

A home for every person

Hamilton's new effort to solve homelessness



Homeless Cam, a homeless person at the Wesley Centre on Ferguson Avenue, near Barton..

Kaz Novak/The Hamilton Spectator

For many Hamiltonians, it's a familiar dilemma: put a roof overhead or put dinner on the table.

"It's hard to find a place that's affordable to rent and also afford groceries," says Cam, a homeless Six Nations man who spends his days at the [Wesley Centre](#) and his nights hopping between local shelters.

A former heavy equipment operator who was injured on the job, Cam now survives on a \$565 monthly allowance from Ontario Works.

He says it's barely enough to rent a room in a rooming house, and for him, that's not a viable option. He fears for his safety in places like that, and it's not the sort of company he wants to keep.

"I'm trying to stay away from those places," he says, fingering the lens of his broken eyeglasses. "There's a lot of drug activity and you don't know when someone's going to kick your door in at night."

With more than 5,300 local households waiting for affordable housing and more than 5,600 men, women and children using Hamilton's shelters each year, the obstacles Cam faces are hardly unique.

But city officials hope to change that through the creation of a comprehensive homelessness and affordable housing plan.

“We think it’s very important that we address the full continuum, from homelessness prevention to serving people in the shelters, to, ultimately, everyone in Hamilton having safe and affordable housing,” said Gillian Hendry, the city’s director of housing and homelessness. “It’s important to have a very inclusive plan for the future.”

More than 20 representatives from all levels of government and several local agencies will come together to develop the [Housing and Homelessness Action Plan](#), a community-centric strategy that will work to ensure that everyone in the city has a home.

The plan, which will focus on the specific needs of Hamilton and its residents, will advocate policy change and act as a point of liaison between the city and upper levels of government. It will also work to address some of the financial challenges that have traditionally plagued the social housing system.

“If we have a good, staged, phased plan in place, we can generate more funding opportunities,” Hendry said. “That way, when available funding comes up we will have a plan in place rather than scrambling.”

Hendry said the proposal will be brought to the [emergency and community services committee on Feb. 17](#). The planning group, which meets monthly, will then attempt to create and implement the action plan by year’s end.

“We need this,” said Alan Whittle, a spokesperson for the Good Shepherd Centre and a member of the planning group. “If we have affordable housing, people might be able to afford food.”

According to Whittle and other group members, the initiative is an improvement over previous city strategies, such as a 2004 plan that addressed affordable housing and a 2007 plan that addressed homelessness, because it treats the issue “holistically.”

Joanne Santucci, executive director of Hamilton Food Share, said having representatives from a variety of sectors, including [Service Canada](#), the [Affordable Housing Flagship](#) and the Emergency Food System, will enable the group to develop strategies that align with the multifaceted nature of housing problems.

“Once you see the connections and understand them, more resources, expertise and information are at your disposal,” she explained.

Dean Waterfield, director of the [Transitions to Home program](#), said he backs the initiative, specifically because it aims to address issues such as addiction and mental illness that often contribute to homelessness.

“It’s a very complex issue,” he said. “For some people it’s a transitory stage in their life, for others it’s a cycle that they’re stuck in. Those two scenarios require different supports and different interventions.”

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