

MEDIA RELEASE

*For immediate release
March 11, 2024*

What does homelessness look like in Lanark County?

The following is part of a series about homelessness in Lanark County.

In Ontario, and Lanark County, homelessness is defined as “a situation in which an individual or family is without permanent, appropriate housing or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it.”

This can look like many things. It could mean staying in a makeshift shelter (such as an encampment or a vehicle) or no shelter at all. It could be an emergency shelter or temporary accommodation, such as couch surfing with friends or family. It could be someone leaving a provincial institution, such as a correctional facility, hospital or the child welfare system, with nowhere to go.

“We have to remember that circumstances change for people,” said Emily Hollington, Director of Lanark County Social Services. “Things may be going along just fine, and then life takes a turn. People become ill and cannot work. They lose their job and suddenly their home is unaffordable. Costs for everything have increased, and maybe the job that was okay will no longer make ends meet and things become precarious and unaffordable. Maybe your spouse becomes violent and you have to leave but cannot afford to live on your own. We see people in all sorts of unfortunate situations.”

The county’s by-name list, which is a real-time list of people experiencing homelessness in the community, indicated 62 people were actively homeless as of Feb. 29, up from 54 on Jan. 31. Of those, 34 women and 28 men were deemed head of the household, and 17 people on the list are part of a family (couple, couple with children or single-parent household). Five people are over age 65. Twenty-four people are located in Smiths Falls, with 19 in Carleton Place, 13 in Perth, four in Mississippi Mills and two in Tay Valley.

Currently, 24 people (or 39 per cent) on the by-name list are couch surfing. Fifteen people are sheltered in hotels and motels in all three towns. Two people found themselves unable to work due to illness and are seeking rent support because now they cannot afford permanent or long-term housing. Eight people are sheltered at Lanark County Interval House, second stage housing and a Lanark County Mental Health crisis bed. Others are living in trailers or are basically unsheltered in cars and sheds. One woman is precariously housed in a violent situation.

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“Eviction, the affordable housing crisis and coping with mental health or addictions issues can be barriers for people, but one of the biggest barriers is stigma,” Hollington said. “People don’t choose to be homeless – it’s a last resort. We need to get rid of that shame so individuals feel comfortable accessing supports and we can try to get them into a stable situation more quickly.”

The Homeless Hub works to dispel myths around homelessness and notes people experiencing homelessness have the added challenge of constantly searching for food, shelter and a sufficient source of income. If unemployed, searching for a job becomes even more challenging without access to a phone, computer, regular fixed address, transportation, proper clothing and access to showers. Although some struggle with substance use and/or mental health issues, this is not always the case – as in the general population.

“Homelessness looks different for each person,” Hollington said. “Everyone experiencing homelessness has a complex set of circumstances to navigate. Showing some understanding and compassion goes a long way to reducing stigma and helping people on the path to housing stability.”

To learn more about housing supports in Lanark County, see <https://www.lanarkcounty.ca/en/family-and-social-services/housing.aspx>. If you are experiencing homelessness, call the Lanark County Homeless Response Team at 613-267-4200 ext. 2140 or 1-888-952-6275 Monday to Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. or after hours at 613-206-1486.

– 30 –

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