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COUNCIL NEWS

Niagara consortium's early-intervention prevents 600-plus evictions

Community agencies report strong results as rapid rehousing succeeds in more than 85 per cent of cases. Youth make up over a third of those at risk.

Updated 3 hrs ago | March 13, 2026  



A focus on preventing homelessness in Niagara hopes to avert encampments like this one, set up about a year ago near McGuire Street in St. Catharines.

By Allan Benner Reporter St Catharines Standard

By focusing on preventing homelessness before it occurs, a consortium of Niagara agencies is having an impact on the lives of some of the most vulnerable residents in the community, regional politicians heard.

As Niagara Region public health and social services committee members were considering the allocation of more than \$20 million in funding from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing during their Tuesday meeting, Kithio Mwanzia updated councillors on the success of the coalition's efforts last year.

"Preventing homelessness is far more effective and far less costly than responding to homelessness after it occurs," said Mwanzia, housing manager for Community Care of St. Catharines and Thorold.

"Every eviction prevented reduces pressure on shelters, emergency services, health care system and other crisis supports," he said.

Community Care of St. Catharines and Thorold is the lead agency for the consortium that also includes Hope Centre, Project Share, Community Care in West Niagara and Salvation Army in Fort Erie.

Mwanzia said the consortium is being expanded to include Port Cares, "strengthening the reach of this partnership even further."

“Through this consortium, we share a common goal — preventing homelessness before it occurs, and quickly rehousing those who do lose their housing,” he said.

That’s accomplished by assisting people who are at immediate risk of eviction by addressing financial, legal and social challenges they face.

For individuals and families who have already lost their accommodations, he said the organizations work to find them new housing and provide the supports they need to remain housed.

“The need for this work is very real. Across our agencies we see firsthand how quickly housing instability can escalate when families face unexpected job loss, rising rents, health challenges or other life disruptions,” he said.

“What’s important to remember is that homelessness rarely begins with a single event. It’s often the result of multiple pressures that accumulate until households simply cannot keep up.”

Mwanzia said 35 per cent of clients are younger than 17.

“One of the most striking realities we see in our program is the number of young people affected by housing instability,” he said.

“That statistic reminds us that when we talk about housing loss prevention, we’re not only supporting adults, we’re helping to protect children and youth from the long-term impact of housing instability.”

Mwanzia said the consortium’s efforts are making a difference.

The rapid rehousing program, last year, had a success rate of 85.3 per cent, while the housing loss prevention program prevented evictions for 67.92 per cent of cases.

“Thanks to the collaboration of our agencies and the resources provided through the region, we are seeing strong results,” he said.

“Together, our organizations helped house more than 580 individuals across Niagara, and during that same period we prevented more than 600 evictions, allowing families and individuals to remain in their homes.”

Meanwhile, he said ongoing supports provided by the consortium’s members are helping keep people from again falling into crisis.

“Of the hundreds of individuals we supported last year, only three returned to homelessness,” Mwanzia said.

Under the Region’s Housing and Homeless Investment Plan, more than \$4.2 million of the provincial funding will be spent on housing assistance, \$2.9 million will be spent on supportive housing programs such as rental assistance, while \$12.5 million will be spent on emergency shelters.

Niagara Region is also contributing \$10.4 million to homelessness prevention through its 2026 operating budget.

In addition to investing in the talents of agency staff, Mwanzia said the provincial funding allocated to the consortium pays for the technology they use, such as a homeless individuals and families information system (HIFIS).

That technology has given agency staff the ability to respond to people in crisis “just in time,” and information provided through the system makes the experience easier for clients.

“Rather than re-traumatizing them (by forcing them to) tell their story to us each time of why they find themselves in unstable housing, we have things like HIFIS that allow us to serve them not just quickly but also with dignity,” Mwanzia added.

Pelham Coun. Wayne Olson said homelessness is a complex issue and will need a collaboration of organizations to address it, such as those involved in the consortium.

“I’m delighted to see that you’re expanding, because this adds new ideas and experiences that you are going to pick up,” he said.

Olson said the work the agencies are doing also has an immediate impact.

“It’s not tomorrow or down the road where we’re going to build something, and maybe we’ll get it approved and maybe five years later we’ll get this done,” he said. “The fact that this is right now and in the moment is extremely important.”

St. Catharines Coun. Tim Rigby was impressed with the results of the work of consortium member agencies, as a result of past investments.

“It’s finally happening and I’m thrilled,” he told Mwanzia.

He said the funding “has offered us an opportunity to step forward and be able to bring our operations in and do them in a way that is effective.

“We in the future are going to be very satisfied with what you have presented, what each of our members have told us their stories, and what our staff are telling us is really a big lift.”



Allan Benner is a reporter with the St. Catharines Standard.

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