

It's safe to say the pandemic overturned many of society's industries and systems — affordable housing wasn't immune.

The Kawartha Lakes Haliburton Housing Corporation is looking to demolish, rebuild and renovate A Place Called Home in Lindsay to meet new needs.

The 19-bed housing shelter on Lindsay Street was forced to close as it didn't have the space to maintain COVID-19 health and safety protocols. Housing needs compounded as those struggling for shelter became potential health risks to those who'd usually put them up.

Hope Lee, manager of housing for Kawartha Lakes and Haliburton County, attended the city's committee of the whole meeting on Sept. 1 with housing's annual report for last year. She was quick to note, however, that things have changed significantly since year-end.

"It's really quite different today as a result of the pandemic," Lee said. "Overall, our homeless numbers are increasing."

By the end of 2019, there were 81 people experiencing homelessness in Kawartha Lakes (64) and Haliburton County (17). That's 13 youths ages 16 to 24, 48 adults, 13 families and seven seniors over 60 years old.

Now, there are 106 people who are homeless - an increase of more than 30 per cent. Housing has had to rely more heavily on the "motel system," as couch surfing isn't as welcome among COVID-19 concerns and A Place Called Home is closed.

In 2019, 53 per cent of homeless people were transient and sleeping on couches. That's come down to about 30 per cent this year. "They weren't necessarily welcome where they would've been in the past," Lee said.

A Place Called Home was full most nights before the pandemic hit. It served around 110 unique households per year.

Housing is using motels 44 per cent more often than it was last year, a shift from nine per cent to 53 per cent. Currently, there are 61 households or 82 individuals at motels. The largest percentage is at a motel in Lindsay.

"Since A Place Called Home wasn't operating their physical space... They've actually set up in the parking lot in a travel trailer at this motel, so that they can provide that best outreach to those individuals," Lee said.

It costs about \$155 a night to put someone up at a motel, where it would have cost \$80 to put them up at a shelter. Lee said housing is still focused on making shelter stays minimal, but there is a lack of housing availability.

"Although we have some funding to provide those housing allowances, we're having significant trouble actually finding the housing to place people in," she said.

A Place Called Home could reopen with half as many beds in keeping with COVID-19 protocols, or it could be rebuilt to meet new health and safety demands. "We want to try to get back to that 19-bed shelter," Lee said.

Housing is building a business plan that would see \$1.75 million invested into the shelter system if approved by the province.

Around \$1.5 million would go to demolishing the current administration and programming facility at A Place Called Home and rebuild it into a 19-bed shelter with individual rooms and bathrooms. Currently rooms and bathrooms are shared at the shelter.

The remaining dollars would be put into keeping those without housing at motels until the new shelter is ready.