



MEMO / NOTE DE SERVICE

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TO: Board of Health for the City of Ottawa Health Unit

DESTINATAIRE : Conseil de santé de la circonscription sanitaire de la ville d'Ottawa

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FILE NUMBER: ACS2023-OPH-HPP-0004

SUBJECT: Strengthening Bridges between Health and Housing Systems

OBJET : Renforcer les liens entre les systèmes de santé et de logement

PURPOSE:

This memo provides a brief overview of Ottawa Public Health's (OPH) current contributions to enhancing the health of Ottawa residents who are experiencing homelessness and people who are precariously housed. It also outlines proposed future

endeavours to bolster OPH's contribution to influencing broader systems-level changes within the health and housing sectors.

BACKGROUND

The health challenges facing people who are experiencing homelessness and precarious housing situations are currently some of the most significant public health concerns in Canada. Housing is a key determinant of health as it affects physical, mental and social health and wellbeing. Poor housing quality is associated with chronic illnesses, injuries, poor nutrition, and mental illnesses. Healthy, safe and secure long-term housing is important for addressing many of these poor health outcomes. The location of housing is also connected to other social determinants of health, such as social supports systems, and housing context contributes to a household's sense of community. Healthy housing is affordable, safe and accessible and supports people to carry out their daily activities. Safe, healthy and affordable housing supports health by increasing the amount of disposable income households have, which increases the accessibility of healthy foods and supports healthy lifestyles and healthy relationships.

Integrating health and social supports into housing programs can positively impact the health and wellbeing of people experiencing homelessness and precarious housing situations. The City of Ottawa's Official Plan discussion paper entitled "[*The Building Blocks for a Healthy Ottawa*](#)" outlines the interlinks between health and housing.

LOCAL CONTEXT AND ACTION

In January 2020, City Council declared an Affordable Housing and Homelessness Emergency.¹ Over the last three years, the City's Housing Services Departments has implemented a number of initiatives to address these pressing community issues. In June 2023, Council approved the [Integrated Transition to Housing Strategy](#), which outlines short-, medium- and long-term strategies to support clients to transit to housing, while addressing immediate pressures in the shelter system. To meaningfully impact system-level change in support of ending homelessness, collaboration is required across multiple sectors.

¹ Motion 26/14 - City Council meeting of January 29, 2020 <https://pub-ottawa.escribemeetings.com/Meeting.aspx?Id=cc9ea3d1-3b98-3d41-94f0-8c72140880bc&Agenda=PostMinutes&lang=English>

Over the past few years, OPH has collaborated with partners to advance the integration of health and the social determinants of health into housing programs, services, and policies. The following are some highlights (detailed list included in Document 1):

- Increasing access to mental health, wellness and harm reduction services and resources for people who are experiencing homelessness.
- Supporting people accessing shelters and housing programs to navigate barriers and build trust.
- Connecting families to housing supports & influencing improved shelter policies and data collection for better health for families.
- Reducing the negative impact of infectious diseases through preventative, early identification and harm reduction approaches for people experiencing homelessness and who are precariously housed.
- Influencing City planning and climate change policies to foster healthy communities with respect to creating healthy, walkable 15-minute neighbourhoods, protecting people from health hazards, and advancing healthy public policy that will positively impact the range and affordability levels of housing through supporting implementation of the Official Plan.

As part of the OPH [2023-2027 Strategic Plan](#), the health unit will collaborate with partners and the City of Ottawa's Housing Services department to support their strategic planning with shared goals to effectively integrate health and housing systems, including advancing healthcare supports to help people remain stably housed.

Throughout 2024, the City of Ottawa will be updating its [10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan](#), which will outline the key goals and actions it will undertake to ensure everyone has a place to call home.

DISCUSSION

By any measure, Ottawa's homelessness response system is operating over capacity. On any given night last year, 2,067 individuals in Ottawa were experiencing homelessness, and those numbers are expected to be exceeded this year. The family shelter system is currently 337% over capacity and the City has over 300 families in overflow shelter spaces. The volume of demand for emergency shelter is regularly outpacing available space, requiring staff to maintain a waitlist for families to be placed in the shelter system. With the growing number of people experiencing homelessness

and people experiencing precarious housing situations, combined with the toxic drug supply, OPH and Housing Services will further examine opportunities to influence system changes. These system changes will aim to make impactful and long-term improvements that will support people who are not currently receiving the health and social care supports they need. While health and housing sector partners are collaborating to provide enhanced and targeted health and social supports, system change provides an opportunity to further integrate health and housing systems.

OPH and the City of Ottawa's Housing Services have initiated discussions with health, housing and community partners to identify opportunities to strengthen our systems to support people with unmet health needs. These discussions have focused on the following issues: initial and ongoing health assessment tools, data sharing and integration, collaboration between systems for case management and planning, and creating and streamlining care pathways from housing services to community-based health care. Although some of these changes can be implemented within existing resources, the more transformational system changes will require additional investments. Ideas from these ongoing discussions will inform provincial health funding applications and Housing Services' strategic planning.

Future opportunities to collaborate with the City's Housing Services department include:

- Knowledge exchange and integration of health and housing data;
- Advancing health and housing system change to better support people who are unhoused, people with precarious living situations, and people who live in supportive and community housing; and
- Informing and contributing to the City's refresh of its 10-year Homelessness and Housing Plan.

CONCLUSION

OPH will update the Board of Health on the progress, including OPH's Strategy action plans related to Goal 2: Create Conditions to Live Well and Thrive.

Dr./ Dre Vera Etches

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SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Document 1 - OPH collaborative approaches to increasing health supports within housing

Supporting Document 1: Increasing health supports within housing

OPH collaborative approaches to increasing health supports within housing includes:

Increase access to mental health, wellness and harm reduction services and resources

- In collaboration with partners, develop accessible and available services to support people experiencing homelessness and people who are unstably housed with mental health, addictions and substance use health needs.
- In collaboration with partners, ensure access to harm reduction and overdose prevention supports through services like needle and syringe programs, supervised consumption and treatments services, naloxone kit distribution, and mobile outreach.
- In partnership with Recovery Care and Ottawa Inner City Health, launched a mobile substance use health and infectious disease service, which aims to increase access to substance use health supports and infectious disease services for Ottawa residents who are experiencing barriers accessing services.

Navigate barriers and build trust

- Support individuals and families who live in shelters by navigating language barriers and building trust with those who have experienced several, complex barriers.
- Increase access to public health resources and information, facilitate mobile vaccine clinics, connect clients to community supports, and work alongside the Community and Social Services Department's Integrated Neighbourhood Services team to problem-solve issues.

Connect families to housing supports & influence improved shelter policies and data collection for families

- Participate in the Rapid Resolution Table pilot project, which aims to prevent shelter entry. Through this project some families were able to access Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit and keep their housing.
- Provide system navigation to families. This includes providing guidance to families on the process for accessing housing support, subsidized housing, and information about temporary housing process/timeline.

- Support families to remain in their homes by connecting to community services and advocating on client's behalf with housing concerns (i.e.: pest concerns, unhealthy living environments, provide help to connect with property owners). Public Health Nurses also connect with housing workers to provide and receive updates, address concerns and suggestions, and/or special consideration for families with special needs children.
- Contribute to revised Point-In-Time Count (City of Ottawa, 2021) to include questions regarding pregnancy as a life changing event.
- In collaboration with the Housing Services Department, influence shelter procedures to support pregnant women and their respective partner/support to access family-focused housing opportunities before giving birth and encourage prioritizing families with children and pregnant women in emergency shelter locations with kitchen amenities.

Reduce the negative impact of infectious diseases through preventative, early identification and harm reduction approaches

- Collaborate with congregate living services providers and shelters to prevent transmission of infectious diseases by updating infection prevention and control standards for congregate settings and shelters; building capacity and providing education to increase knowledge and skills among facility staff and operators for infection prevention and control measures; and developing procedures to support safe isolation for infectious diseases.
- Support the City's homelessness working group.
- Enhance health services with local providers, including strengthening vaccination access.
- Provide property standards enforcement and health hazards response to congregate living setting and shelters.

Influence City planning and climate change policies to foster healthy communities

- In collaboration with City partners, advance healthy public policy that will positively impact the range and affordability levels of housing, through supporting implementation of the Official Plan. This includes working towards greater densities, greater diversity of housing choice and ensuring housing is supported

through the evolution of healthy, walkable 15-minute neighbourhoods. This includes, for instance, involvement in the new Zoning by-law.

- Protect those who experience homelessness and are unstably housed from health hazards, including extreme heat and cold by: providing resources on extreme heat and cold protection measures to service providers, including those who work with people experiencing homelessness, and chairing the City of Ottawa Extreme Heat, Cold and Smog Planning Committee.
- Continue with the Climate Change and Health Vulnerability Assessment on extreme heat, which included collecting community feedback on current adaptations and future resiliency measures for where people live or stay from services providers who work with those who are experiencing homelessness and who are unstably housed.