

MORE HOMELESS SEEKING SUPPORTS DURING PANDEMIC

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Halton Region's emergency shelter program is being pushed to its limits by the coronavirus emergency, with hotel rooms increasingly being used to help vulnerable individuals stay physically distanced.

According to a report from Halton Commissioner of Social and Community Services Alex Sarchuk, 60 households have been sheltered in hotels throughout Halton since mid-March.

"With the formal closure of public spaces, individuals who were previously living in unsafe housing environments, or reluctant to enter into formal shelter services, have required support from Halton Region to self-isolate," explained Sarchuk.

"Halton Region's shelter system has seen large increases in informal evictions related to relationship breakdown, mental health crisis and from residents who do not have formal lease agreements."

The 60 households are in addition to residents

still temporarily sheltered at the Salvation Army Lighthouse in Oakville and through Halton's family emergency shelter program.

The Lighthouse shelter capacity has been reduced from 34 beds to 20 to ensure physical distancing, with the remaining individuals being moved to hotel rooms with on-site supports.

"Halton Region's shelter program is above capacity," noted Sarchuk. "We have seen increased demand from some of our hardest to serve clients. The dependency on hotels for emergency shelter use continues to grow."

Region staff estimates that by July, \$432,000 will have been spent on emergency accommodations in hotels.

The expense will be covered by one-time funding Halton has received from the provincial and federal governments to support homelessness prevention and emergency shelter programs during the COVID-19 outbreak.

The Province has dished out \$2 million, with an additional \$1.3 million



Torstar file photo

Halton is using provincial and federal funds to help house vulnerable residents during the pandemic.

"Proactively protecting vulnerable Halton residents experiencing homelessness is an important element of managing the wider public health crisis."

- Alex Sarchuk, Halton Commissioner of Social and Community Services

from the Trudeau government.

"Proactively protecting vulnerable Halton residents experiencing homelessness is an important element of managing the wider public health crisis," noted Sarchuk.

Just over \$1.1 million of this funding has been allocated so far in Halton. In addition to covering the hotel costs, the Region is

supporting more than 16 community agencies working with vulnerable residents throughout Halton — organizations that Sarchuk says have seen a "significant increase" in requests for emergency food, personal protective equipment and transportation.

Some of the agencies are working to support those being sheltered in

hotel rooms. For example, Food For Life has delivered them 250 fresh food bags, while Wesley Urban Ministries has served them 647 hot meals. The individuals are also receiving wellness checks from St. John's Ambulance three times a week.

"Halton Region continues to receive funding requests and is acting quickly to make targeted invest-

ments with the senior government funding received," said Sarchuk.

As the world adjusts to the "new normal," the commissioner said congregate settings like shelters will be faced with unique challenges in terms of permitted capacity, etc.

"We need to work with our partners to reimagine how those programs will be delivered moving forward," he said. "We see it (hotel accommodations) as an interim solution."

For more information on Halton's emergency shelter and homelessness prevention programs, visit halton.ca.

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