

Ending Homelessness: An Integrated Emergency and Tiny Shelter system



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Summary

In this article I will explore the creation of an integrated emergency shelter and tiny home system that will provide the necessary amount of shelter spaces to house all those currently sleeping rough in the HRM and allow the municipal government to ban illegal tent communities and sleeping in public places. I hope to outline a shelter system that will provide a high degree of comfort and dignity for those using it while returning the use of public spaces to the broader community. Emergency shelters will exist to provide immediate housing for someone without a place to sleep tonight. However, emergency shelters will also function as a gateway to the tiny home shelter system which will make a tiny home available in a short time-span to any one whom has entered the emergency shelter system. The purpose is to provide high quality, dignified shelter for both emergency and chronic homelessness.

The cost of providing the emergency and tiny shelter spaces is not high, in the order of \$10 per person per day, and to house all the people currently sleeping rough in this city would cost less than \$1million per year with this expense being covered by existing social assistance payments. The more difficult side of the equation is for the wrap-around services that will accompany the shelter system. Laundry facilities are typically included in the installation costs, and food is often provided by volunteers at no cost to the government. Wrap-around services typically cover supervision and counselling services and range upwards of \$130 per person per day based on the grants that have been provided to tiny shelter communities within the Halifax area. For 200 people, this would cost approximately \$9.5million per year. For some homeless people, an intensive support system will be necessary to help maintain them in housing once housed, for others, such as those down on their luck, very little is needed in additional supports other than a place to sleep and regular access to food.

Currently, wrap-around services are provided in an ad-hoc, emergency, fashion. There may be ways to reduce their cost through greater efficiencies by providing them in a more coordinated manner. Given that the costs of the actual housing aren't high, the question is whether and \$10million for wrap-around services is too high? Is cost the barrier to providing a basic level of accommodation to all residents of the HRM? If so, should we focus on housing all people currently sleeping rough first, even if it is without a high degree of accompanying wrap-around services? Or, is \$10million a reasonable amount of money to spend if it means solving, within this city, one of humanity's most difficult problems? Although I do not answer that question here, I do think that the costs can likely be brought down significantly and that homelessness is a problem that can be solved without a great deal of additional expenditure.

Introduction

Homelessness is a problem to both those experiencing it and those negatively affected by tent encampments. Allowing people to sleep in public places is not a sustainable solution. Homelessness is not an especially complex problem because there are really only two possible solutions. We can't end homelessness simply by making it illegal for anyone to sleep in a public place because the HRM is a signatory to a UN Convention which prohibits removing anybody from an outdoor encampment on

public land *unless* adequate shelter space is available. Therefore, in order to prohibit sleeping in public places, we must either: 1.) withdraw from the UN convention, or 2.) build the necessary shelter space.

Given the options, I think building the necessary shelter space is the moral choice: everyone deserves the basic guarantee of a place to sleep given that the future is uncertain for all of us. I believe that the shelter system should have two components: 1.) emergency “on demand” shelter, 2.) tiny shelter homes for anyone that has entered the emergency shelter system. Emergency shelters will exist to provide a basic place to sleep for the night for anybody who needs it. The emergency shelter system will also serve as the access point or gateway to a tiny shelter home for anybody once they have entered the emergency shelter system and have successfully passed a trial period within the emergency shelter.

In addressing the homelessness issue, I believe it is important to be even handed: offer kindness and compassion while also establishing rules and boundaries. Providing access to tiny shelter homes through the emergency shelter system will offer an incentive for people experiencing homelessness to enter the shelter system voluntarily rather than continuing to sleep outside. Tiny shelter homes will also act as a reward for abiding by the shelter’s code of conduct and can be used to help establish the behavioural norms that will be expected of the residents of the tiny shelter villages. I also think that a \$10 nightly fee should be charged for the use of a tiny shelter. Social assistance payments are designed to cover basic food and shelter costs. If the shelters are provided for free, along with food, heat, and electricity, a \$675/month social assistance payment actually represents quite a large amount of disposable income that could be harmful to someone struggling with addictions issues. Out of a \$675 monthly social assistance payment, \$300 for the monthly rent of a tiny home which includes food, laundry, heat, and electricity, will still leave a reasonable amount of disposable income for other expenses. As human beings, I believe that it is important to have the structure in our lives that comes from having responsibilities and the pride and satisfaction that comes from meeting them.

Upon investigation, the most surprising conclusion is that the cost to shelter homeless people is not high. Many of the costs involved can be averaged over 10 years or more with the *per-night* cost of a tiny shelter in the range of \$10. With a \$10 nightly fee, the shelters themselves would be revenue neutral. The greatest cost, by far, is for wrap-around services. The \$900,000 provincial grant for yearly wrap-around services at the Lower Sackville Pallet Shelter village with 19 units works out to roughly \$130 per day per person and does not include the cost of food and laundry services as the food is provided by volunteers and laundry facilities are included in the installation costs.¹ For the Akwaaba Reverend Wallace Smith shelter in Westphal, the cost of wrap-around services is \$180 per person per day.² The homelessness problem, therefore, has two distinct components: a lack of shelter and the lack of social services needed to address the root problems that are at the core of homelessness in some cases.

While the shelter component is actually quite simple to solve in that it doesn’t come with a great financial burden, the question of wrap-around services is more complex. If budgetary concerns are the primary barrier to solving this problem, should housing take priority over wrap-around services in order to end the immediate harm of living in substandard conditions? Are wrap-around services even truly a

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/pallet-shelters-halifax-nova-scotia-installed-1.7147652>

² <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/pallet-shelter-for-seniors-dartmouth-1.7224267>

component of the housing problem or are they, in fact, social services that should already be available to anyone who needs them regardless of their living situation? Drug addiction or mental health counselling would be equally beneficial to someone living in a tent as to someone living in a shelter. The fact that we are not already providing these services is a social policy shortcoming that is now also complicating the establishment of shelter spaces for homeless people. If the cost is the limiting factor in the establishment of shelter spaces because of a lack of social services, perhaps there are ways to reduce the costs of providing these services. At present, wrap-around services are delivered in an “ad-hoc” fashion through provincial grants given to different operators at each site and could, instead, be provided by the Department of Community Services in a coordinated fashion.

The implementation of an integrated emergency and tiny shelter system also requires many considerations other than finances. I will first discuss a strategy that *won't* work in order to help identify one that *will* using claims which are not easily testable but rather draw upon concepts that we all share and have an understanding of even if they can't easily be defined: community, independence, and acceptance. Attached to any system, there needs to be a great deal of sympathy and patience. The ways of being learned over many years of life on the streets may not be easy to change, if at all, and so it is important to not have unreasonable expectations surrounding personal behaviour or drugs or alcohol. Rather, as a society, we need to work on reducing the scale and intensity of the problem.

What Won't Work

By one estimate, there are approximately 200 people sleeping outdoors in tent encampments. If there are approximately 200 people experiencing homelessness in the HRM, the solution is simple: purchase or build a large warehouse on the outskirts of the city where land is cheap and repurpose it as an emergency shelter that can house 200 people a night and force them to sleep there.

The problem is, this won't work. Shelter is about much more than simply having a place to sleep for the night. It is rooted in community, a sense of belonging, and provides security and freedom. Many people won't want to spend hours busing to and from Bayers Lake or Burnside everyday to share a large dormitory. Forcing people to use such facilities would mean separating many from a community which offers mutual trust and support. It would also mean separating many from the support systems established by charities to provide comfort and care within the historically poor neighbourhoods of Halifax and Dartmouth. Such a facility might be tolerable for a night or two, but it will not provide a long term solution for chronic homelessness. Given the choice, many homeless people would prefer tent encampments where, despite hard living conditions, there is a degree of autonomy and freedom.

What Will Work

To create a viable, respectful shelter system, shelters should be placed near areas where homeless people currently live so as to maintain their sense of community and access to services. Emergency shelters should also be seen as a temporary option which, after a short stay comprising a trial period, will provide access to a tiny shelter. I think most people would agree that living in a communal shelter is an imposition. As humans, we need our moments of solitude and privacy, and living in constant close proximity to others can be emotionally draining. However, it is much easier to bare such an imposition if

it is temporary and offers the chance at a better living situation than a tent community but with the independence and freedom in the form of a tiny shelter home.

For some, homelessness can be accompanied by a range of issues such as drug use, mental health issues, violence, and even criminal behaviour. Those behind such behaviour might not readily respond to the typical legal sanctions that help maintain order within our society precisely for the reasons listed above. For this reason, tiny shelter villages housing the hard to house should not be constructed adjacent to established residential neighbourhoods but nearer to commercial or industrial areas or along transportation corridors where the effects of noise and other disruptions is more likely to go unnoticed and so reduce the chances of conflict with those living next to tiny shelter communities.

In the North End of Halifax, establishing tiny shelter villages in areas along the waterfront or Barrington Street would preserve access to the various support services offered nearby while also providing the residents of the tiny shelters a degree of independence and freedom from judgement or disapproval by the broader community. The reasons for homelessness are varied, but some causes like mental illness bring inevitable conflicts with others. Some people experiencing homeless may simply not want or even be capable of living in a way that is compatible with those living a more regimented lifestyle. Yet, homeless communities have a tremendous ability to regulate themselves. People who are homeless understand other homeless people and the challenges they face in a way someone on the outside never could. The need for intense supervision, to stem noise and disturbance complaints, may not be born out of the needs of the homeless community, but rather poor site selection and the needs of its neighbours.

There are also many people experiencing homelessness whom are employed and capable of supporting themselves but are simply without a place to live because of high rental costs. In this case, tiny shelter homes could be constructed adjacent to residential neighbourhoods with little in the way of supervision required or risk of an excessive amount disturbance to the broader community.

An Even Handed Approach

Public spaces are for everybody to use—homeless people included. No one person or group of people has the right to monopolize them. Banning sleeping, and especially tenting, in public places is a reasonable course of action. However, providing an incentive for those currently sleeping outside in public places to instead use the shelter system is a better option than coercion or force. Living in a tiny shelter community will require respecting one's neighbours and a responsibility to care for the tiny shelter as a scarce public resource providing a vital public service. Requiring a trial or evaluation stay in the shelter system is a reasonable way to determine someone's suitability for a tiny home. This might include nothing more than the determination that someone is able to live relatively peacefully with others and is capable of following a basic set of rules notwithstanding occasional minor infractions.

Responsibilities are a part of daily life and a requirement for anyone integrating into broader society. Providing someone with a free home and free meals while also taking care of all their daily basic needs, may not provide the best chance at success. Responsibilities provide structure to our lives and a sense of accomplishment when they are met. The current maximum social assistance payment of \$675 represents quite a great deal of disposable income if food, rent, heat, and lighting costs are already

covered. For someone facing addictions issues, the temptation this amount of money would provide may be too great to resist. Charging a monthly rent of \$300 for a tiny shelter will still leave \$375 in disposable income and provide a reasonable balance in reducing hardship.

The Cost

The provincial government's website states that it spent \$7million to purchase 200 pallet shelters and that this figure includes installation costs and wrap-around services. I estimate the serviceable lifespan of a Pallet shelter will be 10 years. However, because the information provided by the government does not state for how many years the funding covers the cost of the wrap around services, it is not possible to get an estimate of the total average daily costs of each pallet shelter including wrap around services from this data. However, an article about the Lower Sackville Pallet village provides information on the purchase and installation costs of the shelters as well as the annual budget for wrap-around services.

The article describes \$630,000 being spent to purchase and install 19 pallet shelters, including separate washrooms and laundry facilities, which equates to an average daily cost of \$9.08 per shelter over a 10 year period, or approximately \$275 per month. This does not include additional variable costs like electricity for heating, lights, and hot water but does include the purchase costs of a bed, bedding, and a desk. In addition to the facilities costs, the article describes a \$900,000 yearly grant from the provincial government to pay for "wrap-around services," but it does not describe if this includes things like electricity. It does say that meals are provided by volunteers and so, I assume, free of charge to the government. It also describes the hiring of three employees, two of which will be onsite for some portion, if not all, of the day, and the third being a councillor available three days a week. Wrap-around services are by far the biggest cost, with a yearly \$900,000 grant equating to \$130/person/day.

The Halifax Forum Emergency Shelter was given \$3million in funding from the province to operate until August 31, 2024. The facility is being provided "for free" by the HRM, as is the shower trailer. The \$3million was used to cover setup costs like beds, mattresses, bedding, divider screens, and other such costs as well as providing wrap around services like food, laundry, facilities staff, and counselling services. At peak capacity, the Forum can house 70 people. \$3million works out to a cost per person per night for 8 months of operation of \$175. However, it is a 24 hour facility, unlike a hotel in which guests check out during the day, and so comes with higher staffing and resource requirements. Also, because it is only planned to operate for 8 months, the setup costs that could have been spread out over years, as in the purchase cost of a pallet shelter, are only spread out over a seven month period.

From the information available about the Halifax Forum shelter, it is impossible to make an estimate of the average per person per day costs of the shelter over a longer period of time or what proportion of the total costs represents the fixed costs, like facilities, versus variable costs like food and staffing. However, it is reasonable to expect, like in the previous example, the largest portion of the total costs comes from the wrap around services with food and laundry being the least among them and staffing and counselling services being the highest. The same trend holds true in another example. The recently opened Akwaaba Reverend Wallace Smith Sr. Campus was granted an annual budget of \$2.3million to provide wrap around services to 35 residents. This works out to \$180/person/day.

These costs are very high and raise a difficult question, should the requirement of wrap around services be the limiting factor in the deployment of emergency shelters and tiny shelter homes? That is, should a high degree of wrap around services be in place before the establishment of such facilities or is it better to get people housed and eliminate the immediate harm of tent communities first?

The other question is whether wrap-around services, other than food or laundry, should really form part of the cost of emergency shelter spaces or tiny shelter homes? Shouldn't these services be available to anyone who needs them regardless of their living circumstances? Someone living in a tent is equally deserving of mental health or addictions counselling and may even gain more benefit from it given their stark reality. Greater access to addictions and mental health counselling may help prevent the onset of homelessness altogether in the first case. Therefore, many of the "wrap-around services" aren't really "shelter services," but social services whose cost and provision should be organized outside of the shelter system budget/mandate (although such services may well operate in and through the shelter system in conjunction with it). The important point is to not muddle the accounting of shelter costs and social services. The cost of providing emergency shelters is low, the cost of providing social services is high. The need for greater mental health and addictions treatment services has been a long standing debate within our society. The cost of providing emergency shelter spaces should not be lumped together with the costs of providing social services and thrown out as "too expensive." Homelessness to the current extent is a new problem; lack of funding for social services is an old one.

If the long-term average cost of an emergency shelter space or a tiny shelter home is \$10, when issued on a low-rent basis of \$10 a night, these units are actually revenue neutral. The rent covers their cost. As in other forms of social housing, the rent can be directly deducted from social assistance payments. Current provincial rental subsidies can also be applied to make the cost more affordable. Such a rent burden is affordable, and may offer benefits in terms of the self-satisfaction of paying one's own way.

There may be other ways to further bring down the costs. First, many people experiencing homelessness may not need intensive wrap-around services. And so, the costs to house them would be limited to the \$10 a night or less for the actual shelter costs. Some of these people may actually be working and capable of *renting* a tiny home at no cost to the government. A "triage" approach could be taken where young men and woman are sheltered in dormitory or hostel-type rooms with multiple beds for the first night or two with single or double occupancy rooms being reserved for older residents or couples.

A more integrated model might help lower costs where more intensive wrap-around services are needed. Currently, each site provides its own wrap-around services funded by a provincial grant. Instead, the provincial government could hire its own social workers and councillors and have them travel to the communities on a regular schedule. Rather than providing a 24 hour presence as in the Lower Sackville tiny shelters, a social worker could be available during the day with regular visits at night by a specialized team to protect against violent or dangerous incidents. Each shelter village could also include a dedicated emergency phone for police or ambulance. The tiny shelters could also include security cameras, controlled by their residents, and alarm systems or panic buttons.

Centralized meal preparation could also be used to reduce costs. An “a la carte” menu could offer a range of meal options provided by a food-truck type arrangement supported by a centralized food production network. In this manner, each food-truck could distribute a range of meal choices and accommodate a variety of dietary needs in a cost-effective manner.

Conclusion

An integrated emergency and tiny shelter system is a reasonable solution to the homelessness crisis. It will provide both on demand, immediate shelter, and a dignified interim solution for anyone experiencing chronic homelessness. A tiny shelter home will provide a great deal of freedom and independence for any one whom is using it and should provide a strong incentive for someone experiencing homelessness to enter the emergency shelter system rather than sleeping rough.

The barrier to providing an adequate amount of shelter space and tiny shelter homes isn’t the cost of the shelter spaces themselves, which are quite inexpensive at around \$10/per night, not including meals or variable costs like electricity and heating. The largest cost, by far, is for the “wrap-around services,” which accompany the shelter spaces and currently range from \$130 per person or per day or more. To some extent, these wrap-around services are, in fact, social services that should already be in place but are instead being provided on an “emergency” basis to people who have already fallen through the system and have wound up homeless. It could be argued that a lack of adequate social services is a contributing factor to the current crisis of homelessness but is now also something standing in the way of its solution because it makes the costs of emergency shelter look unreasonably expensive.

Although an increase in social spending would help address the present lack of services like addictions or mental health counselling, perhaps it is possible to bring down the costs of providing the emergency wrap-around services that accompany emergency shelter spaces. Currently, the wrap-around services are provided via an ad-hoc system funded by government grants given to various social organizations. A more integrated, streamlined approach in which the wrap-around services are provided by the Department of Community Services might offer lower costs. The biggest cost component of the wrap-around services is for staffing to provide counselling services and what I would call “supervision.”

One way to reduce these costs would be to place the emergency shelters or tiny shelters housing difficult to house people in areas where complaints against the shelters are likely going to be less likely to occur, such as in industrial areas or along major transportation corridors, and so will reduce the need for as strict supervision. I would argue that the current 24/7 presence of social workers in shelter villages is largely to keep noise and disruptions to a minimum for residents in nearby neighbourhoods. Strong emotions like anger are part of homelessness. Locating shelter villages where these emotions can be expressed without causing alarm to nearby residences will help reduce complaints.

For others, such as those whom are employed but have fallen into homeless because of high rents or exceptional circumstances, tiny shelter villages could be constructed within or nearby established residential neighbourhoods without any need for additional supervision or counselling services. Without accurate numbers available from the HRM or Province of Nova Scotia, it is difficult to determine in any accurate sense what percentage of the homeless population may fall into this category.

According to an article from April 25, 2024, there are approximately 70-80 people sleeping outside within the HRM.³ At the time, these numbers were expected to rise over the summer. Most recently, I heard the figure of 200 people quoted by an HRM councillor on the radio, but I cannot verify this information. The last official count of people sleeping outside in the HRM was in 2022. According to a recent inquiry with the HRM homelessness office, there are 160 people sleeping rough in the HRM. Using the figure of 200 people, the total yearly shelter-only cost would be approximately \$730,000.⁴ Along with this come additional costs to cover maintenance, snow removal, garbage collection, and other services such as electricity and running water, although these expenses will be minimal.

Individually, \$10 per day for shelter costs represents a total monthly expense of \$300. This could be paid through the monthly social assistance payments of \$675 that most homeless people resident to Nova Scotia would already be getting. The net additional cost to the provincial government in this case would be \$0 and would leave the residents of the tiny shelter homes \$375 in monthly disposable income.

The cost of providing wrap-around services to 200 people at a daily cost of \$130 is \$9,500,000 or almost 10 times the cost of providing the shelter spaces alone. Not all people may benefit from or need counselling services to the same extent. Care and supervision can be provided through other means than the constant presence of a social worker or security guard as is the case now.

If, between the people who don't need intensive wrap-around services, and more efficient provision of services for those that do, the average cost of providing wrap-around services were reduced by half, it would cost an additional \$4.75million per year to both house and provide wrap-around services for all those currently experiencing homelessness in the HRM. The current homeless encampments also have a cost in terms of their negative effects, so the net additional costs associated with providing wrap-around services to house people in established shelter communities may not be high once the societal costs associated with the current situation are taken into account. Tent communities also presently have some wrap-around services like water, washroom facilities, and visits by support staff and by-law enforcement agents that the costs of would be saved if their residents were housed. Given the size of entire provincial budget, and with the costs of the housing provided out of existing social assistance payments, this is a small amount of money to solve one of humankind's most intractable problems.

As I've discussed, providing what should be broadly accessible social services out of the emergency shelter budget confuses the accounting. It is much better to fully fund these services through the appropriate agency and provide them to anyone who needs them rather than just those who have entered into homelessness. Ultimately, in choosing between shelter and support services, I believe that housing is the greatest need of immediate concern. Supervision and support should be maintained at a level in which basic order can be preserved. Arguably, there are many people for whom falling into homelessness could have been prevented if they had access to the appropriate assistance at critical junctures in their lives. In the mean time, I believe it is most important to end the immediate harm of living outside even if it means providing only a basic level of emergency wrap-around services.

³ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/halifax-plans-for-new-designated-homeless-encampments-1.7183632>

⁴ \$10/night x 200people x 365 nights=\$730,000.