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# TRANSITIONAL HOUSING PROJECT

PROJECT REPORT

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July 2021

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## OVERVIEW

The homeless population in the hamlet of Lac La Biche has been identified as a community issue for more than 15 years. The current homeless population is a stable number, with some increase during warmer weather. The Transitional Housing Task Force researched the issue and identified various models of addressing it to inform the work undertaken here. Utilizing the knowledge gained through this research, a projected service program is presented in this document. A proposed facility site and design have also been drafted to present to Council. Critical to this process will be having a viable volunteer board to manage the process, program, and facility. Anticipated progress for the project is outlined in this report, which is dependent on factors beyond the control of the Task Force or County Administration. A culmination of this work will form the basis for grant applications to other levels of government.

While homelessness has been a long-term issue, efforts to address it emerged through community conversations that started more than 15 years ago. The establishment of the Lakeland Out of Elements Shelter Society (LOESS) was a direct response to males sleeping rough (outdoors) during inclement and severe weather. Since its inception, the Society has expanded its mat program to include women who are unable to utilize the services offered by Hope Haven, predominantly due to capacity issues. Since 2016 County Council has been directing Administration to investigate the issue and develop an action plan.

While warm weather can bring an increase in number, the current target population is stable. Twelve to fifteen individuals utilize either the LOESS or living at the homeless camp. Information provided by staff at LOESS and Community Peace Officers (CPOs) is that the core group of homeless individuals is nine people. Other people join the camp intermittently when they are evicted by their families or are choosing to join others who are using alcohol or drugs. Historically, people will also join the homeless population in the community during warm weather so they can be close to the lake. Intermittent camp users contribute heavily to chaos within the camp which typically results in CPOs attending the scene. This growth of population in the camp also creates growth in the garbage, distress for neighbours in the community, and disruption to businesses close to the camp. Business disruption may include day-time thefts, break-ins, and property destruction. Camps have been taken down numerous times, however, the truly homeless individuals set up residence at another location within the hamlet. This process does not provide a long-term solution to the homelessness issue, creates upset among some members of the public, and simply moves business disruption to another part of the community.

The Transitional Housing Task Force has researched different ways of addressing the issue and identified various models to inform the work undertaken here. Previous research through the Transitional Housing project and knowledge from members of the task force identifies homelessness to be a complex issue. These issues affect both the currently homeless and those people at imminent risk of losing their homes. Contributing factors include mental health, addictions, family dysfunction, limited life skills, and not enough income to meet basic needs. Housing models researched by task force members include contacts with the Canadian Native Friendship Centre in Prince George, processes used in Fort McMurray, Salvation Army in Edmonton, and Warmland House in Duncan, B.C. Wisdom from Prince George, City of Edmonton, and Salvation Army is that separate facilities be used for the different parts of the process for helping people out of this type of life. Physical separation is strong support for people wanting to change from homelessness to being stably housed, especially when addictions are part of the problem. How can this be accommodated in a small community like Lac La Biche? The Warmland House program in Duncan has done this successfully through building design. The mat program and other immediate supports are on the main floor of the building and the transitional accommodations are on the second floor. Another example of successfully engineered separation is Hope Haven with emergency shelter provided in one building and second-stage housing in an attached building; the two programs are separated by locked doors. This engineered partition is augmented by staff support for maintaining separation between populations.

Additional research has been conducted and is planned by the Task Force. A second Housing and Service Needs Estimation Survey was conducted in partnership with community agencies and the Rural Development Network (RDN). A living wage calculation was also done for Lac La Biche County. The Task Force plans to conduct a *Social Return on Investment* (SROI) project in the community this fall. This last research exercise is to identify supports our struggling populations need to move forward and the value of providing these supports. The results of this project will inform the community regarding the cost of supporting the homeless, or those at risk of homelessness, in comparison to stabilizing them into healthy and appropriate accommodations. The information gained from each piece of research will inform the community awareness campaign and support future grant seeking for the work.

The *Housing and Service Needs Estimation Surveys* compiled information important for the set-up and evolution of the services to be provided through this program. Both the 2018 and 2020 estimations identified a high percentage of Indigenous persons as being homeless. In 2018, 90% of respondents indicating they were homeless or unstably housed self-identified as Indigenous. In 2020, 82% of the respondents indicating they were homeless self-identified as Indigenous.

This creates a strong rationale for ensuring Indigenous cultural teachings be part of the programs offered through this facility.

## 4 STAGE PROGRAM DESIGN

Utilizing the knowledge gained about this type of work, a projected service program is presented here. The program itself will be comprised of 4 stages.

**STAGE 1** The first stage is the emergency mat program including an “intox” room. Facility staff members build relationships with the people utilizing this level of the program. Staff members encourage clients to participate in the maintenance of the facility (i.e., shoveling the sidewalk, taking the garbage out, putting materials away, etc.). Through the conversations and joint work effort staff seek opportunities to develop a personal plan with individuals that moves a client into Stage 2.

**STAGE 2** Stage 2 will see the client attend detoxification or rehabilitation facilities if required. If other issues are present (i.e., mental health), the staff will support the client(s) in accessing appropriate supports. If clients need a place to stay until they can get into facilities to support their change, staff will move them out of the mat program. This may include a space until the individual can get a ride to a detoxification facility. There is typically a waiting period between completion of a detoxification program and attending rehabilitation. (Transportation to 'detox' and someplace to stay until entry into rehabilitation have been specifically identified as barriers to change.) This facility can provide that support.

**STAGE 3** Clients returning from a rehabilitation program will move into Stage 3. In this stage, staff work with clients in fostering life skills. These may include:

- following a regular schedule of work/activities;
- maintaining good personal hygiene;
- maintaining physical space in a neat, orderly manner;
- financial management skills.

Program staff will determine the best way to build and strengthen these skills with clients. This may include volunteer work about the community, and eventually some type of employment.

**STAGE 4** Assist clients to enter market rental accommodations. This will include finding affordable rental space, frequent check-ins with the client which will diminish over time as the client demonstrates the capacity to manage their home and

life. Clients will always be welcome to request further supports if they are unsure of their capacity to continue in the changed lifestyle.

## FACILITY SITE AND DESIGN

A proposed site and revised facility design are part of this report to the Council. In reviewing potential sites available within the hamlet of Lac La Biche, the Task Force took into consideration access to services and amenities within the community, the likelihood of the target population utilizing the facility, proximity to residential properties, and site potential for program development. The site deemed most appropriate for the Transitional Housing Program is the fenced property south of Independent Grocers and the Almac Motel, directly over the railroad tracks (9001-105 Street, Urban Legal Land Description 202097711, Rural Land Description NE-36-66-14-4).

The draft facility design originally submitted to Council was reviewed by the Task Force. A revised design is provided with this report as Appendix A. Changes to the design include:

- An “intox room” to sleep a maximum of six, where individuals under the influence of drugs or alcohol can be monitored but are separate from the main body of program users. This space allows the program staff to shelter intoxicated people without disturbing other program users. This space will be especially important during severely cold weather when sleeping rough is dangerous.
- A mat room available to accommodate up to 12 people. The mat room can also be used as a program space during the day. Sleeping mats or cots can be stored against the wall allowing space for healing circles and support group meetings.
- Three rooms with two beds in each room. These beds will be for people waiting to get into a detoxification or rehabilitation facility. It can also be for people returning from rehabilitation and continuing their healing journey. These three rooms are separated from the mat programs using secured doors and a separate entrance to the facility. Mealtime or activity separation can be done using staggered times for meals or programs.
- A common area will be used for taking meals, visiting, and general socializing (i.e. games, storytelling, craft activities, etc.)
- Three office spaces include one general administration/intake office, two staff office spaces. Two office spaces allow facility and program management to be separated for meeting one-on-one with program clients. There is potential to use the intake office as a lightly stocked commissary.

- Washroom and bathing spaces have been placed to facilitate the separation of those people waiting for treatment supports from regular mat program users.
- A laundry room with space for two sets of washers and dryers.
- Two storage areas: one for donations, one room for regular facility supplies.
- A flex room is included to meet a variety of purposes: it could be sleeping space for someone with special circumstances, small group programs, or partner agencies meeting with someone using the shelter.
- A cultural room for one-on-one or very small group teaching or meetings.

The current draft of the facility and program design does not include specific information regarding outdoor cultural teachings or programming. Consensus in the group is that the value in this type of activity is significant for healing and engagement. The evolution of this part of the programming would be the responsibility of the board and staff responsible for the program once it is established.

## PROJECT COSTS

Funding will be sought from the various levels of government to cover the facility set-up and on-going operational costs. Other revenue streams will include rent/boardings fees from program participants. Research is needed to know how to calculate and administer these fees. It is anticipated any fees would be income tested utilizing good practices from similar programs in the province.

## PROJECT PROCESSES AND TIMELINES

Critical to this process will be having a viable non-profit society and well-functioning board to manage the process, program, and facility. While at this time the County has a lead role in this work through staff time and allocated funds, this is not intended to be long-term. The board members of the society having responsibility for this venture should take board development training to ensure the volunteers have a full understanding of their roles and responsibilities for the board and society membership. The emergency mat program is currently overseen by the Lakeland Out of the Shelter Society (LOESS); however, demand has outgrown its current operations. The County can facilitate much of this work. County staff can also act in an advisory role with the board until it is well established and functioning well.

There is a sense of urgency in moving this project forward to be ready for the next cold weather season. Each step, though, is contingent on factors beyond the control of the Task Force

members or County Administration. With this information in mind, the anticipated timeline for this project is:

➤	Council's acceptance of this report, approval to access funding.	2021 -Early August
➤	Identify the operational society / board having responsibility for this facility and program.	2022 -Mid-August
	• Board members attend the Board Development Program to ensure sound governance structure.	2022 -End August-end September
➤	Apply for funding from other levels of government.	
	• Rural Development Network (agent for Government of Canada);	December 2021 / on-going
	• Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation;	
	• Federal or provincial funding for initiatives contributing to issues for Indigenous populations;	
	• Alberta grant programs.	
➤	Research, purchase building suitable for the program.	
➤	Set-up facility / Opening.	2022 October-November

## CONCLUSION

While long term planning for the program is to have people eventually becoming self-sufficient, the current goal is to provide sufficient safe space for presently homeless individuals. Therefore, this report focuses on the immediate work of setting up the facility and program.

Addressing the current homelessness issue in the hamlet of Lac La Biche needs to be a patient process. People living in homelessness did not arrive in this circumstance quickly or in a straight-line fashion. Likewise, turning a life around will not be straightforward or easy. People will need to be supported, encouraged, and coaxed as they learn or re-learn conventional life skills. People will move in and out of this process while they struggle with exacerbating factors such as addictions and mental health issues. Lac La Biche County is rich in community agencies available to support this effort along the way. There does, however, need to be coordinated effort to ensure people going through this process are not overwhelmed, and gain the confidence to claim a stabilized lifestyle. The Transitional Housing Task Force sees strength and potential in recommending the identified site, draft facility layout, and program designs provided in this report.



## APPENDIX A: Revised Proposed Facility Design



