

What We Heard: Community Stakeholders

The following are themes that were most prevalent in the July 20, 2022 consultation with stakeholders:

Increased Focus on Eviction Prevention and Shelter Diversion Necessary:

- Stakeholders noted that when people enter into homelessness it is vital to ensure experiences are brief and non-recurring, if not non-existent altogether. This is particularly critical for high risk youth between 17 and 29 years old.
- Stakeholders shared that having a financial strategy to coordinate resources across sectors was necessary to create prevention opportunities across all stages of someone's journey, in and out of homelessness.
- Stakeholders identified prevention and a sustained long-term approach to homelessness as the most effective way to limit the number of people living in encampments.

Lack of Affordable, Subsidized, and Supportive Housing Available:

- Stakeholders suggested that housing available to people living in encampments is often inadequate or unsafe, which presents another barrier to access. Stakeholders also indicated that limited options for adequate housing lead to dissatisfaction and poor long-term housing stability.
- Stakeholders identified a lack of supportive housing, specifically a lack of appropriate housing for individuals with mental health issues who are also using substances.
- Stakeholders shared that a lack of coordination – both in funding and policy - across multiple levels and departments of government contribute to barriers that limit access to housing opportunities for people living in encampments.
- Stakeholders identified that increased costs of market rental units combined with inadequate social assistance rates has made it extremely difficult for people living in encampments to afford a unit without a deep housing subsidy.
- Stakeholders noted a lack of housing opportunities as a key contributor to burnout amongst frontline staff who consistently have few options to offer people experiencing homelessness.

Better Coordination of Systems (e.g. health, criminal justice, and housing) is required:

- Stakeholders expressed concern that there is insufficient housing and health infrastructure (e.g. formalized programs and connections) to effectively attend to the complex needs of individuals living in encampments at the present time.
- Stakeholders suggested that there is a disconnect between the services being provided by the housing and health care sectors and that greater participation of the health care sector in the housing and homelessness sectors is necessary to ensure a coordinated approach.

- Stakeholders identified the medical system as needing to take a more direct role in addressing the opioid epidemic being experienced in our community.
- Stakeholders suggested that siloed funding mandates, particularly between health care and housing systems, reduces the ability to develop a coordinated response.
- Stakeholders also identified a lack of programs that assist people exiting correctional facilities (both for chronic and first-time offenders) to find housing and supports needed to increase stability and reduce recidivism.

Negative Impacts of Parks By-law:

- Stakeholders in the community reported that the current by-law enforcement window (e.g. 12-72 hours for Municipal Law Enforcement (MLE) to respond) was inadequate for necessary services in the community to meaningfully connect with people in encampments, and once people living in encampments have moved locations, it is increasingly difficult and resource-intensive to locate them and provide services.

Alternatives to Existing Parks By-law:

- Several stakeholders felt a designated area (such as a sanctioned encampment site or a Tiny Homes model) would be more effective than the current approach being employed.
- Stakeholders recommended that the City shift the focus of encampment response away from enforcement towards providing outreach-led follow-up and supports.

Alternative Shelter Service Models:

- Stakeholders identified a lack of harm reduction policies and spaces as problematic, especially when considering the complexity of need amongst people living in encampments. Some stakeholders noted issues regarding liability as a reason for a lack of harm reduction spaces in the emergency shelter system.
- Some stakeholders highlighted that individuals in need of the most support do not always receive suitable and appropriate care within the existing emergency shelter model.
- Stakeholders identified a lack of choice and duplication of emergency shelter service models available to people living in encampments as a barrier to access.

Better Utilize Strengths in Non-Profit Sector:

- Stakeholders suggested the City should review how current funding arrangements support the goals of the community, and resource existing effective services in a sustainable way.

- Stakeholders indicated that a more flexible funding arrangement, where new services can be created quickly to address acute issues, would be beneficial when responding to emergent concerns.
- Stakeholders highlighted that staffing is an ongoing concern for frontline providers, as the work has become more difficult and complex, and the pay has not increased. This creates issues with staff retention.
- Participants noted that community stakeholders should work to avoid the creation of silos and duplication of efforts, and work to connect chairs across different tables across the City.
- Stakeholders identified that the City's data sharing with community providers is insufficient and requires additional resources.

A Whole-of-Community Approach:

- Stakeholders suggested educating the community of the realities associated with unsheltered homelessness to develop compassion and empathy, particularly amongst those with little exposure.
- Stakeholders noted the importance of a broad set of stakeholders (e.g. all levels of government, health care sector, corrections, pharmacies, dentists, media and filmmakers, academia, other jurisdictions) were required to help identify solutions to encampments and unsheltered homelessness.
- Stakeholders suggested that a broader understanding amongst the public of the cost savings associated with preventative measures when compared to reactive responses is necessary to understand the different approaches to addressing homelessness.

Introduce Targeted Strategies and/or Supports for Overrepresented Groups:

- Stakeholders shared that particular focus should be placed on people living in encampments who identify as Indigenous and/or 2SLGBTQ+, in addition to other populations disproportionately affected by homelessness.
- Stakeholders suggested that customized approaches are necessary to engage and adequately address the needs of each specific community.
- Stakeholders indicated that autonomy and self-determination was necessary for all individuals, but particularly for Indigenous populations, who have been disproportionately impacted by ongoing colonial violence that contributes to displacement and poverty.
- Stakeholders suggested that moving forward, engagement efforts should be more intentional, particularly with Black and Indigenous people of colour (BIPOC) stakeholders.
- Stakeholders highlighted gender-based violence as an issue facing people living in encampments that requires greater attention.

Involve People Living in Encampments:

- Several people living in encampments noted skills or trades they wished to pursue and requested assistance with skill development and employment opportunities.
- Stakeholders provided examples of funding provided to non-profit agencies to successfully support employment programs for people with lived experience of homelessness.
- Stakeholders suggested that it was necessary to consult not only professionals, but also people with lived experience to influence decision-making.

Utilize the Successes of Other Jurisdictions:

- Knowing encampments are visible in many municipalities across Canada, stakeholders suggested reviewing and utilizing the successful efforts of other municipalities to explore potential approaches within Hamilton.
- Stakeholders believed Hamilton should be at the cutting edge of innovation and begin to pilot and evaluate new approaches across the City.

Align Encampment Response with Existing Strategies:

- Stakeholders mentioned that they are already partners in the Housing and Homelessness Action Plan (HHAP), which involved extensive consultation and reflects a whole-of-community approach to change and wanted to ensure any work done regarding encampments would be aligned.

Frustration with Lack of Accountability/Action:

- Stakeholders shared that progress is necessary, and a sense of urgency needs to be conveyed in improving the quality of life of people in encampments.
- Stakeholders indicated that they had been consulted with many times in the past and wanted greater accountability from the City to ensure consultations would lead to positive action.

What We Heard: People with Lived Experience

The following are themes that were most prevalent in the July 25 to 29, 2022 consultation with people living in encampments:

Difficult Maintaining and Acquiring Housing:

- People living in encampments reported losing their housing as a result of several reasons, most commonly due to eviction (e.g. landlord/tenant conflict, 'renoviction') or family relationship breakdown.

- There was a strong consensus that lack of housing affordability, insufficient income, and discrimination were barriers to accessing housing.
- A majority (65%) of people living in encampments shared that they did not feel supported in their search for housing and conveyed frustration and concern that they would never be able to transition into permanent housing.
- As a barrier to acquiring housing, people living in encampments reported that the requirement to move so frequently has led to many missed appointments with housing workers and to view units, as well as lost ID and documentation necessary to access housing.

Negative Impacts of Parks By-law:

- There was clear agreement from people living in encampments that the current approach was not working for them. When asked directly, only 10% agreed that the current approach was working, and the vast majority agreed that the current approach has had a negative impact on their physical health, mental health, and ability to acquire housing.
- An overwhelming majority of individuals living in encampments shared that moving frequently has led to negative impacts on physical health (90%), mental health (92%), and their ability to secure housing (94%).
- People living in encampments reported that the existing by-law has led to many missed health appointments, appointments with housing workers, and court appointments that have impacted their long-term well-being.
- People living in encampments reported that moving regularly to different sites around the City made it hard to keep their belongings safe, particularly important paperwork (e.g. applications for housing) and identification.
- Many people living in encampments noted that the existing by-law has resulted in a considerable increase in fear, worry, and stress amongst people living in encampments. Particularly the fear of waking up to a knock at the tent asking them to move.

Lack of Access to Resources:

- People living in encampments felt as though the need to move frequently and into less conspicuous areas has led to increased difficulty in accessing basic needs and other resources.
- Only 39% reported having access to supplies that meet their basic hygiene needs, and less than 50% of people living in encampments reported having access to the physical and mental health supports they needed, either on-site or through referral, and that the existing by-law has led to many missed health and court appointments that have impacted their long-term well-being.
- 68% of people living in encampments reported having access to the harm reduction supports and supplies they need, while 55% reported having access to other supports (e.g. employment, education, legal, ID replacement) on-site or via referral.

Barriers to Accessing Emergency Shelter:

- People in encampments identified several barriers to accessing shelter. Among the most common barriers are safety concerns, lack of low barrier, harm reduction-friendly options, lack of spaces for couples, and a lack of space for pets. Only 19% of people living in encampments reported that they would take an emergency shelter space if it became available that evening.
- People living in encampments identified fear of safety as their primary challenge when accessing shelter. Several others shared that the rigidity of emergency shelters, particularly the rules related to harm reduction and curfew, were also barriers.
- 31% of people living in encampments reported being in a relationship with someone else who is living unsheltered, and many reported not accessing emergency shelter as a result of there not being space for both people to stay together.
- 25% of people living in encampments reported having had a pet or support animal within the past six months and many reported not wanting to access emergency shelter without their pet.

Frustration with Approach:

- When asked what was working with the existing Parks By-law, the majority of people living in encampments shared that nothing was working for them, beyond some of the staff they encountered who made a positive impact.
- Several respondents shared that there was a disconnect between the policymakers and those who were living in encampments, reporting that their struggles were not well understood. This has led to frustration and a perceived lack of respect amongst people living in encampments.
- The common sentiment amongst people living in encampments was they wanted to be left alone to live their lives.

Preferred Next Steps:

- Although there was a clear consensus that the current approach was not beneficial, there was no clear consensus on an alternative approach to be taken.
- One cohort of people living in encampments felt as though the preferred approach would be to allow people in encampments to stay where they are and provide services directly to them via outreach.
- Another cohort of respondents believed a sanctioned site was a preferred approach, as they wouldn't be required to move and would have services that meet their basic needs available to them.
- Irrespective of the approach, there was a preference for services to be easily accessible, and a need for a consistent space to stay in.