

Staff report calls for more attention on county housing, homelessness efforts

Written By JAMES MATTHEWS

The Choices shelter in Orangeville may be in better financial straits, but a staff report suggests Dufferin County needs to look at how to continue improvements to its housing and homelessness services.

Details of financial and operational challenges at Choices was brought to Council in January. Concerns were raised about the long-term sustainability of the shelter's operations and the need to consider alternative service delivery approaches.

Choices Shelter and Support Services' financial position has improved considerably since then, according to a report to County Council. Additional funding has been secured, community partnerships expanded, and significant private donations were received.

New housing-focused programming has also been developed.

The 2026-27 budget projects revenues of as much as \$1.76 million and expenditures of \$1.65 million. That's a projected operating surplus of \$105,660. Choices also reported a first year-end operating surplus for the fiscal year ending March 31.

A report to Council by Brenda Wagner, the County's Health and Human Services Director, indicates the primary issue is no longer the immediate financial viability of the shelter provider. Attention should be focused on how the county's housing and homelessness system can be strengthened to improve housing outcomes and better align with emerging best practices.

To that end, county staff examined local homelessness data, housing and homelessness programs, and service delivery models in comparable municipalities.

Coun. James McLean, who is also Melancthon's deputy mayor, said it seems the county is moving from a shelter capacity issue to the rest of the housing continuum.

"I think a lot of municipalities would be envious of the position we're in and there's a lot of work left to do," he said.

He asked if staff will request funding for bridge housing, supportive housing, and rapid-rehousing when the county starts the work of inking the priorities of next year's capital and operating budgets.

Wagner's report said Dufferin County's primary strength remains emergency shelter services, while future investments should focus on prevention, bridge housing, transitional housing, supportive housing, rapid re-housing, and housing stabilization supports that improve movement toward permanent housing.

Wagner said there hasn't been such a request.

But, based on the need, she does anticipate such a request.

"I'm just not sure it would be ready at budget time," she said.

A review of comparable municipalities demonstrates that emergency shelter functions most effectively when it is part of a broader housing continuum. Municipalities such as Simcoe County have increasingly invested in bridge housing, transitional housing, supportive housing, housing stabilization programs, and rapid re-housing initiatives that support transitions from homelessness to permanent housing.

"Emergency shelter serves as a point of entry into the housing system rather than a destination in itself," said Wagner in the report.

Although service delivery models vary, a common trend is evident. Communities are increasingly investing in interventions that sit between emergency shelter and permanent housing.

These programs reduce the amount of time individuals remain in shelter while improving housing outcomes and overall system efficiency, according to the report.

When compared to these municipalities, Dufferin County appears appropriately resourced from an emergency shelter perspective, she wrote. Existing shelter capacity is proportionate to population size and current levels of homelessness, and the review did not identify a need for significant expansion of emergency shelter beds.

Where Dufferin differs from many comparator municipalities, she said, is within the broader housing continuum. Historically, the county has had fewer bridge housing, rapid re-housing, transitional housing, and supportive housing options available after individuals access shelter services.

As a result, emergency shelter has often been used to meet needs that would more appropriately be addressed through housing-focused interventions, contributing to longer shelter stays and increased pressure on providers, she wrote. Based on the review completed by staff, future system development should focus on strengthening these components of the housing continuum rather than increasing emergency shelter capacity.