

## **F. Create and Implement a Provincial Strategy to Address Homelessness, Mental Health and Addictions**

Submitted by: The Chamber of Commerce Brantford-Brant and the Greater Sudbury Chamber of Commerce. Co-sponsored by the North Bay and District Chamber of Commerce, the Orillia District Chamber of Commerce, the Timmins Chamber of Commerce, the Sault Ste. Marie Chamber of Commerce, and the Barrie Chamber of Commerce.

### **Issue**

Many communities across Ontario are dealing with unprecedented vagrancy and nuisance behaviours as a result of a number of factors including the opioid crisis, shortage in social services supports, and a lack of housing that is affordable to many struggling with addictions. Businesses in many urban areas are struggling to manage loitering and trespassing issues, and police forces and municipalities are frustrated with repeated violations of the *Trespass to Property Act* with minimal tools at keeping people and negative activities from impacting their daily operations.

### **Background**

Communities across Ontario are struggling to manage transient groups of individuals that lack access to permanent housing or are unable to be housed in available units. Encampments can be found across the province. The December 2021 homelessness report by the Ontario Auditor General is based on four key municipalities - City of Toronto, City of Ottawa, City of Greater Sudbury, and the District of Cochrane. These municipalities were selected because they had the most people experiencing homelessness in absolute and relative terms, and/or they had a high number of COVID-19 cases in their shelters.<sup>199</sup> However, other municipalities including the City of Hamilton, City of North Bay, City of Kingston, City of Thunder Bay, City of Sault Ste. Marie and Kitchener Waterloo region are also impacted by homelessness encampments. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost of a one-bedroom apartment in the City of Toronto rose by \$200 per month from 2018 to 2021.<sup>200</sup>

Unsheltered populations have complex and varied needs including mental health challenges, physical disabilities, and addictions that make supporting them within business areas like downtowns a challenge. The prevalence of addictions stemming partially from prescription opioids has increased the numbers of hard-to-house and employ individuals who are unable to work or follow rules needed for traditional community supportive housing units. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, rates of emergency medical services (EMS) for suspected opioid overdose increased by 57% and rates of fatal opioid overdose increased by 60% in Ontario. Rural and northern communities, people experiencing poverty or homelessness, people experiencing incarceration, and Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) communities have seen the largest relative increases.<sup>201</sup> Public Health Sudbury District reported an increase of almost 40% in suspected opioid related incidents from January to the end of November 2021.<sup>202</sup> Social Services funding to and within municipalities has not kept up with the increased demands for mental health and addictions supports due to pressures on the existing revenue tools of municipalities. Further to this, the Auditor General states that “Ontario does not have an overarching and co-ordinated provincial strategy to

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<sup>199</sup> [https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en21/AR\\_Homelessness\\_en21.pdf](https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en21/AR_Homelessness_en21.pdf)

<sup>200</sup> <https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/community-partners/social-housing-providers/affordable-housing-operators/current-city-of-toronto-average-market-rents-and-utility-allowances/>

<sup>201</sup> <https://covid19-sciencetable.ca/sciencebrief/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-opioid-related-harm-in-ontario/>

<sup>202</sup> [https://www.sudbury.com/local-news/opioid-related-incidents-in-sudbury-jump-by-almost-40-in-less-than-a-year-4951051?fbclid=IwAR3y1tjs\\_Qk3MEJg2Hq3KGZYhIjci7HEKLuWSaCAOMOCKG6Av-waMQ9FMh0](https://www.sudbury.com/local-news/opioid-related-incidents-in-sudbury-jump-by-almost-40-in-less-than-a-year-4951051?fbclid=IwAR3y1tjs_Qk3MEJg2Hq3KGZYhIjci7HEKLuWSaCAOMOCKG6Av-waMQ9FMh0)

prevent and reduce homelessness.”<sup>203</sup> She recommends “that the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing take a lead role, in collaborating with other ministries that fund or directly provide services and supports to people who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness, in developing a provincial strategy with specific actions, targets, and timelines to collectively aim to address the issues that contribute to homelessness”.<sup>204</sup> In addition, it would be beneficial to incorporate best practice ideas from the City of Medicine Hat, Alberta a municipality that successfully addressed chronic homelessness over a 10-year period through their *Plan to End Homelessness*.<sup>205</sup>

At the onset of the pandemic, police forces in Toronto, Ottawa, and York Region all reported increased business break-ins as a result of the pandemic.<sup>206</sup> The enforcement and implementation of the Trespass to Property Act is not effective. In Ontario, the number of actual incidents of Trespass at Night violations increased from 789 in 2019 to 1030 in 2020.<sup>207</sup>

Anecdotally, Ontario-based chambers of commerce and municipalities have received numerous calls from businesses regarding vagrancy, trespassing and loitering among other bylaw infractions. The Trespass to Property Act and their enforcement mechanisms needs to be reviewed and revamped in order to better support municipalities managing transient populations.

Communities are facing increased policing costs due to the policing demands in managing the struggling population, while simultaneously facing new demands on their services.<sup>208</sup> Funding allocations should be reviewed and budgeted to reflect the growing funding priorities stemming from the pandemic.

Increasing funding for social services that address mental health, homelessness and addictions is important as this has a direct positive impact on business health. Improving the visible social issues will ultimately allow municipalities to attract and retain vibrant economies across the province.

## Recommendations

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:

1. Create and fund a provincial strategy to ensure social services outreach teams as partners or as an alternative to police throughout Ontario to support marginalized individuals
2. Invest in more in-patient beds and support staff for addictions and mental health services throughout Ontario to support marginalized individuals.
3. Ensure that the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, and the Ministry of Health coordinate efforts in developing a provincial strategy to address homelessness, mental health and addictions with a view to incorporate best practices from successful municipalities
4. Review the *Trespass to Property Act* and their enforcement mechanisms to enable municipalities to better manage transient populations

Effective Date: April 30, 2022

Sunset Date: April 30, 2025

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<sup>203</sup> [https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en21/AR\\_Homelessness\\_en21.pdf](https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en21/AR_Homelessness_en21.pdf)

<sup>204</sup> <https://mhchs.ca/homelessness-initiatives/plan-to-end-homelessness/>

<sup>205</sup> <https://mhchs.ca/homelessness-initiatives/plan-to-end-homelessness/>

<sup>206</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/crime-data-during-covid-19-shows-spike-in-business-break-ins-stunt-driving-1.5539331>

<sup>207</sup> <https://bit.ly/3nqLqj>

<sup>208</sup> <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/a-better-way-this-is-what-alternatives-to-defunded-policing-could-look-like-1.5001517>