief Fund which was available during the pandemic, was used in Durham to contribute to the construction of 77 new units
- Provincial funding increases to the Homelessness Prevention Program funding of approximately \$7 million/year will support the continuation of programming developed during the pandemic



Declare homelessness a national emergency

The federal Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy supports the National Housing Strategy and integrates tools and approaches, such as a Coordinated Access System, which are used effectively in Durham to support people in need. However, the need far outpaces the supports available. A federal pivot from a Homelessness Strategy to declaring a homelessness emergency would better reflect the urgency and gravity of the situation and need for swift meaningful action.



Provide flexible funding to create more deeply affordable and supportive housing

The Region engaged OrgCode Consulting to do a system review of the supports for homelessness in the region. Despite recent government investments in housing, the OrgCode report stated that Durham needs 200 more shelter beds over the next three years and 60 supportive housing units per year over five years.

- Federal programs provide capital funding for housing, but programs should be allocation-based and have flexible uses. For example, the Rapid Housing Initiative partially supported three different projects that will bring 73 units to the system but it cannot currently be used to increase shelter space. With an additional 200 shelter beds needed in Durham, additional flexible funding is required
- The Housing Accelerator Fund seeks to increase affordable housing but upper-tier Regional governments - the government level responsible for community and supportive housing in Ontario are ineligible. Dedicated federal capital funding for Regional governments is required to deliver innovative affordable housing projects
- Partnership with both the province and federal government is needed to provide capital investment in housing infrastructure and the wrap around supports needed (such as access to mental health and addictions services) to lead to successful outcomes
- There is a regional project to develop a mixed-use housing project on Rossland Road which would increase the housing options in Durham but requires partnership



Increase wages for homelessness support sector workers

During the pandemic, the provincial government recognized personal support workers face unique job pressures that merit extra compensation. As an effort to attract and retain workers in long-term care, public hospitals and community care settings, the province issued a permanent \$3/hour wage enhancement to personal support workers (PSWs). Frontline homelessness support staff are suffering from significant mental health stress and are leaving the sector similar to PSW staff retention challenges during the pandemic.

- Homelessness support sector employees tend to be female and are comprised of a younger cohort. Homelessness support sector workers generally have post-secondary education such as a trade school, college or non-university certificate diploma
- A 2019 national study demonstrated that the median wages, salaries and commissions for homelessness support sector workers was \$32,707, which was lower than social workers (\$59,494) and social and community service workers (\$37,716) employed in all sectors
- Province-wide increased wages for homelessness support workers are needed to attract and retain staff in this critical sector which is on the frontline of the homelessness, mental health and addictions crises



Reduce poverty by increasing income

According to Statistics Canada, Durham had a population of 696,992 residents as of the end of 2021. We have an estimated 45,800 residents (6.6 per cent) living with low income, defined as \$26,570 after tax for an individual and \$53,140 for a family of four.

Individuals living with low income include those who are receiving employment income and/or social assistance under the Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Programs (ODSP). As of January 2023, the number of OW recipients in Durham was 12,835. The number of ODSP recipients was 19,952.

Existing income supports, including social assistance benefits, are not enough for people to live with dignity. While ODSP rates were increased by 5 per cent in 2022, OW rates have not seen an increase since 2018.

- Increases to OW by at least 12 per cent against current rates and ODSP by seven per cent based on the September 2022 increase are required
- Implement earning exemptions to the OW program similar to the ODSP program which allows earnings of \$1000 per month, to let recipients develop greater financial independence and autonomy from government assistance, and create opportunities for engagement, training, and employment
- Implement a basic income based on the evidence from programs and research around the world that show that basic income, in various forms, has a positive impact on the lives of people who receive it



Increase portable housing benefits

Portable housing benefits like the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit Program (COHB) have been effective in helping low acuity individuals in Durham Region exit the shelter system into affordable housing. A consistently low vacancy rate in Durham has contributed to steadily raising rents and an average two-bedroom apartment in Durham rents for \$2321/month. In a climate of rising rental costs, rent supplement programs are even more vital for individuals to access market rental housing.

- Durham has exhausted available COHB funding in the past several years leaving unmet demand
- New and enhanced investments in COHB funding to increase Durham's allocation are required from the provincial and federal governments to support more individuals and families securing and maintaining market rental housing
- Program eligibility criteria should be expanded to include vulnerable persons admitted under federal emergency travel pathways in response to humanitarian crises and other immigration program, including those who may be temporary residents

Mental Health and Addictions (MHA)

Overview

Growing MHA challenges in Durham are straining existing support systems. Over 14,000 individual visits to the emergency department in Durham for mental health and substance use emergencies in 2022. At 827 days, Durham has the second worst wait times for child and youth mental health services in Ontario.

In Ontario, Public Health Units do not oversee or provide mental illness treatment programs. Instead, many mental health services within Durham are funded directly by Ontario Health and the Ontario Ministry of Health and delivered by health professionals within the community, including primary care providers, community agencies, hospitals, treatment facilities such as Canadian Mental Health Association Durham, Durham Mental Health Services, Lakeridge Health, including Pinewood Centre, Ontario Shores Centre for Mental Health Sciences, and service hubs, such as Back Door Mission.

Durham's Bright Spots

- Decrease of opioid poisoning-related calls to paramedics and visits to emergency departments in 2022
- Strong local partnership on the Durham Region Opioid Task Force that works together to create the Durham Region Opioid Response Plan – including agencies that provide harm reduction and/or treatment services, first responders, individual residents with lived experience, school boards, and health professionals
- Durham has expanded client-facing Regional teams to provide on the ground support for people in need through the Mental Health Outreach Program

Advocacy Positions

Durham Region applauds the 2020 Roadmap to Wellness: A Plan to Build Ontario's Mental Health and Addictions System which aims to build a comprehensive and connected mental health and addictions system easier to navigate and to access care. In the 2023 provincial budget, additional \$425 million was committed over three years towards MHA programs and services.

The 2023 Federal Budget includes funding allocated towards suicide prevention efforts and a renewed Canadian Drugs and Substances Strategy with focus on combatting the opioid crisis.





Support the Ontario Shores EmPATH Model

- A planning grant for a 24/7 emergency mental health assessment and treatment facility at Ontario Shores ensuring the right treatment in the right place
- A first-in-Canada solution using the proven Emergency Psychiatric Assessment Treatment and Healing Unit (EmPATH), model. In EmPATH units, unlike a traditional ER, patients are provided with immediate psychological assessment followed by immediate psychiatric and pharmacological treatment- all in a safe and non-threatening environment
- A dedicated and appropriate facility for individuals experiencing a mental health crisis will provide relief to emergency departments while ensuring appropriate care



Approve the Lakeridge Health Planning Grant

- Durham is one of Ontario's fastest growing municipalities. By 2041, Lakeridge Health will need almost 1,800 beds, more than double the current count
- The population growth has stretched Lakeridge Health to the limits, currently operating at 105 per cent of funded capacity
- The province has approved Lakeridge Health's plan to build in a new hospital and they need the requested planning grant to be approved to allow this important work to advance so that the residents of Durham Region have greater access to care



Invest in Best Practice Approaches to Mental Health and Addictions across Durham hospitals

- While the number of opioid poisonings in Durham are reducing, the number of opioid related emergency room visits and opioid deaths are still too high. Investment in specialized addictions support in every emergency department should be considered. A specialized medical professional, 'Opioid Navigator' role would help to reduce deaths and provide support for those with opioid addictions in accessing support after a crisis
- Empower physicians, nurse practitioners and other medical professionals to provide support to those suffering from opioid addiction since many of these patients do not have OHIP coverage
- To support a continuum of care, create a provincial system of support that includes supportive housing for those leaving residential withdrawal management as an alternative to returning to homelessness



Increase mental health and addictions stabilization beds

- Aligned with Lakeridge Health's Together, Best Mental Health strategy, support the development of a rapid pathway from emergency departments into Pinewood's Withdrawal Management Program or other mental health services treatment centres
- Provide access to more mental health and addictions stabilization beds (including crisis beds and addictions beds) to eliminate the wait for those who are ready to seek treatment



Invest in frontline supports such as the Primary Care Outreach Program and Mental Health Outreach Program

- Durham Region has been operating the Primary Care Outreach Program for four years. During that time, the mobile team of a paramedic and social worker have developed trust within the vulnerable populations, so that they can provide crisis counseling and system navigation to get people the mental health and addictions support they need
- Permanent funding for the program will ensure patients continue to see improved health outcomes and reduced emergency room visits
- This highly impactful proven program should be made permanent



Endorse AMO's Integrated Approach to Mental Health and Addictions

AMOs comprehensive approach to mental health and addictions includes planning services and developing policies with municipalities and key partners at the table.

- The Region of Durham endorses AMO's submission to the Ministry of Health (August 2022)
- We recommend that boards of health, which include regional municipalities, sit on central and regional Ontario Health MHA tables as key partners informing the delivery of mental health and addictions services

Victimization and Criminal Behaviour

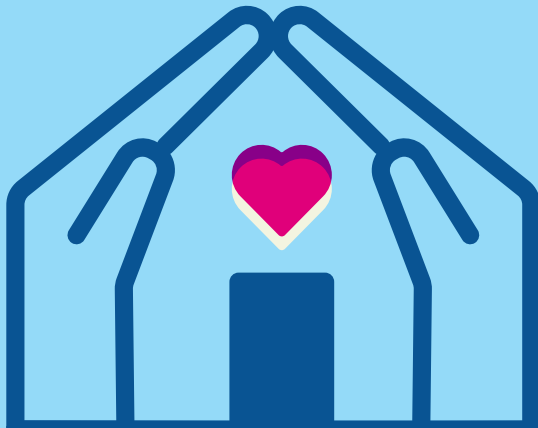
Overview

Homelessness is associated with crime victimization highlighting the need to address criminal behaviour alongside employing strategic and targeted approaches to help people out of homelessness. A review of bail conditions would better protect vulnerable populations from repeat offenders while increased supports for offenders during incarceration and following release would help make community reintegration a success



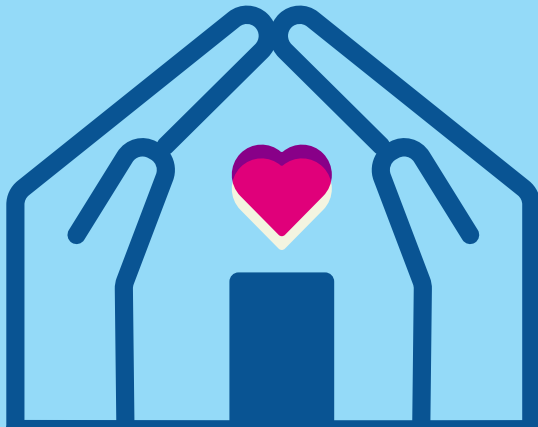
Durham's Bright Spots

- Launch of the Crisis Call Diversion Program. The program diverts non-emergency calls to a clinician and connects individuals to mental health supports. Year-to-date Mental Health Act apprehensions in 2023 are decreasing
- Unique partnership between Victim Services, Durham Regional Police Service and the Ontario Works team at the Region work closely to support victims of human trafficking. Having a specially trained response team to support victims at each Ontario Works location, has been successful at helping build trust and supporting people out of trafficking
- Almost \$4 million from the federal Building Safer Communities Fund will be used in Durham
- Preventative community policing in downtown Oshawa totalling over 29,000 hours
- Five Durham Regional Police Service (DRPS) Mental Health Support Units, consisting of a Police Constable and a Regionally funded Registered Nurse conduct proactive mental health follow ups and provide immediate mental health support



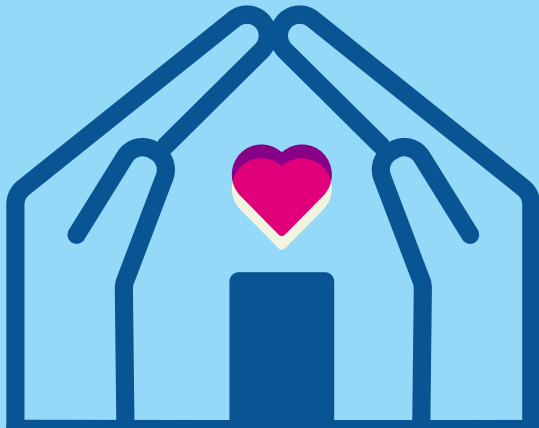
Ensure access to MHA programs to incarcerated individuals as well as those serving sentences in the community and on parole

- Mental illness is overrepresented in the criminal justice system in Canada. Rates are four to seven times more common in prison than in the community
- To reduce the rate of recidivism coming out of prison, the justice system should screen for mental health problems and distress and offer mental health care for people that is appropriate to their needs and support them through their incarceration



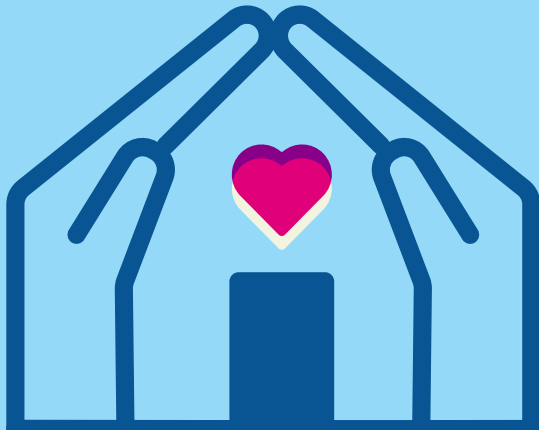
Fully implement the community reintegration program across all Correctional Facilities in Ontario

- Successful community reintegration lowers the rate of reoffending and makes communities safer
- A substantial proportion of prison releases are either homeless or at an increased risk of becoming homeless at release and need appropriate connections to community supports
- Ensuring active planning for release and re-integration into society by addressing issues like housing, financial support, linkage with community mental health services (professional support, medication etc.) and family and social support will increase the effectiveness of reintegration
- Implementation of the provincial Community Reintegration Program at the Central East Correctional Centre will ensure those leaving incarceration and coming to Durham are better equipped to be successful in the community



Implement bail reform for repeat offenders

- The province has called on the federal government to implement meaningful bail reform. Police services, like Durham Regional Police Service need to have a seat at the table to discuss the challenges with releasing repeat offenders back into our communities
- Increased funding is required to support police to enforce bail conditions



Strengthen penalties for assaults on all transit works

- Increasing incidents of assault on transit workers is happening across the country



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