




INFORMATION REPORT

TO:	Chair and Members Emergency and Community Services Committee
COMMITTEE DATE:	May 18, 2023
SUBJECT/REPORT NO:	2022 Access to Housing Update (HSC23029) (City Wide)
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	City Wide
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SIGNATURE:	

COUNCIL DIRECTION

Not Applicable

INFORMATION

This report provides an update on the Access to Housing (ATH) waitlist for 2022. ATH is the City of Hamilton's provincially mandated centralized waiting list for rent-geared-to-income (RGI) and alternate housing assistance. The Housing Services Act, 2001 (HSA) lays out the rules governing RGI and alternate housing assistance.

ATH applications consist of two parts. The first part is the application itself which contains all relevant information to determine the applicant's eligibility to receive assistance. The second part is the building selection form on which applicants must indicate the buildings in which they are interested.

ATH is designed to provide a comprehensive service that goes beyond processing applications and ensuring ongoing eligibility for the waitlist. Staff provide information about assistance available through ATH and other services in the community. They help applicant households complete applications. They also help applicants problem-solve challenges with housing affordability and housing crises. They are available for drop-in service at 350 King Street East, Suite 110, by telephone and by e-mail.

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OUR Mission: To provide high quality cost conscious public services that contribute to a healthy, safe and prosperous community, in a sustainable manner.

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Rent-Geared-to-Income (RGI) and Alternate Assistance

Rent is considered geared-to-income when the household pays no more than 30% of its net income in rent. In Ontario, households in receipt of social assistance pay according to a set scale. RGI is generally attached to a housing unit.

Alternate forms of assistance differ in that households in receipt of social assistance pay no more than the maximum shelter portion of their assistance. They may be attached to a unit or they may be portable.

Eligibility

Applicants are eligible to be on the ATH waitlist if they meet the following criteria:

- a) at least one member of the household is 16 years or older;
- b) at least one member of the household can live independently, with or without support services;
- c) each member of the household can prove status in Canada - all household members must be legal residents of Canada;
- d) no member of the household owes money to a social housing provider in Ontario; and
- e) the household's income and assets are below locally approved limits.

Offers of Assistance

The City of Hamilton is not a residential landlord and does not make offers of housing. Offers come directly from one of 40 housing providers. Offers are made through a software system which ensures modified-chronological offer rules are followed. Highest priority is given to applicant households with Special Priority Person (SPP) status, which is dictated by the Housing Services Act, 2011. This includes applicants who are currently or have recently been a victim of domestic violence, and/or if a member of the household is being or has been trafficked. Applicants who receive SPP will be given the highest ranking on the waiting list above all other applicants. SPP applications are ranked chronologically by the date the SPP status is assigned. Urgent status is a priority that was established by Council. Applicants with Urgent status (i.e., applicants who meet the criteria for having a safety priority, or terminally ill priority) will be ranked on the waiting list above all applicants whose applications are purely chronological. These applications are ranked chronologically by the date that the Urgent status is assigned.

Hamilton has three other priorities which were also established by Council including Homeless, Newcomer and Youth and Chronological.

- Applicants with Homeless status will be offered every 5th vacancy within a Housing Provider's portfolio;

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- Applicants with Newcomer or Youth status will be offered at least every 10th vacancy within a Housing Provider's portfolio; and
- Applicants with Chronological status will be ranked by their application date.

Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit

In 2022, 429 households were granted the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB). COHB was launched in April 2020 by the Province of Ontario under the National Housing Strategy. Service Managers (SMs) refer eligible households to the Ministry of Finance which administers the benefit. The COHB is a portable housing benefit that can be applied directly to rent in the private market. The province does not require the waitlist eligibility rules to be followed for awarding COHB but COHB applicants must reside permanently in Ontario and be on, or eligible to be on, the centralized waitlist. Households cannot receive COHB and Rent-Geared-to-Income (RGI) housing or any other form of housing benefit at the same time. The Housing Services Division has primarily used the benefit to assist households experiencing homelessness who require timely access to housing and households whose fixed rate housing allowances are coming to an end.

COHB has been a valuable tool in Hamilton. The Housing Services Division has worked closely with community partners to connect households experiencing homelessness with COHB. This has been done to create an equitable distribution of COHB among groups and to ensure that they are allocated in a timely fashion. Hamilton's ability to allocate COHB has been rewarded each year with additional COHB funding beyond the original allocation.

Applicants Housed

Table 1 reports the number of households on the ATH waitlist as of December 31 of the years 2017 to 2022. In 2022, the number of households on the waitlist stood at 6,110. This number is relatively stable over the six-year period reported below. The dip in 2021 can be attributed to data clean up that was done in preparation for the migration of data to a new software system. It is important to note that the actual number of waiting households is larger owing to a backlog in inputting applications. The backlog of approximately 2,000 applications is due to staffing shortages, demands on staff relating to assisting providers with offers for tenants in new buildings and an increase in new applications. To manage the application backlog, ATH staff have prioritized the assessment of Priority applications (SPP/Urgent) and seniors. These applications are entered in real time and are not a part of the current backlog. This backlog will have no effect on an applicant's ability to access social housing.

Of the total number of households on the ATH waitlist, 930 were currently living in an RGI unit and waiting for a transfer to another unit.

Table 1 - Access to Housing (ATH) Waitlist - as of December 31 by Year

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
# total households	6,258	6,704	6,231	6,647	5,716	6,110
# households living in RGI unit	1,110	1,166	1,113	1,089	916	930
# households not living in RGI unit	5,148	5,538	5,118	5,558	4,800	5,180
# of households housed in RGI unit	672	508	469	416	412	653
# of households housed with a COHB			126	246	129	429
# total households housed from ATH Waitlist	672	508	595	662	541	1,082
% of households housed	10%	7%	9%	9%	9%	15%

The number of households housed in an RGI unit in 2022 was 653. This is the largest number housed since 2017 and a significant increase from 2020 and 2021. The percentage of households housed is calculated based on the total number of annual applications, which combines both the number of households currently active on the waitlist and those who have been housed. The increase in households housed in 2022 can likely be attributed to the number of buildings that opened in 2022 including CityHousing Hamilton's (CHH's) project at 263 Main St. E., Hamilton East Kiwanis' building at 6 Acorn, Indwell's projects at 219 East Ave. N., 225 East Ave N and 247 East Ave N , and Wesley Community Homes' project at 195 Ferguson Ave. N. The implementation of a 'one-offer/one-refusal' rule which requires waitlist applicants to accept the first offer of subsidized housing for a unit in a housing location they selected facilitated more households to accept a housing offer.

The number of units offered declined between 2018 and 2021 for a variety of reasons. One of the most significant is the number of households that opt to remain in a social housing unit even when they no longer qualify for RGI. This decision is likely driven by the increasingly high prices in the private rental market. The reduction also relates to fewer units being available due to redevelopment. The smaller number of offers was also driven by a large number of units being offline due to long term repairs and redevelopment.

Most of the households housed in 2022 have SPP or Urgent status. The chronological applicants housed were seniors for whom wait times tend to be shorter because of the large number of buildings with seniors mandates or households housed in new buildings due to the short waitlist

2023 Outlook and Actions

It is anticipated that the number of households housed in 2023 will decline somewhat. Only two new buildings will open in 2023 and one building will reopen following prolonged closure for repairs following a fire. Several developments will reduce capacity pending redevelopment. To support movement on the list, the Housing Services Division will introduce a new Over Housed Policy in the summer of 2023. Hamilton's COHB allocation for 2023-24 is anticipated to house 225-250 households, which is almost half of the number allocated in 2022. The new income and asset limit approved by Council in HSC23004 will be implemented on July 1, 2023. Based on the experience of other Service Managers, it is expected that a very small number of households will no longer be eligible for RGI subsidy or to be on the waitlist due to the policy. The Housing Services Division is also working to eliminate the applications backlog by the end of 2024 by hiring additional temporary staff to be funded by social housing subsidy recoveries from Annual Information Returns and administrative funding.

APPENDICES AND SCHEDULES ATTACHED

Not applicable