

# ARGUS PREVENTION AND DIVERSION EVALUATION FINAL REPORT

Prepared by OrgCode Consulting, Inc.  
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The housing system can feel like a maze for people experiencing homelessness. Trying to determine who to talk to, how to get there, and where to begin can seem confusing and overwhelming. Getting connected to housing too frequently seems like a matter of talking to the right case manager, at the right agency, at the right time.

Shelter diversion represents an essential component in preventing homelessness, and Argus Residence for Youth People, in collaboration with the Region of Waterloo and its sheltering partners has spent the last two years piloting a multi-agency collaboration focused upon diversion for youth experiencing housing insecurity. Wherever possible, when youth can be safely diverted from emergency shelter, the cost savings are not merely financial, but prevent experiences of traumatic and often repeated homelessness that limit opportunities for a healthy transition to adulthood, educational and employment attainment as well as physical, psychological and social wellness. Over the past two years, OrgCode has had the opportunity to engage community partners to evaluate the impact of coordinated shelter diversion services consistently delivered to youth experiencing both housing insecurity and literal homelessness, the outcome of which this final report describes.

Building upon the “Housing Stability Data Summary” report examining initial outcomes from 2016-2017, early findings from the pilot program demonstrated promising results. From a one year baseline from April 1, 2015 to March 31, 2016, Argus’ shelter program provided 6,211 bed nights. Over the next year from 2016-2017, following the implementation of diversion, bed nights reduced to 2,206, representing a 64% decrease. Beyond bed nights, the overall count of youth aged 16-24 accessing the Waterloo Region’s emergency shelter system dropped by 22%, from 776 youth from 2015-2016 to 607 youth from 2016-2017.

The need for diversion is further demonstrated by national data profiled in *The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness* by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada. In *Without a Home*, the largest national study on youth homelessness ever conducted in Canada, the average age that study participants first left home was 15, and 40% were younger than 16 when they first experienced homelessness. This homelessness often occurred more than once: 76% of respondents had experienced multiple episodes of homelessness. Homelessness has cascading negative effects: when examining educational outcomes, 53% of young people experiencing homelessness drop out of school compared with the Canadian average of less than 9%. The research also revealed that a high percentage of homeless youth report being tested for a learning disability (50%) or ADHD (41%). Such learning disabilities are amongst the most significant factors contributing to school disengagement for those who have dropped out. Despite these challenges, the desire

for education remains: of those young people that dropped out, 74% would like to return to school.

By measuring Argus' implementation of diversion, OrgCode's evaluation sought to answer the following four questions through both qualitative and quantitative analysis:

- Is the Youth Diversion Tool valid and reliable?
- Will youth shelter diversion reduce shelter admissions, returns to homelessness and assist youth with identifying safe housing options, thereby reducing the trauma of homelessness in their lives?
- Will this coordinated access approach for youth seeking shelter improve local efforts to prevent and end homelessness for youth seeking shelter admission?
- Will housing, stability and financial outcomes for youth improve?

OrgCode joins Argus and its partners dedicated to preventing and ending homelessness in demonstrating how shelter diversion for youth represents the strategies and investments that most effectively leverage the numerous resources, innovative minds and shared vision across the community through a responsive system that ensures homelessness becomes increasingly rare, brief and non-recurring. Homelessness prevention and diversion, led by full-time experts that maintain a housing-focused and trauma-informed lens and utilize motivational interviewing, de-escalation techniques and harm reduction together combine to form the foundation of successful organizations dedicated to preventing and ending the traumatic experience of homelessness. The Argus Prevention and Diversion team was also guided by sensitivity to lived experience of youth experiencing housing crises.

As expected with a two year project, a number of operational factors changed during the lifespan of the youth pilot. One of the revisions included the adoption of shelter diversion practices as a pre-shelter admission in the Region of Waterloo. For youth, this increased the likelihood that all local youth seeking shelter in the Region would be connected with the Argus team. Any referrals shelter or other emergency and re-housing supports for these youth would then be activated by the Argus staff. Data on interactions with and for youth was maintained by the agency.

Given the comprehensive dataset of youth participants served over the two-year pilot project, OrgCode Consulting dedicated additional resources to ensure detailed data scrubbing and analysis activities in January 2020. ***Data provided by Argus confirmed that the Prevention and Diversion Tool was implemented 827 times over the 2018 and 2019 project lifespan.*** Extensive de-duplication of the dataset across the two years resulted in the ***identification of 351 unique youth*** served in the Argus Youth Homelessness Prevention & Diversion Pilot Project.

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## INFORMATION ON YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

### Youth Served in 2018 & 2019

From February 2018 to December 2018, the Argus team connected with youth experiencing a housing crisis 559 times. Within a very short data analysis timeline and

issues of “missing” data, OrgCode completed a rudimentary de-duplication of contacts served (based on name, age and gender datapoints) and identified 516 different contacts.

From January 2019 to December 2019, demands on the Prevention and Diversion Team lessened and Argus implemented the Diversion Tool on 268 occasions. During 2019, greater and/or more consistent detail was provided regarding specific demographic information that greatly improved our ability to de-duplicate the combined dataset covering both years.

Using extensive data scrubbing and de-duplication methods, it can be confirmed that ***the Tool was implemented 827 times but a total of 351 unique youth were served*** by the Argus Youth Homelessness Prevention & Diversion Project over the two year period of the project.

### **Gender**

Youth receiving diversion were 71% male, 27% female and 2% transgender.

### **Age**

The average and median age for youth receiving diversion was 22 years old.

13% were 18 and under, 70% were 19-24 and 17% were 25 and older.

**KEY FINDINGS**



Through piloting diversion for youth experiencing housing insecurity and literal homelessness, the following key findings emerged:

**1. Many youth seek housing assistance, and without diversion activities, often exit the homeless service system to the same place as they initially entered: homelessness**

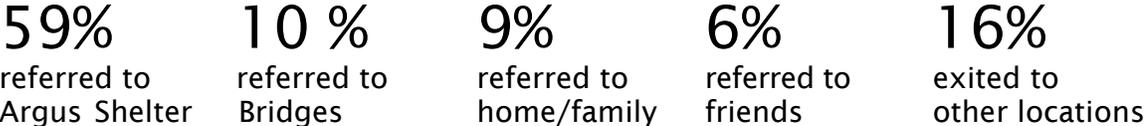
During the last two years, Argus recorded interactions with 351 unique youth, a total of 827 distinct times/separate contacts. In 2018, Argus team members connected with youth for shelter diversion activities on 559 occasions and in 2019, Argus provided 268 diversion activities. When examining the 351 unique youth, interactions ranged from 77% receiving assistance once (270 youth), 11% receiving assistance twice (37 youth), and 13% receiving assistance three or more times (44 youth):



**2. Diversion plays a critical role in preventing and quickly ending youth homelessness**

When diversion from shelter could not be achieved, youth who entered shelter continued to receive trauma-informed, housing-focused, strengths-based motivational interviewing that sought to better understand the housing crisis and explore all options for quickly moving from shelter to safe alternatives. Capitalizing on trained Prevention and Diversion practitioners, Argus team members modified the approaches and strategies used in the diversion process to promote a rapid exit to youth’s entry into emergency shelters.

After receiving diversion, youth were referred to the following locations:



As part of a system dedicated to preventing youth homelessness wherever possible, 69% of diversion was done prior to shelter admission. Another 25% of diversion was continued after shelter admission (7% of responses were unclear).

Of the youth that were served by the Prevention & Diversion team at Argus, 13% of the youth were referred to the Prioritized Access To Housing Support (PATHS) process in the Region of Waterloo system of care. Such a referral identifies that these youth were not only experiencing a current housing crisis but also living with chronic

homelessness and demonstrating a higher depth of need. Diversion for these youth would not have been appropriate.

As a part of the post-diversion reporting by the Argus team, 34% of Argus staff determined their diversion to be successful, 61% of staff identified that diversion was not possible, and 5% were uncertain based on the conversation with youth. Early results into shelter diversion efforts with single adults identify a successful diversion rate of 30%<sup>1</sup>. Argus' success rate of 34% exceeds the target established for this Youth Prevention & Diversion Project.

### 3. Diversion houses and supports youth, many of whom never return to homelessness<sup>2</sup>

When examining the youth that were successfully diverted from literal homelessness and were assisted in located a safe place in the community to stay...

## 83 youth served were referred to friends or family

An examination of homelessness information from the Region of Waterloo and the Argus project database identified that of those...

## 94% never returned for additional assistance

78 youth

Of 5 youth (6%) who returned to Argus Prevention & Diversion, **none of them returned more than once.**

In analyzing data available, it is also helpful to examine the journey of youth that were not successfully diverted to a safe housing option in the community and entered shelter or some other local emergency response service such as crisis respite, hospital, hotel/motel and mental health counselling.

Of the 286 youth who were referred to non-permanent locations...

- **76% of those exits never returned** to the Argus team which provided access to shelter for youth in the Region (217 youth)
- 11% returned once (32 youth)
- 7% returned twice (19 youth)
- 3% returned three times (9 youth)
- 1% returned four times (3 youth)

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<sup>1</sup> Numerous Shelter Diversion projects have successfully diverted up to 30% of singles adults and youth including projects in Virginia Beach, Virginia; Montgomery County, Maryland; Traverse City, Michigan; City of Kawartha Lakes-Haliburton, Ontario, Region of Waterloo, Ontario and Hamilton, Ontario. As well as St. Thomas-Elgin, Ontario.

<sup>2</sup> For data analysis...While 351 unique youth were served, when examining "positive or non-positive locations," a total of 18 youth had both a positive and negative exit, so that count rises to 369 "positive or negative diversion exits" (since those youth were counted in each category). "Positive" locations were to friends and family. "Negative" locations were to everywhere else; largely shelter but also crisis respite, hospital, hotel/motel and mental health counseling).

- <1% returned five times (1 youth)
- 2% returned six times (5 youth)

As Argus was the primary homelessness prevention and shelter diversion service for youth locally, this analysis identifies that the diversion assistance was *potentially* more successful long term than the self-reported exit destinations from Argus team members suggested. Recognizing that 76% of the exits believed to be to non-permanent locations were stable enough that youth did not return to seek further assistance at Argus, the impact of the Argus diversion and shelter pre-admission activities appears positive. Whether that was because they received more intensive re-housing supports from the local homeless response system, left the area, remained insecurely housed or homeless but never re-engaged the system, or were genuinely housed is impossible to tell from the data we possess. But *based on those 217 youth's actual usage patterns, a strong case could be made that they were also diverted, however inadvertently, from future experiences of homelessness.*

Considering the above finding and the fact that almost all of the 83 youth believed to be exiting to housing (the 94% referenced above) never re-engaged Argus, and for the literal handful who did, none of them returned more than once, the problem solving and crisis intervention supports provided by Argus was essential for the prevention of literal homelessness.

**4. Most youth receiving diversion assistance do not possess at least one source of employment and do not report attending school**



5% of responses were unclear as to employment or school enrollment status

**5. Diversion, done well, takes considerable time, expertise and financial resources to effectively engage youth in crisis**

With limited housing resources, the need for well-trained staff to pursue self-resolution and creative problem-solving with youth amid their initial and traumatic experience of homelessness could not be more important. To the extent that staff specializing in these diversion activities can rapidly meet youth in their moment of crisis prior to literal homelessness, shelter entry can indeed be prevented for more than 30% of youth served. These conversations best occur when meeting youth face-to-face and with sufficient time to fully explore all available alternatives to shelter. Dedicated financial resources greatly assist these housing support specialists, but well-trained, highly motivated and relentlessly creative problem-solving staff fully unlock diversion’s potential.

Throughout the process, youth themselves continued to demonstrate remarkable divertability as they resolved their own housing crises without entering shelter or being engaged in places not meant for habitation.

**6. Post-Diversion follow-up with youth – although hugely challenging with youth not connected with the homeless response systems (and captured in HIFIS) – demonstrates the lasting impacts of homelessness prevention and shelter diversion efforts.**

Research initiatives across North America are identifying the consistent challenge in reconnecting with youth that do not enter the local community's homeless response system since such an entry activates the capturing of demographic data and intervention impacts/outcomes. In order to gather follow-up information on the youth participants served by the Argus Youth Prevention and Diversion Pilot, this evaluation project used multiple mechanisms and platforms to reconnect with served youth:

- a. Electronic invitation to participate in a follow-up survey shortly after their interaction with Argus (this included the addition of a \$5 gift card as a token of appreciation for respondents);
- b. Argus Team Leader attempted cold calls to all participants to gather information on current housing status, school attendance and income updates;
- c. OrgCode and Argus coordinated and facilitated youth focus group locally (tokens of appreciation were provided to attendees);
- d. OrgCode completed follow-up email contact with Argus Prevention & Diversion participants to invite them to participate/update the youth survey;
- e. OrgCode completed 2 texting blitz sessions to the youth that had agreed to participate in follow-up contact to gain updates on housing, education and income status (once again token of appreciation were provided to respondents).

It also enhances the important role of other community partners such as schools, drop-in centres and other youth service agencies, Child and Family Services and potentially Justice that could be capitalized in future youth research projects to improve follow-up data gathering. Casting a wider net through multiple community partners that may have improved access to youth served, with informed consent, could improve the follow-up data available.

In total, 42 youth (12% of the 351 unique youth served in this Pilot) connected with OrgCode for follow-up contacts via survey participation, text or email responses and/or the focus group session. Of these follow-up contacts, detailed information on housing, income and education status updates is available for 33 youth (9% of the overall Pilot project participants). See below for the insights gleaned from this follow-up.

## Results of Follow-Up with Argus Youth Prevention & Diversion Participants

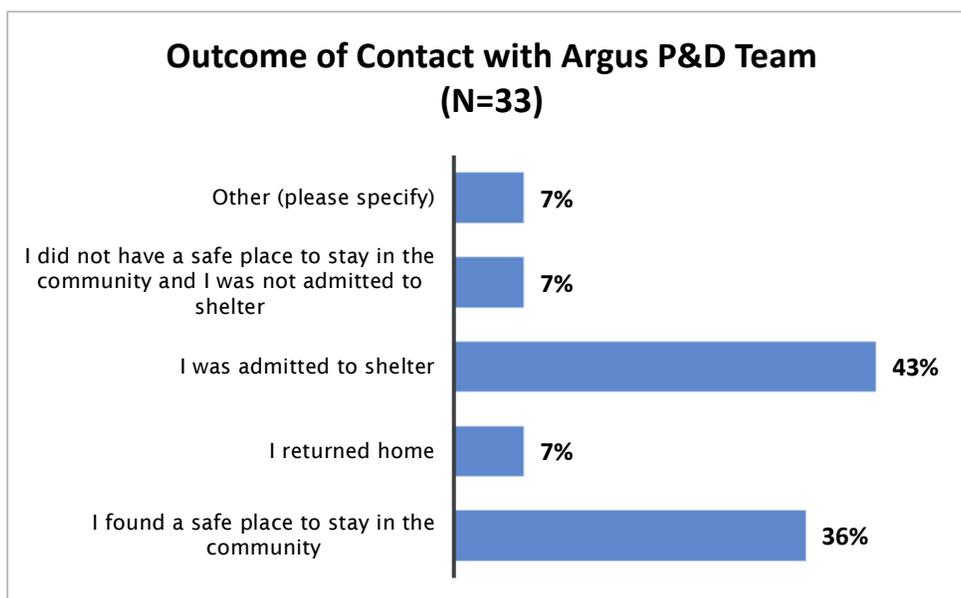
As is the scenario for an evaluation project of this nature, OrgCode identified the goal of engaging with a sample size of youth participants that achieved a 95% confidence level (confidence interval of +/- 10). Regardless of the multitude of efforts made for re-engagement with youth participants, follow-up contact with 42 of the 351 unique youth, represents a sample size that achieves a 90% confidence level (margin of error interval of +/- 13%). The following insights were shared in the follow-up contact with youth served by the Argus Prevention & Diversion Team.

### 1. Outcome of Argus Youth Homelessness Prevention & Shelter Diversion Service

The occurrence of follow-up contact with youth participants ranged from 2 weeks after initial contact with the Argus Prevention and Diversion Team to 6 months, with the average length of time being 2.75 months. 57% of youth identified that they would recommend the Argus Prevention and Diversion service to other youth that were facing a housing crisis or homelessness.

**57% of the 33 youth participants stated that they would recommend the Argus Prevention & Diversion to other youth.**

In self reports of the outcomes of their contact with the Argus Team, 36% of the youth (N= 12) identified that they avoided literal homelessness by finding a safe place to stay in the community and an additional 7% (N=2) returned home which they deemed to be a safe location for them. This successful diversion rate is actually higher than the 34% successful exits reported by Argus staff. 43% (N=14) were admitted to shelter which is lower than the staff reported exit of admission to shelter.

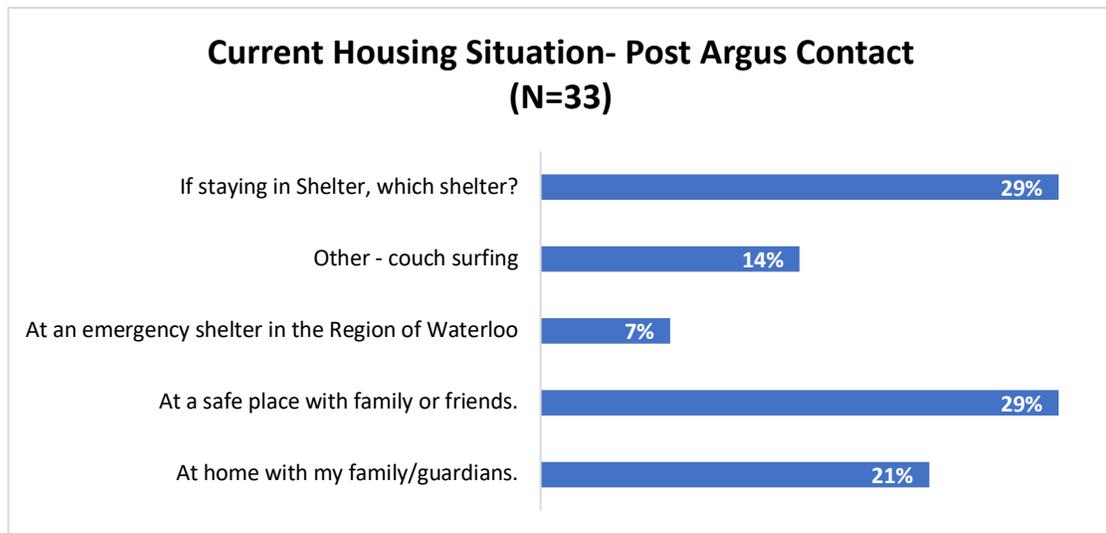


At follow-up, 36% of the youth identified that they avoided literal homelessness by finding a safe place to stay.

12 Youth

## 2. Post-Diversion Contact - Housing Status

In examining the housing status of youth respondents, 29% of youth identified staying in a safe place with family and friends (N=9), 21% were safely living with family (N=7) and an additional 14% or 5 youth identified couch surfing (the safety in these housing situations, however, is unknown).



Comparisons of the youth database maintained by Argus for the Youth Homelessness Prevention and Diversion project, confirmed that the youth identifying as “safely housed” at follow-up contact with OrgCode had indeed been assisted by the Argus team to avoid entering literal homelessness (sheltered or unsheltered). Based on this follow-up, 48% of the youth participants that followed up with OrgCode (N=16) gained and/or maintained safe housing situations after receiving shelter diversion with Argus.

At follow-up, 48% of the 33 youth maintained safe housing situations

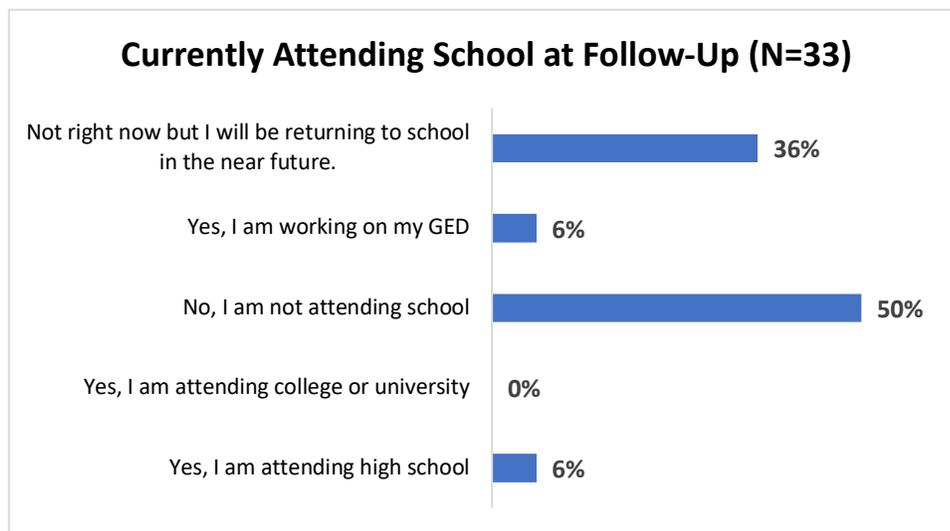
16 youth

### 3. Post-Diversion Contact - Involvement in Education for Youth Participants

As identified in *Without A Home*, despite the housing and homelessness challenges facing Canadian youth, the desire for education remains: of those young people that dropped out, 74% would like to return to school. For the 33 youth that provided information to OrgCode in follow-up contact, 16 were not currently attending school (50%); 2 were working on their GED (6%), 2 or 6% were still attending high school and 12 were not attending school at the time of follow-up but planned to return in the near future. Based on the above statistics, the percentage of youth involved in education at follow-up (12%) exceeded the education involvement reported initially to Argus (10%).

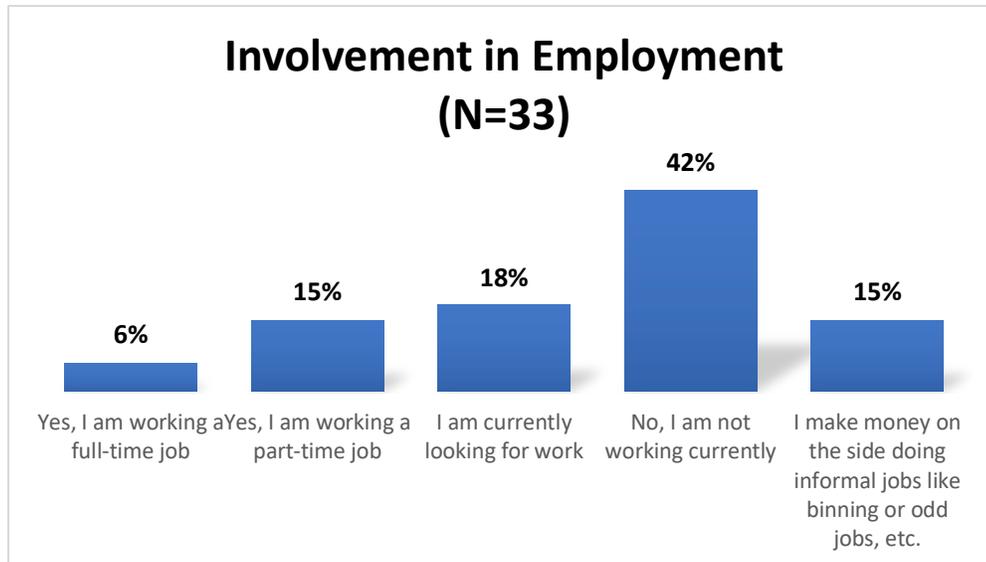
## At follow-up, 12% were attending school or working on their GED.

36% were planning on returning to school in the near future.



### 4. Post Diversion Contact - Involvement in Employment

Consistent with the data gathered by the Argus team on the youth served, 42% of the 33 youth were not working at the time of follow-up contact (N=14). However, 6% or 2 youth identified working at a full time job, 15% or 5 youth were working part-time and an additional 5 (15%) were making money informally (i.e. binning, odd jobs, etc.). The remaining 18% were looking for work (N=6).



At follow-up, 36% of youth were engaged in employment - formal or informal.

18% were actively looking for work.

## FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUTH HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION

### I. Continue and expand investments in proven interventions like diversion:

- Further invest financially in Argus to conduct both diversion prior to shelter entry and delayed diversion immediately following it, recognizing diversion as a critically important component of a system dedicated to ending homelessness because it prevents new episodes of homelessness and reduces the toxic stress impact on youth through a more cost-effective intervention than entering emergency shelter

### II. Increase the providers who can implement this proven investment

- Consider expanding diversion to additional organizations, schools and all agencies/groups that may act as a front-door into the homeless response system for youth to improve the solution focused approach to addressing housing crises and family breakdown scenarios

### III. Prioritize shelter admission to youth sleeping outside or in places not meant for habitation

- Increase staff dedicated to conducting youth-dedicated street outreach to engage those currently residing in their vehicles, tents, under bridges and in the woods

#### **IV. Enable staff to learn from what works -- and doesn't -- across organizations**

- As diversion expands in scope across additional providers, leverage peer learning opportunities by intermittently enabling each organization's direct service staff to shadow each other during particularly challenging scenarios and to build upon promising practices in problem-solving

#### **V. Expand creative usages of HIFIS to better record outcomes and coverage**

- Continue enabling and encouraging creative uses of HIFIS as a reporting system, starting simply, and collecting only the most essential identifying elements (name, date of birth, dates of service and provider name) possible, potentially expanding to additional demographics when doing so increases exits from homelessness to housing and secures additional funding to do so

#### **VI. Continue to expand targeted diversion to all other populations, learning from youth**

- Consider piloting shelter diversion dedicated to unaccompanied single adults and families, in addition to youth experiencing housing insecurity

#### **VII. Further open predominantly centralized access to better engage youth**

- In a trauma-informed manner, continue opening access to people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity wherever they present for services, engaging them through a "no wrong door" but coordinated approach to receive system-wide resources, while also targeting street outreach for people who do not come into the system (and often avoid it) and do not seek its assistance through a centralized location, with a particular emphasis on engaging youth experiencing unsheltered and chronic homelessness

#### **VIII. Continue to track youth participants to identify future returns to housing crisis and homelessness**

Customization of HIFIS reporting templates to ensure that homelessness prevention and shelter diversion activities are better measured, analyzed and reported will assist all agencies and community partners throughout the Region of Waterloo in preventing and ending youth homelessness. Such strategic analysis and tracking of the journey of youth through the homelessness system of care will provide valuable insights in enhancing local service delivery excellence.