



MEMO / NOTE DE SERVICE

To / Destinataire Mayor and Members of Council

File/N° de fichier:

From / Expéditeur Kale Brown, Director, Housing and Homelessness Services Branch

Subject / Objet Motion No. CSC2025-18-01
Response to Encampments

Date: February 20, 2026

Purpose

The purpose of this memo is to provide a response to Motion No. CSC2025-18-01 approved on September 23, 2025, by Community Services Committee and by Council on October 8, 2025.

BE IT RESOLVED that the Community Services Committee recommend that Council direct Community and Social Services Department staff as follows:

1. **That staff provide a written summary of the current response to addressing encampments, particularly as it relates to the response in Ward 12; and**
2. **That staff complete an analysis of encampment response, including dismantles, across the City and utilize the data to identify gaps which will be used to inform resource needs and prioritization by Q4 2025.**
3. **That following the analysis by staff, staff will meet with impacted Ward Councillors to review the findings and will report their findings to Committee.**

Background

In 2020, the City of Ottawa began experiencing a sustained increase in the number of encampments and people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. In response, City staff established the Unsheltered Task Force (UTF), recognizing the need to develop a consistent, collaborative, and human-rights based response to encampments. The UTF is a multi-departmental task force comprised of City Staff, service providers, and relevant community stakeholders. The core members of the UTF (*see Appendix A*), who are subject matter experts in

their respective service areas, developed the Ottawa Community Encampment Response Plan as well as the Guidance Document for Encampment Identification and Response. These documents form the basis for the City's current response to unsheltered homelessness. The response is regularly reviewed with relevant partners and updated based on current strategic or legislative direction.

Recently, the City has further clarified its approach to encampments following the release of a report from the Federal Housing Advocate which outlined the following:

Upholding Dignity and Human Rights: The Federal Housing Advocate's Review of Homeless Encampments Final Report in 2024 states that international human rights standards prohibit measures that would arbitrarily and unnecessarily deprive individuals of housing, including temporary or informal shelters such as encampments. The advocate states that relocation without consent should be limited to exceptional circumstances. International human rights standards require all levels of government to make every effort and use all available resources to eliminate homelessness. By recognizing the human right to adequate housing, clearly established in human rights law, governments have legal obligations to respect this right and protect against its violation.

Last year, the Federal government issued funding through Unsheltered Homelessness and Encampment Initiative (UHEI). The UHEI funding stream of the Federal Reaching Home program aims to support community encampment response plans that commit to the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing. In 2025 the City of Ottawa received \$10,479,346 of UHEI funding that required the implementation of a human rights-based approach to responding to encampments in Ottawa.

The Ottawa Community Encampment Response Plan is grounded in this human rights-based approach and outlines a client-centered process to address unsheltered homelessness and encampments. The plan emphasizes collaboration, compassion, and cultural appropriateness, particularly for Indigenous peoples. It integrates multiple partners including internal City of Ottawa departments, outreach services, health organizations, and Indigenous service partners. The plan also works through coordinated structures like the UTF and integrates ongoing case conferencing among stakeholders. Enforcement and the process to dismantle an encampment includes additional partners such as By-Law Services, Public Works, and Ottawa Police Services. The City and partners do not activate an enforcement response until all other supportive solutions have been exhausted.

Current state in Ottawa

Ottawa has experienced an increase in the number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness and reported encampments, with continued increases each year since the City started tracking in 2020. This increase is driven by factors such as economic pressures, lack of affordable and supportive housing, and individuals struggling with physical health challenges, mental health challenges and/or addictions. The increase in encampments has had an impact on

both individuals experiencing homelessness and the surrounding community. Residents in highly impacted areas have reported being more likely to feel unsafe walking in their communities and believing their community had become a worse place to live in recent years, with the increase of encampment activity. In the community survey done as part of the Community, Safety and Well-Being Plan Refresh it was found that overall wellness and safety concerns have been expressed by members of the community because of the growing number of encampments.

In response, the City has been working with community partners and other levels of government to address the underlying causes of unsheltered homelessness. Since 2023, over 700 transitional housing beds have been added to the shelter system, alongside 180 supportive housing units. These additions have created new shelter and housing options to address the growing needs for transitional, supportive and affordable housing in Ottawa.

Despite these efforts, while shelter capacity exists, some people still choose to stay outdoors. This choice may be due to lived experiences of trauma, safety concerns in shelters, and/or a lack of pet-friendly options. The City is aware of these barriers and is working with the Housing and Homelessness Leadership Table (HHLT) to assess and respond to gaps in the system, with a focus on supporting rapid transitions to long-term housing.

In the January 2026 Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) Report: *Municipalities Under Pressure One Year Later: An Update on the Human and Financial Cost of Ontario's Homelessness Crisis*, it was stated that there are nearly 2000 site-based encampments in Ontario, with 42 of 47 service managers in the province reporting encampments. The report found that enforcement and management activities have led to the movement of encampments, often to less visible places, but not to long-term housing solutions. The AMO report recommends that the provincial and federal governments invest in long-term action on affordable housing, mental health and addiction services and income supports to address the growing number of individuals and families experiencing homelessness.

In Ottawa, between January 1, 2025, and December 31, 2025, there were 545 encampments reported that resulted in a service request to the Salvation Army Outreach team. These reports triggered the UTF response plan. Of those:

- 462 were resolved without the enforcement of an organized dismantle
- 83 required an organized, enforced dismantle through the City-led coordinated approach

As part of work to update the City's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan, staff also completed a 2024 Housing Needs Assessment (HNA). The HNA describes increased challenges in supporting a diversity of needs among people experiencing homelessness. These challenges are not unique to Ottawa and are being experienced by other municipalities across Canada. To address these issues, the HNA found that increased investments are needed in affordable housing and other support services such as health, mental health and substance use treatment.

The City of Ottawa also conducts Point-in-Time (PIT) surveys with people experiencing homelessness across the community in partnership with sector stakeholders. Recent surveys showed the number of encampments is increasing. In 2018 there were 51 people living unsheltered in Ottawa, in 2021 that number grew to 151 and in 2024 increased further to 405. These changes reflect broader affordability pressures and systemic barriers to long-term housing. Ottawa's experiences mirror patterns observed across Ontario of prolonged shelter stays and limited pathways out of homelessness.

Ottawa's response to encampments and unsheltered homelessness

The City of Ottawa responds to encampments through the Ottawa Community Encampment Response Plan, using the Guiding Document for Encampment Identification and Response. This response plan provides a framework for a community-based, supportive, and housing-focused response to encampments and unsheltered homelessness. The documents outline current practices to respond to encampments across the City and are updated regularly. The coordinated response is consistent across the city and focuses on ensuring people are supported to access long-term housing.

Although the coordinated encampment response is applied city-wide, including in Ward 12, it is recognized that the majority of unsheltered homelessness is located in the downtown core. Through a review of the encampment reporting data it was found that of the 545 reported encampments in 2025, 159 of those were reported in Ward 12. This trend is due to a variety of factors, including proximity to services, transportation, and community supports that people experiencing homelessness often rely on. While our overall encampment response model is consistent across the city, a higher prevalence of activity downtown requires a greater presence from outreach teams.

The City recognizes that historically social services to support higher needs individuals have been concentrated downtown leading to more social issues and ongoing impacts to surrounding communities. Staff remain committed to finding solutions to deconcentrating services for high need individuals in the downtown and ensuring people can be supported in their home communities. Although the City has made some progress in recent years, there is still more that needs to be done to address social issues caused by homelessness, mental health illness and a toxic drug supply.

Recent efforts by the City have also included a focus on its outreach response where the needs are greatest, by deploying additional resources and more coordinated outreach to the downtown core. This allows outreach services to engage more frequently with individuals in encampments, offer supports, and promote pathways to shelter and housing. Again, it is recognized that enhanced outreach services downtown is a short-term approach, and that the focus needs to remain on the long-term strategy of creating pathways to permanent, affordable and supportive housing.

The City's encampment response plan prioritizes housing-focused outreach, trauma-informed care, and meaningful engagement. Through the Plan, the City aims to reduce encampments by 35 per cent and improve housing outcomes through initiatives funded by municipal, provincial, and federal sources. Long-term goals in the response plan align with Ottawa's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan, targeting systemic solutions like increased supportive housing units and improving safety and well-being through integrated services and community partnerships.

The Guidance Document for Encampment Identification and Response outlines a four-step process:

1. Identification and notification

In the identification and notification step, encampments are reported through various City channels and tracked using a digital tool to improve coordination. City staff are notified of encampments in multiple ways. Reporting mechanisms include direct emails to City staff, 311 reports (email, phone call, or online reporting form), via elected officials, and via other partners such as the National Capital Commission (NCC), By-Law, and Ottawa Police Services. Often, the same encampment site is reported multiple times.

2. Site assessment

Once the City has been notified of the encampment, the site assessment begins. During this step staff track all encampments and make a service request to the Salvation Army Outreach Team (contracted partner) to attend the encampment. Direct outreach takes place with the individual(s) residing in the encampment during which an assessment is made to determine whether a dismantle is warranted, considering several factors. These factors include where the encampment is located, potential or real safety concerns and the size of the encampment.

3. Support services and engagement

Once the service request is sent to the Salvation Army Outreach team it leads with a housing-focused, trauma-informed, and harm-reduction approach. The outreach team's goal is to offer housing-focused supports and shelter placement. Additionally, the team provides referrals to mental health and addiction services and other services such as culturally appropriate services for Indigenous residents. The outreach team remains in ongoing communication with City staff to update on interventions and housing progress.

Client engagement emphasizes client autonomy and voluntary participation. Before enforcement and dismantle, the focus is on resolving situations through outreach services. This approach has demonstrated that most individuals in encampments move on voluntarily after receiving a formal notice to vacate, which builds the supportive relationship with outreach providers and avoids the need for initiating the fourth level of encampment response – dismantle – through police, By-Law and Public Works involvement.

4. Dismantlement (if required)

Dismantles are used as a last resort when a supportive intervention is not successful. The supportive intervention efforts can vary in length based on the factors of the assessment described above. Dismantles involve resources from multiple internal and external partners, these include:

- **City Staff (Housing and Homelessness Services)** to lead the coordination and administrative oversight for each encampment dismantle
- **Client Support Team (City of Ottawa)** to be on-site to assist with system navigation and direct client support on the day of the dismantle
- **The Salvation Army Outreach Team** to lead engagement with individuals prior to the planned dismantle to offer support and alternatives, as well as for transportation
- **Public Works (Roads and Parking and Parks Maintenance Services)** to mobilize the deployment of crews and equipment for site cleanup, debris removal, and restoration of public spaces
- **By-Law Services** to provide enforcement presence during dismantling, issuance of notices, and compliance monitoring
- **The Ottawa Police Service (OPS)** to lend on-site support to ensure safety and manage potential conflicts during dismantling operations

Alternatively, there are exceptions to the typical process, including urgent cases or those in “No Go Zones” such as National Monuments and certain parks. It also must be considered that Ottawa is a multi-jurisdictional city where encampments can fall outside of areas of municipal jurisdiction. For example, the City of Ottawa cannot control the resolution of encampments on Ministry of Transportation (MTO), National Capital Commission (NCC), Federal or private lands. These encampments require different coordination, processes, and resources and are funded by the landowner. Though the landowner is required to resource the dismantle, the City often supports in the coordination efforts.

If the decision is made to move forward with dismantle, By-Law Services must post a notice at the encampment with the date and time of the dismantle. All efforts are made for this notice to be given five days before the scheduled dismantle date. Once the notice is posted, the five-day timeline begins, and staff mobilize a plan with partners.

The five-day notification period is intended to give the individual(s) notice to self-resolve before the scheduled dismantle. During this time outreach teams offer support until the day before the dismantle with the goal of resolving the encampment before there is an enforcement requirement. The date of the dismantle is subject to resource availability with the partners involved. Currently the City can conduct an average of 1-3 dismantles per week within existing resources.

Analysis

The City of Ottawa's response to encampments continues to be responsive to recent court decisions related to municipal encampment responses. The Ontario Superior Court of Justice ruling (Court file no CV-22717) in *Regional Municipality of Waterloo v. Persons Unknown and to be Ascertained*, dated January 27, 2023, reinforced the municipality's requirement to offer support before enforcement and dismantle. The Court found that Waterloo's by-law unlawfully violated the section 7 Charter rights of homeless encampment residents. As such, the bylaw cannot be enforced when there are more homeless individuals than available accessible shelter beds, unless the Region later proves that enforcing the by-law would no longer breach those rights.

The City of Ottawa conducted a legal review in 2023 and found that Ottawa should consider this decision when addressing enforcement of by-law's involving encampments, encampment dismantle decisions and homelessness policy development. The review noted that municipalities should prioritize outreach and individual support, facilitating access to shelter and must consider federal and NCC property rules separately. These legal findings reenforced the City's approach to addressing unsheltered homelessness and using dismantles as a last resort.

Furthermore, a dismantle process creates difficulties for outreach teams to build a supportive relationship with the person(s) who are unsheltered, which is an effective and important element required to voluntarily move people onto a housing or treatment pathway and out of an encampment.

As stated earlier, in 2025, the City, with its partners, were successful in resolving 462 encampments. Of the resolved encampments, 85% were through voluntary dismantles and formal dismantles were only required 15% of the time. In 2025, encampments that did not require the fourth step of formal dismantle took an average of 21 days to resolve.

Gaps informing resource needs

The biggest gaps in the current Response Plan process relate to the staffing and resources required to respond to the growing demand and number of service requests. To decrease the time it takes to achieve a dismantle further resources would be required.

Resource implications for dismantles include costs associated with staffing, heavy equipment, materials, transportation, coordination, and administration. The resource demands vary and are impacted by many factors. These factors include the size and location of the encampment, actual or perceived safety and health concerns at the encampment, and other general factors such as weather events, competing priorities, and staff availability.

To increase the number of dismantles there would need to be dedicated resources from internal and external partners. For instance, under current conditions, conducting two dismantles per day, five days per week would require dedicated staff resources for dismantles as follows:

- Two FTE City of Ottawa Housing and Homelessness Program Coordinators
- Two FTE City of Ottawa front line Client Support staff

- One fully staffed community outreach team (Salvation Army)
- Two FTE Ottawa Police Services (OPS) Officers and one vehicle
- One FTE By-Law Officer and one vehicle
- Ten FTE Public Works staff and four trucks

Resourcing a dedicated dismantle team, as outlined above, is cost prohibitive. The annual costs are estimated to be \$5.3 million. This includes staffing, logistics and programming, disposal fees, heavy equipment, vehicle and transportation costs. This cost estimate is specific to addressing encampments on City of Ottawa land. There would be additional considerations and costs associated with encampments located on NCC or Ministry of Transportation (MTO) owned land. Resourcing this dedicated team would allow for 10 dismantles per week. Additional investment would be required to achieve a 5-day dismantle timeline, given that the City has experienced up to more than 50 encampment sites per week during peak periods.

Again, as evidence shows, dismantling encampments represents a short-term solution. Long-term, effective solutions to unsheltered homelessness are necessary, such as more transitional, supportive and affordable housing. These require targeted, sustainable funding by all levels of government.

In the interim, the City, with its partners, is investing in priorities and initiatives outlined in the 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan, which will provide effective actions for addressing the growing number of encampments in Ottawa.

Next Steps

The City will continue working with the HHLT and other sector partners to expand transitional and supportive housing, create low-barrier 24-hour respite sites outside the downtown core, and advocate for funding for enhancing harm reduction, mental health, and addiction supports.

The municipally funded outreach service model is also being redesigned to enhance support to individuals experiencing homelessness as well as to the surrounding communities and businesses. This new Unsheltered Homelessness Outreach Model will increase visibility of outreach service providers in the downtown core where the issues are most prevalent. The model will update local strategies to assist the unsheltered population and individuals with mental health and/or substance use challenges. The new outreach model will strengthen the Encampment Response Plan by introducing centralized intake and dispatch for all encampment calls, consistent assessments by trained staff, and real-time public data on encampment locations, size, risks, and outcomes.

The Encampment Response Plan will continue to function as the policy and operational framework for how encampments are identified, assessed, monitored and supported, but the new outreach model improves how these functions are carried out on the ground and increases pathways to health care and housing.

A report on this new outreach model will be presented to Community Services Committee (CSC) on February 24, 2026.

As a next step, CSSD staff will also offer to meet with members of Council who have experienced encampments in their Wards to further discuss this response.

Sincerely,

Kale Brown
Interim Director, Housing and Homelessness Services Branch
Community and Social Services Department

Cc: Clara Freire, General Manager
Wendy Stephanson, City Manager
Senior Leadership Team
Community and Social Services Departmental Leadership Team
Jocelyne Turner, Chief Communications Officer, Public Information and Media Relation

Appendix A

Unsheltered Task Force, Core Members Group

Updated February 2026

Active Members:

1. Housing and Homelessness Services, Community and Social Services Department, City of Ottawa
2. Public Works, Roads and Parks, City of Ottawa
3. By-Law Enforcement Services, Emergency and Protective Services, City of Ottawa
4. Neighbourhood Officers, Ottawa Police Services (OPS)
5. Outreach Team, The Salvation Army
6. National Capital Commission (NCC)