

MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate release

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Lanark County moves forward with supported housing project

Lanark County is moving ahead with an innovative partnership that will see a supported housing program for Lanark County clients currently experiencing homelessness.

At its regular meeting Wednesday evening, Lanark County Council directed staff to enter into an agreement with Lanark County Mental Health (LCMH) to provide \$296,000 for the program from the county's Homelessness Prevention Program, which is 100 per cent provincially funded.

The program is planned to be housed in the now-vacant, 63-unit Willowdale Retirement Home in Smiths Falls, which was recently purchased by a developer. LCMH will enter into an agreement with the developer to run the program in that space to support about 11 clients residing in individual rooms. "The clients would sign a participation agreement with LCMH that includes rules, expectations and services," said Director of Social Services Emily Hollington. "The clients will be program participants, not tenants, and must participate in order to stay."

The rooms are approximately 170 square feet and will be renovated by the developer so they exit directly to the outside. There is space for a shared coin laundry on site, and the developer has also offered to convert an entryway into an office for the program's staff person at no extra cost.

Each unit has its own bathroom, small kitchenette, bed, desk/table and chair, etc., similar to a small bachelor apartment. They are designed for a single person but could accommodate two people (such as a couple) in some cases. Hollington explained while it will be considered transitional housing, there is no time limit to how long someone can reside in a unit. "The residents will be provided supports to find other housing in the community when they are ready, which would then free up the space for another person."

Hollington noted the "Housing First" approach is a well-established way to solve homelessness and is based on supported living environments. "This is not a shelter," Hollington said. "It is a program that supports individuals in getting the help they need to transition into longer-term, independent housing."

With the funding, LCMH will hire a case manager to work in the building to support tenants with activities of daily living, connections to services and support, and to assist them in their path to independence. They would have access to other services, such as a nurse practitioner, psychiatry, harm reduction and more. The funding will also supplement the rents of the unit, provide minimal personal items to clients and cover an administration fee. The county would be responsible for costs associated with interior unit maintenance and unit turnover, which would be provided by current Lanark County housing maintenance workers.

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At the community services committee meeting earlier this month, Hollington explained the county had 61 people on its by-name list for homelessness in January. This is a real-time list of people experiencing homelessness in the community that provides coordinated access and prioritization to services and supports. “Many of these individuals require a supported independent living environment; however, this type of housing is very limited in the county.”

Similar models in eastern Ontario include Pixie Place in the United Counties of Leeds and Grenville and the Sidney Street project in Hastings County. “This project will support people who are already living in our community,” Hollington said. “Moving people from being homeless to housed is good for the entire community as it reduces pressure on other services, such as hospitals, paramedics, police and other supports.”

Hollington explained the Housing First approach involves moving people experiencing homelessness – particularly chronic homelessness – from the street, temporary shelters such as motels, or couch surfing, into stable housing with supports. “This provides a platform to deliver services to address issues frequently faced among the chronically and episodically homeless. The goal is to encourage housing stability and improved quality of life and, to the extent possible, foster self-sufficiency.”

The “At Home/Chez Soi” project, funded by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, studied Housing First and found that more than 80 per cent of people in the study who received Housing First remained housed after the first year. For many, use of health services declined as their health improved, and involvement with law enforcement also declined. “Social and community engagement is an important focus in recovery. People make new linkages and develop a stronger sense of self.”

Hollington added if the program is determined to be successful, Lanark County would provide annual funding to LCMH to continue as long as the Homelessness Prevention Program funding and resources are available.

Council extended gratitude to the project partners to enable the space and program delivery for the supportive housing project. “This program will support people experiencing homelessness from all communities in Lanark County,” said Warden Steve Fournier (Drummond/North Elmsley Reeve). “This kind of partnership strengthens our community by helping people in need.”

“The Town of Smiths Falls is pleased to be part of the Housing First solution for the growing homelessness crisis currently taking place,” said Shawn Pankow, Smiths Falls Mayor. “The former Willowdale facility is a creative and innovative example of how rural communities can utilize vacant buildings to provide needed supports and services to those in our community who need it most. In a housing crisis, we are fortunate to have a willing landlord who has the space and the desire to help some of the most vulnerable members of our community. I do not believe there is anywhere else in Lanark County where this could have been possible. The new facility will not only provide progressive housing and mental health supports those struggling with chronic housing displacement, but it will also provide them with the tools to achieve housing sustainability and a higher quality of life now and in the future. In the end, it is about changing lives and saving lives.”



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