

Joint Social and Housing Services Advisory Committee

REPORT JAC2025-07

Meeting Date: February 19, 2025

Meeting Time: 1:30 p.m.

Meeting Place: County of Haliburton Council Chambers, 11 Newcastle Street, Minden and Electronic Video Meeting and Electronic Video Meeting

Subject: Sanctioned Encampments Overview

Author Name and Title: Michelle Corley, Haman Services Manager, Housing

Recommendation(s):

Resolved That Report JAC2025-07, "Sanctioned Encampments Overview", be received.

Director

Other

Background:

At the Joint Social and Housing Services Advisory Committee meeting of October 2, 2024, the Committee adopted the following resolution:

JAC2024-28

Moved by Councillor Joyce

Seconded by Councillor Ryall

Resolved That the Housing Services Manager Report be received and that staff bring back an update to Committee on the concept of housing those living unsheltered on public lands solution for encampment be brought back to Council.

Carried

This report provides an overview of sanctioned encampments.

Rationale:

There are a number of definitions pertaining to sanctioned encampments but at its core sanctioned encampments are, designated areas where unhoused individuals can set up tents or temporary shelters, often with some level of services provided, such as sanitation, security, and access to basic needs like food and water.

There are many perspectives about the feasibility and practicality of sanctioned encampments as a solution to the current housing crisis for the unhoused population. As with every scenario there are pro's and con's to why or why not a sanctioned encampment would be a benefit to the Municipality and to community members as a whole. As requested by Committee members, this report is intended to provide an overview of the information currently available about sanctioned encampments, as well as a housing first approach in order to consider the practicality of both and the impacts on our community.

As we are well aware in the summer of 2024 a large number of encampments (at one point upwards of nine encampments with anywhere between 30 and 40 individuals) were identified within the City and the County. The growing number of encampments and people living unhoused is a tangible metric pointing to the lack of affordable housing options within both municipalities. The City and the County are among the many municipalities facing these challenges and striving to enact permanent and sustainable housing-focused solutions for our unhoused population.

The homelessness crisis, which was already on the rise before March 2020, worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic exacerbated socioeconomic inequalities, increasing poverty, housing instability, and health disparities, particularly among marginalized communities, while also disrupting employment, education, and access to essential services.

Compounding challenges have led local governments to explore alternative approaches to addressing homelessness. Some municipalities have adopted a more tolerant stance toward select street camps, acknowledging their presence and, in some cases, providing basic provisions and services. Others have explored small-scale solutions such as tiny home communities, fenced-in tent cities, or unconventional shelters, which provide residents with access to services and infrastructure, typically managed by public agencies or non-profit organizations.

While these initiatives have provided some relief, the sanctioned encampment model can introduce limitations similar to those found in traditional shelters. More concerning, local governments may point to these encampments as evidence of their efforts to support the unhoused, while continuing to implement punitive measures outside of these spaces. Criminalization, displacement through "sweeps," and other enforcement tactics are often used to appease certain community members who view the unhoused as a nuisance or threat. Sanctioned encampments, in this context, may offer a way to balance political pressures—addressing homelessness while maintaining control and order in public spaces.

Potential Risks and Barriers

The sanctioned encampment model, while intended as a temporary solution, can sometimes replicate the limitations of traditional shelters. Though they may seem like a humane compromise between permanent housing and complete isolation, these encampments can house people quickly and at low cost—sometimes leading to a perception of "warehousing" rather than providing genuine support. While the intentions behind implementing and managing these encampments are often well-meaning, there may be more complex motivations behind local governments' rapid adoption of this model.

For those who are seriously unwell, restricted or skeptical of shelter environments, sanctioned encampments can become their only option, often forcing them to live in public spaces where they are vulnerable to confrontational tactics. These tactics can include displacement, citations, arrests, and the seizure or disposal of personal belongings, such as medicine and important documents, which can further hinder efforts to escape homelessness. Unfortunately, policies often prioritize the interests of businesses and property owners over the human rights and well-being of unsheltered individuals.

If a sanctioned encampment ends up with a number of residents whose presence poses a risk to the residents of the encampment or staff, they may have to be removed from the site — at which point they set up camp somewhere else, and then we have the original problem all over again.

Sanctioned Encampment Approach

The debate between permitting sanctioned encampments versus adopting a housing-focused approach to addressing homelessness involves complex social, economic, and political considerations. Below is an analysis of both strategies, highlighting their benefits and challenges:

Benefits of Sanctioned Encampments

- **Immediate Relief:** Provides a quick solution to homelessness by offering individuals a place to stay and reducing the visibility of homelessness in public spaces.
- **Safety and Sanitation:** Well-managed encampments can offer a safer, more sanitary environment compared to street living. Services such as portable toilets, waste disposal, and on-site medical support can improve the quality of life for individuals.
- **Cost-Effective:** Setting up sanctioned encampments can be less expensive than building permanent housing structures. It may be a more feasible short-term solution for cities with limited resources.
- **Improved Mental Health and Stability:** A designated place to stay can provide a sense of stability and security, potentially enabling individuals to seek support services, such as addiction treatment or job training, more easily.
- **Flexibility:** Encampments can be established relatively quickly and adapted to meet immediate needs, especially in emergency situations, such as during a homelessness crisis or after natural disasters.

Challenges of Sanctioned Encampments

- **Temporary Nature:** Encampments are not a destination or a long-term solution to homelessness. They may reinforce a cycle of poverty and prevent individuals from accessing permanent housing. Given the temporary nature, capital investment is required up front, as well as ongoing operating dollars to service the need on the short-term.

- **Limited Support Services:** While encampments may provide basic services, they often lack comprehensive support such as case management, job training, or long-term addiction recovery programs.
- **Stigmatization:** Encampments can be stigmatized, both by the general public and by those living in them. They may perpetuate the stereotype of homelessness being a "lifestyle choice" rather than a crisis, as well as play on the public's threshold around the current polarization to the "not in my backyard" opposition.
- **Public Health and Safety Concerns:** While encampments can be safer than living on the streets, issues such as overcrowding, lack of privacy, substance abuse, and potential for violence or exploitation still persist.
- **Zoning and Community Resistance:** Finding suitable land for sanctioned encampments can be difficult, and there may be opposition from local communities or political leaders, especially if the camps are placed in residential or commercial areas.
- **Risk Mitigation and Management:** Setting up a sanctioned encampment on municipal lands establishes the risk with the municipality. Certain municipalities have been denied insurance, given the associated risk to not only the individuals living there, municipal staff, other agency staff and the broader public accessing the property.
- **Staffing, Security and Resources to Support:** Operating a 24 hour – 7 day a week business / service provision on municipal land requires the municipality to establish the proper staffing and service delivery model to meet the growing demand, as well as the due diligence with the appropriate model for security and protection for all involved. The additional costs and staffing resources require municipal investment, as well as servicing the site (e.g. water, toilets, cleaning, garbage, fire prevention, snow removal, etc.).

Housing Focused Approach

A housing-focused approach emphasizes providing stable, long-term housing for homeless individuals, either through the construction of new affordable housing or through programs like Housing First, which offer immediate access to permanent housing without preconditions such as sobriety or employment.

Benefits of Housing-Focused Approach

- **Permanent Solution:** Providing permanent housing addresses the root cause of homelessness—lack of stable housing. It offers long-term stability and the opportunity for individuals to rebuild their lives with the right level of supports wrapped around them for success.

- **Better Outcomes for Health and Well-Being:** Research has shown that access to permanent housing improves mental health, physical health, and overall well-being, reducing the need for emergency / crisis services and healthcare.
- **Decreases Public Costs Over Time:** While the upfront cost of permanent housing is high, it can reduce long-term public costs by lowering the need for emergency services, hospitalizations, homelessness response services and criminal justice interventions. The right value being invested on the right level of service, at the right time, and for the right cost will make a longer-term impact.
- **Social Integration and Dignity:** Housing helps individuals stabilize their lives to reintegrate into society, restore their dignity, and access employment and education opportunities, which is difficult to achieve while living in encampments.
- **Supportive Services:** Housing-focused programs often include access to comprehensive supportive services, such as case management, mental health counseling, addiction treatment, job placement, and life skills training.

Challenges of Housing-Focused Approach

- **High Initial Costs:** The cost of constructing or acquiring permanent affordable housing is substantial, especially in cities with high real estate prices. Funding and political will may be significant barriers.
- **Long Implementation Time:** Building housing or securing housing units can take upwards of five years. In the short term, many homeless individuals may not benefit from a housing-first approach due to the lack of immediate availability.
- **Supply Shortages:** In areas with limited affordable housing, there may not be enough units available to meet the demand of the homeless population. This could lead to long waiting lists or prioritization issues.
- **Community Resistance:** Just as with sanctioned encampments, there can be local opposition to building affordable housing in certain neighborhoods. NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) sentiments can complicate efforts to secure land and gain approval for housing projects.
- **Complexities in Support Services:** While housing-focused approaches typically offer a more comprehensive solution, the success of these programs depends on providing effective wraparound services. If not properly coordinated, even permanent housing may fail to prevent a return to homelessness.

Conclusion of Comparisons

The decision between permitting sanctioned encampments or pursuing a housing-focused approach depends on the specific goals, available resources, and timeline of the homelessness intervention.

- **Sanctioned encampments** can provide immediate relief and may be useful as a short-term solution in times of crisis or when there is limited capacity to build housing. However, they are not a sustainable solution and tend to maintain the status quo of homelessness rather than address its root causes. They require municipalities to shift resources and focus to an down-stream / reactive approach for an immediate crisis versus establishing a proactive plan to achieve longer term housing solutions. Municipalities need to be informed to understand and assume the risks associated, as well as adopt an enterprise risk management approach when dealing with a sanctioned encampment.
- **Housing-focused approaches** are more effective in the long term, addressing the foundational issue of stable housing. They are more expensive and take longer to implement, yet they provide lasting solutions and improve the health and social outcomes of homeless individuals.

Almost five years out from the beginning of the pandemic, staff have found many municipalities with long-term encampments have experienced an erosion of community will, trust and buy-in for solutions. Tensions have arisen between individual and community obligations when municipalities respond to encampments. It has also been demonstrated that there is a lack of consensus between what encampment residents need, what community members want, what human rights advocates are calling for, and what municipalities believe they must do to fulfill their roles and responsibilities to all residents.

It has also been noted from those living in encampments that they may refuse offers of shelter or housing options, opting to continue living in an outdoor encampment for various reasons, including their own safety. There have been and will continue to be situations when it is necessary to re-locate individuals and/or remove encampments in order to find other alternative options. Ultimately, a balanced approach may be needed, starting with maximizing emergency shelter capacity, a municipal-wide encampment approach to managing the current and growing state, while simultaneously developing long-term housing solutions, including investment in affordable housing and supportive services for these individuals.

Consultations:

Homelessness System Coordinator
Other Consolidated Municipal Service Managers

Attachments:

None

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