

Sault Ste. Marie Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan (2026–2035)

Prepared by OrgCode Consulting Inc.

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Their commitment to collaboration, compassion, and innovation is the foundation for meaningful systems change.

Executive Summary

The Sault Ste. Marie Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan (2026–2035) establishes a coordinated, housing-focused roadmap to make homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring. Building on the findings and recommendations of OrgCode Consulting Inc.'s system review and strategic planning engagement, the plan provides a structured framework for transformation—integrating data-driven decision making, Indigenous leadership, prevention, and measurable outcomes across the housing and homelessness service continuum.

Consultation and action planning for this Homelessness Strategy occurred during a period of transition for the community. Homelessness in Sault Ste. Marie has become increasingly complex, influenced by rising housing costs, health and mental health challenges, and the concentration of services in one central facility. The District of Sault Ste. Marie Social Services Administration Board (DSSAB), in partnership with the City of Sault Ste. Marie, CMHA, Indigenous partners, and community agencies have committed to advancing system redesign rooted in Housing First principles, lower-barrier practice, and coordinated access.

Over the next decade, this plan outlines six interrelated strategic priorities that form the backbone of a modernized, effective homelessness response system:

- 1. Strengthen Housing-Focused Responses and System Flow** – Transforming the men's shelter and bridge housing programs into fully housing-focused, 24/7, lower-barrier programs with trained staff, consistent policy frameworks, and measurable housing outcomes.
- 2. Improve System Access, Coordination, and Integration** – Embedding the Hart Hub as the community's central coordinated access and case conferencing system, integrating data across all programs.
- 3. Advance Equity and Indigenous Leadership** – Supporting Indigenous self-determination through governance roles, cultural safety training, and the co-development of an Indigenous definition of homelessness.
- 4. Prevent Homelessness and Sustain Housing Stability** – Expanding diversion, mediation, and post-housing stabilization supports to prevent inflow and returns to homelessness.

5. Build and Leverage Affordable and Supportive Housing Supply – Aligning DSSAB, Provincial, Federal and Municipal investments with By-Name List data to increase the supply of deeply affordable and supportive housing.

6. Strengthen Community Partnerships and Accountability – Establishing a Community Relations Committee, annual reporting, and transparent progress dashboards to maintain trust and alignment across sectors.

Through these actions, Sault Ste. Marie will achieve measurable outcomes: reduced shelter length of stay, increased housing placements, improved housing retention rates, and greater community cohesion. This plan positions the community to meet Reaching Home and Ontario Homelessness Prevention Program objectives while reflecting local priorities and strengths.

Introduction and Local Context

Homelessness in Sault Ste. Marie is complex, caused by overlapping issues such as housing costs, income gaps, lasting impacts of trauma, mental health concerns, and the harmful effects of substance use. The community's homelessness response system shows strong commitment and innovation but faces systemic issues common in Ontario. Services—including the men's shelter, bridge housing, and drop-in program—operate from one facility, offering both opportunities for service integration but also amplifying limits in capacity and access.

Over the past several years, data from the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS), By-Name List (BNL), and Point-in-Time counts indicate a core of individuals experiencing persistent, chronic homelessness with complex support needs. Many experience co-occurring health conditions, substance use concerns, and barriers to traditional housing markets. Indigenous peoples remain overrepresented within homelessness data, highlighting the need for Indigenous-led and culturally grounded responses.

At the same time, the Sault Ste. Marie system of care has significant strengths: dedicated front-line staff, a collaborative network of service providers, and leadership within DSSAB and municipal partners eager to drive meaningful change. This 10-Year Strategy provides a roadmap to leverage those strengths, align local efforts with national frameworks, and create a system where homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring.

Progress Made Due to the Initial Housing and Homelessness Plan (2014-2024)

In 2014, OrgCode Consulting Inc. prepared the first comprehensive Housing and Homelessness Plan for Sault Ste. Marie. Over the past decade, the community has achieved meaningful progress in areas such as system coordination, data integration, and collaboration across providers. However, persistent structural challenges—including affordability, housing supply, and high-acuity needs—continue to shape the local homelessness landscape. This section summarizes progress achieved, ongoing gaps, and the shifts informing the 2026–2035 Plan.

KEY MILESTONES (2014–2024)

- Establishment of the Hart Hub, providing a foundation for coordinated access and integrated service navigation.
- Expansion of bridge housing and outreach programming through CMHA Sault Ste. Marie.
- Integration of HIFIS and the By-Name List (BNL), enabling improved data tracking and coordinated housing efforts.
- Initial adoption of Housing First principles and trauma-informed approaches among local service providers.

PERSISTENT GAPS AND NEW CHALLENGES

- Limited supportive housing options for individuals with complex needs.
- Disproportionate Indigenous representation within the homeless population (35–40%).
- Rising rental costs and declining vacancy rates are intensifying affordability pressures.
- Ongoing workforce and training challenges affect consistency in housing-focused service delivery.

How Housing Realities Have Changed in SSM - Comparative Indicators (2014 → 2025)

Indicator	2014 Baseline	2024 / 2025 Update	Trend / Commentary
Total Population	~75,000	73,370 (2021 Census)	Slight decline; aging population ↑
% of Renters in Households	32%	35%	Rising rental demand
1-Bedroom Vacancy Rate	≈ 4.5%	<2% (CMHC 2024)	Tightening market
Average Rent (1-BR)	\$700	\$1,050	+50% since 2014
Individuals Experiencing Chronic Homelessness	40–50	90+	Increase driven by high-acuity needs

Indigenous Representation	≈30%	35–40%	Persistent overrepresentation
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Since 2014, Sault Ste. Marie has strengthened collaboration and data systems, laying essential groundwork for coordinated access and housing-focused practice. Yet housing affordability and supportive housing capacity have not kept pace with need. The 2026–2035 Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan builds on these lessons, prioritizing system integration, lower-barrier service delivery, and a measurable pathway to ending chronic homelessness.

Methodology and Planning Process

The development of this Action Plan was informed by a comprehensive community engagement and information analysis process. OrgCode’s methodology combined quantitative data review, qualitative research through a document review and community engagement to gather insights, and systems mapping to produce actionable, evidence-informed recommendations.

The planning methodology consisted of seven interrelated phases:

- 1. Environmental Scan** – Reviewing policies, demographics, housing supply, and local service structures.
- 2. System Mapping** – Understanding the current homelessness response system, including service flows, bottlenecks, as well as gaps in resources and services.
- 3. Needs Assessment** – Analyzing By-Name List data, shelter usage, and demographic trends to determine demand and priority populations.
- 4. Quantifying Need and Cost** – Using available data to project future housing and service requirements, cost implications, and resource gaps.
- 5. Draft Recommendations** – Developing preliminary directions validated through consultation with leadership, providers, and individuals with lived experience.

6. Validation and Refinement – Hosting focus groups, interviews, and working sessions to test and refine the recommendations.

7. Finalization and Implementation Planning – Producing the final homelessness strategy and action plan, with phased timelines, governance structures, and performance measures.

This approach reflects OrgCode's commitment to evidence-based, community-based planning. Key informant interviews and multiple focus groups (including people with lived/living experience of homelessness and housing crisis) informed the findings, alongside analysis of data from DSSAB, CMHA, municipal records, and national datasets such as CMHC and Statistics Canada.

Insights from Data & Reporting Mechanisms

SYSTEM DATA OVERVIEW

This section brings together several complementary data sources to provide a cohesive picture of homelessness and housing in Sault Ste. Marie. It combines Point-in-Time count data, By-Name Data, inflow and outflow records, shelter usage information from Homelessness Individual and Family Information System (HIFIS), and local housing supply and access figures. Together, these sources describe how many people are experiencing homelessness, how the system is functioning, and the structural conditions influencing housing stability.

Homelessness in Sault Ste. Marie has grown steadily over the past several years, both in scale and visibility. Point-in-Time counts recorded 93 people in 2018, 244 in 2021, and 421 in 2024. These counts capture the number of people experiencing homelessness in a community on a single night and help track changes in scale and characteristics over time, including those staying in shelters, transitional housing, or unsheltered locations. The increase across these three counts reflects both higher need and improved system coverage through HIFIS and coordinated access.

By-Name Data, which track individuals known to the system in real time, show a smaller but more consistent group of people engaged with services. In January 2023 there were 139 people on the list, rising to 161 in January 2024 before falling to 113 in January 2025. The chronic population followed a similar pattern,

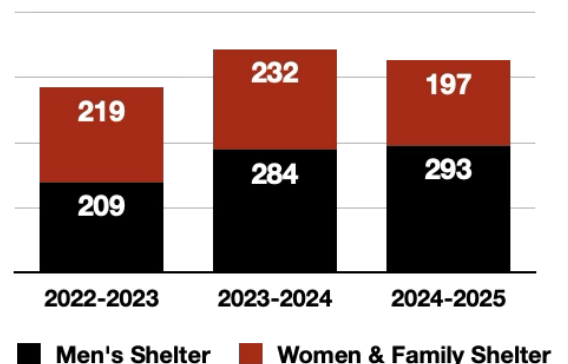
increasing from 51 to 81 and then decreasing to 54. This decline in 2025 does not yet represent a sustained reduction in homelessness, but it does suggest fewer people meeting chronic criteria and some improvement in active case resolution.

Between January 2024 and August 2025, Sault Ste. Marie's homelessness system was marked by steady inflow, moderate housing placements, and a high number of people moving inactive rather than achieving housing stability. Over this period, the chronic population averaged about 60 people active at any given time. Inflow and outflow volumes were relatively balanced, with 169 people entering and 147 leaving the chronic population. Of those who exited, 96 were moved to inactive and 51 were housed. This indicates that while the system maintained engagement and turnover, most exits were the result of people losing contact rather than securing housing.

By 2025 there are clear signs of progress. In the first eight months of this year, the chronic population recorded 19 exits to inactive and 13 to housing, a more balanced ratio than the previous year. The same trend appears in the overall population, where 45 people were housed and 55 went inactive. Although total inflow is still outpacing outflow, a greater share of those leaving homelessness in 2025 did so through housing rather than inactivity. This reflects gradual improvement in the system's ability to achieve housing outcomes, even as the overall number of people experiencing homelessness remained high.

Demographic data for July 2025 show that homelessness in Sault Ste. Marie continues to affect primarily single adults, with a strong representation of Indigenous residents. Of the 127 people active that month, 114 were single adults and 49 identified as Indigenous. Within the chronic population of 62, 57 were single adults and 19 identified as Indigenous. Youth, seniors, and families were present in smaller numbers. These proportions have remained consistent over time, reinforcing the need for both culturally grounded responses and housing models suitable for single adults.

Unique Shelter Clients Served by Fiscal Year (HIFIS Data)



Shelter data from HIFIS show sustained pressure across both men's and women's services. The data are reported on a fiscal-year basis. The men's shelter served 209 unique clients from August 2022 through March 2023, 284 in 2023–2024, and 293 in 2024–2025. The women, children, and family shelter served 219 clients in 2022–2023, 232 in 2023–2024, and 197 in 2024–2025. These totals confirm that emergency shelters continue to play a central role in the system's response to homelessness, with consistently high numbers of individuals and families relying on shelter each year. While the data show some variation across years, the overall trend points to a system operating near capacity and serving a high volume of people with ongoing housing instability.

The housing supply and access data highlight the structural pressures shaping homelessness in Sault Ste. Marie. As of March 2025, the community's housing inventory included 1,806 rent-geared-to-income units across municipal, non-profit, and program portfolios, along with 81 supportive housing units. Despite this stock, demand for affordable housing continues to far exceed supply. The rent-geared-to-income waitlist contained 2,002 unique applicants in January 2025 and rose to 2,115 by March, with the greatest demand for two- and three-bedroom units, which also have the lowest turnover. In 2024 there were 93 move-ins to rent-geared-to-income housing and 79 approvals through the Portable Housing Benefit and Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit programs. In the first quarter of 2025, there were 15 move-ins and 27 program acceptances. These small numbers of placements relative to the size of the waitlist demonstrate how limited turnover continues to restrict access for households in need. The most recent [Housing Needs Assessment](#)¹ found a rental vacancy rate of zero for bachelor units and 2.2 percent for one-bedroom units, underscoring that even smaller, lower-cost options are scarce in the private market. Combined, these factors show that affordable housing pathways remain constrained across all household types, leaving residents with the lowest incomes, including those receiving Ontario Works or ODSP, with few realistic options outside of emergency shelter.

Taken as a whole, this dataset describes a homelessness system that is active and coordinated but operating within the limits of a tight housing market. Chronic homelessness remains a large share of the overall caseload, inflow

¹ City of Sault Ste. Marie (2025). Federal Housing Needs Assessment: Sault Ste. Marie. Retrieved from <https://saultstemarie.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Federal-Housing-Needs-Assessment-Sault-Ste-Marie-3557061.pdf>

continues to match or exceed outflow, and most people exiting homelessness are doing so through inactivity rather than through permanent housing. At the same time, 2025 data show a modest but measurable shift toward more exits to housing, suggesting that continued investment in coordinated housing pathways is beginning to strengthen system performance.

To complement these system-wide findings, a deeper dive into more recent By-Name Data from September 2025 provides a real-time view of the people currently known to the homelessness system and the nature of their housing and support needs.

BY-NAME DATA SNAPSHOT – SEPTEMBER 4, 2025

The By-Name Data was extracted from HIFIS on September 4, 2025, to provide a real-time snapshot of people actively known to the homelessness system in Sault Ste. Marie. This view captures individuals who were engaged with local services on that date. It does not include everyone who may have experienced homelessness during the year, but offers a clear picture of the population currently visible to the system at that moment in time.

At the time of extraction, 107 individuals were recorded in the By-Name Data. Of these, 26 (24 percent) met the federal definition of chronic homelessness, indicating a substantial share of people experiencing long-term or recurring homelessness. Seven (7 percent) were identified as experiencing their first episode of homelessness.

SPDAT full-assessment scores point to a population with very high support needs. The average SPDAT score was 42.8 (median 44), well within the high-acuity range on the 0–60 scale. Of the 56 individuals with a completed SPDAT, 84 percent scored in the high range (35–60), 11 percent in the moderate range (20–34), and only 5 percent in the low range (0–19). This distribution suggests that most people known to the system in September 2025 required intensive and longer-term supports to achieve and sustain housing.

Duration measures reinforce this picture of entrenched homelessness. People had been homeless for an average of 316 days in their current episode and 1,021 days over their lifetime, with the upper range (90th percentile) extending into multiple years. The data indicate that most individuals in the system have

been homeless for extended periods rather than moving quickly through short episodes.

Demographic information shows that 57 percent of individuals identified as women and 43 percent as men. Forty-one percent identified as non-Indigenous, while nearly one-third (31 percent) identified as First Nations living off-reserve, and a further 13 percent identified as Métis, non-status, or unsure. About one in ten (10 percent) identified as veterans. The age profile shows that over half (55 percent) were between 25 and 44 years old, roughly one in five (21 percent) were between 45 and 54, and smaller proportions were youth (8 percent under 25) or older adults (16 percent aged 55 and over).

Homelessness in Sault Ste. Marie emerges from this analysis as a complex but deeply human challenge. The data show that it is defined less by short-term crisis and more by long-term instability. The people reflected in this snapshot are rooted in the community yet remain unhoused for extended periods, often with intersecting health, income, and support needs. The prevalence of high SPDAT scores and lengthy durations of homelessness make clear that resolving homelessness locally depends on sustained, relationship-based work rather than rapid turnover. The strong representation of Indigenous residents further highlights the need for culturally grounded approaches that recognize both systemic barriers and community strengths. Viewed alongside community survey results, the data reveal a homelessness system that is coordinated and responsive but constrained by limited housing supply and the depth of need among people experiencing homelessness. Importantly, respondents with lived experience expressed more confidence than the broader community that homelessness can be reduced, reflecting both a grounded understanding of what works and a resilience that continues to shape local progress.

Insights from the Public, Service Providers and People with Lived Experience

COMMUNITY SURVEY OVERVIEW

To help ground the District's homelessness strategy and housing-focused action plan in local perspectives, a community survey was conducted in June and July 2025. During this two-month engagement, 516 community members responded

to this community survey. The survey invited residents to share their views on housing needs, affordability, homelessness, and community priorities, as well as an opportunity to share their own current housing situations.

Community surveys of this kind are an important complement to administrative data and statistical analysis. They capture how residents perceive local housing challenges, the level of public support for new solutions, and where people see the greatest needs. These insights help ensure that strategic planning reflects both lived realities and community attitudes.

The survey began by asking respondents which community they currently live in. Responses to this open-ended question were reviewed and standardized to account for variations in how people refer to Sault Ste. Marie (for example, “the Soo,” “SSM,” or neighbourhood names), while also distinguishing between residents living directly in the city and those from nearby communities such as Prince Township, Garden River, and Echo Bay.

Among the 515 people who answered this question, 491 (95 percent) indicated that they live within Sault Ste. Marie, while 24 (5 percent) live in surrounding communities in the District, and two responses were unclear.

This means the survey results primarily reflect the views and experiences of people living directly in Sault Ste. Marie, while also capturing insight from those in neighbouring communities who are closely connected to the city’s housing market and service environment.

Participants were asked to identify the perspective from which they completed the survey. This helps show whose experiences and insights are reflected in the results.

Among the 515 people who responded to this question, the largest group were community members, representing 339 (66 percent) of respondents. Another 129 (25 percent) said they were friends or family members of someone who is or was unhoused. A further 66 (13 percent) identified as having lived or living experience of homelessness, and 100 (19 percent) indicated that they work in the housing or homelessness sector.

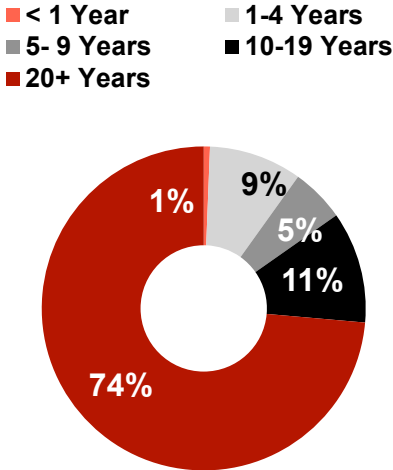
Smaller groups represented other sectors of the community, including 21 (4 percent) from the business community, 18 (3 percent) from City government, 8

(2 percent) from First Nations governments, and 2 (less than 1 percent) from provincial or territorial government.

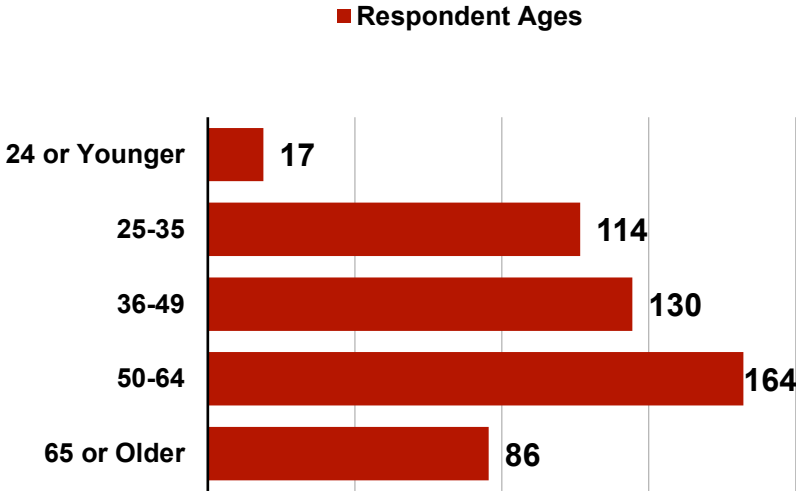
Several participants also described other roles in the community, including mental health and addictions workers, volunteers, and residents concerned about the state of local housing.

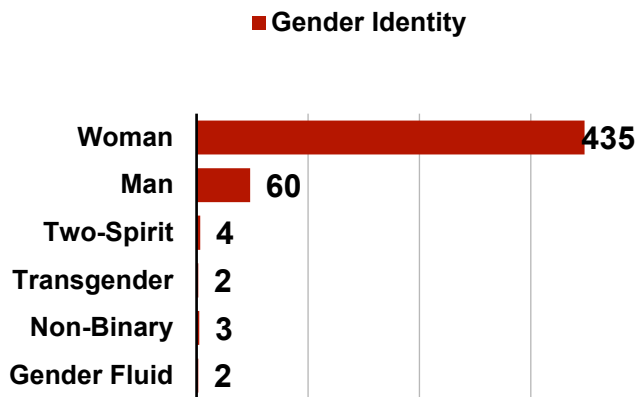
Respondent Demographics

The survey reached a wide range of residents from across Sault Ste. Marie. Most participants have deep roots in the community, with 357 (74 percent) reporting that they have lived in Sault Ste. Marie for more than twenty years. Only a small number, 3 (<1 percent), said they had lived in the community for less than one year.



Respondents represented a broad span of ages. The largest share was between 50 and 64 years old, 164 (32 percent), followed by 36 to 49 years, 130 (25 percent), and 25 to 35 years, 114 (22 percent). Smaller numbers were 65 years or older, 86 (17 percent), or 24 years and younger, 17 (3 percent).





Women made up the clear majority of participants, 435 (83 percent), while 60 (11 percent) identified as men. A smaller number of respondents identified as Two-Spirit, 4 (1 percent), transgender, 2 (<1 percent), non-binary, 3 (1 percent), or gender fluid, 2 (<1 percent).

Together, these demographics show that survey participants were primarily long-term residents, with strong representation from women and adults between 25 and 64 years of age.

Realities and Beliefs on Housing and Homelessness

Respondents were asked how much they agreed with the statement, “I would support more affordable housing in my neighbourhood.”

Among the 396 people who answered this question, 258 (65 percent) agreed that they would support affordable housing in their neighbourhood. Seventy-five (19 percent) gave neutral or mixed responses, and 63 (16 percent) disagreed.

These results show that most residents are open to having more affordable housing in their own neighbourhoods, while a smaller share remain neutral or opposed.

Respondents were asked whether they have someone they can rely on for help if they experience housing issues, such as not being able to pay rent.

Among the 389 people who answered, 187 (48 percent) disagreed, indicating that they do not have someone they can count on for help. Fifty-eight (15 percent) gave neutral or mixed responses, while 144 (37 percent) agreed.

These findings suggest that many residents feel they would have limited support if faced with housing instability, highlighting the importance of strengthening informal and community-based safety nets.

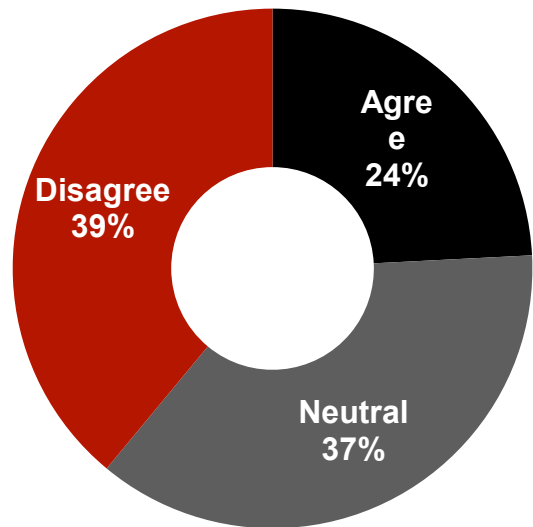
Respondents were asked how much they agreed with the statement, “People who are unhoused in the District often move here from other regions.”

Among the 372 people who answered this question, 145 (39 percent) disagreed, 137 (37 percent) gave neutral or mixed responses, and 90 (24 percent) agreed.

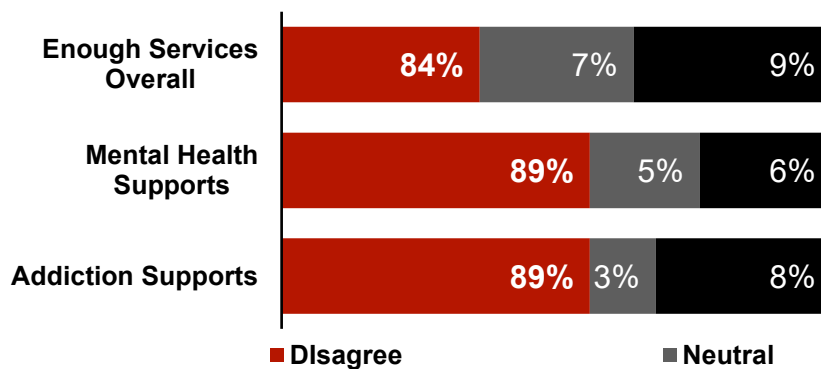
These results show that opinions on this issue are mixed, with most respondents either uncertain or disagreeing that homelessness in the District is driven by people moving in from other regions. This suggests that while there is no strong consensus, many residents may view homelessness as a local challenge rather than something caused by people coming from elsewhere. Recognizing this can help guide how the community frames conversations about homelessness and focuses its efforts on local prevention and housing solutions.

Across the three questions focused on services and supports for people who are unhoused, respondents expressed a consistent view that current systems are not meeting people’s needs.

People Who Are Unhoused Come From Other Regions



Perceived Availability of Services and Supports for People Who Are Unhoused



A large majority, 340 (84 percent), disagreed that there are enough services to meet the needs of everyone who is unhoused in the District. Similarly, 357 (89 percent) disagreed that there are adequate supports for unhoused people living with mental illness, and 348 (89 percent) disagreed that there are adequate supports for unhoused people living with addiction.

Only small proportions of respondents—between 6 and 9 percent—agreed with any of these statements, with very few indicating neutral or mixed views.

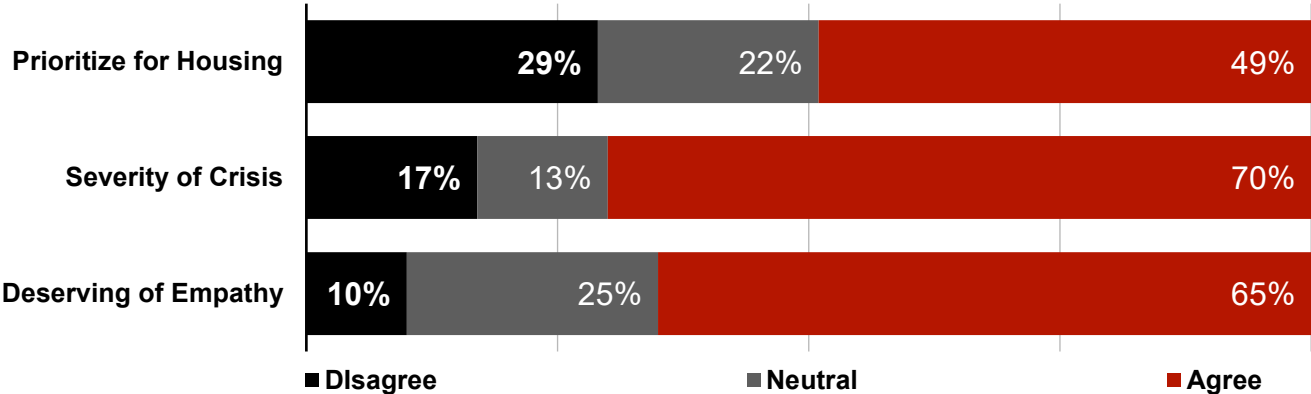
Overall, these results point to a clear perception that services and supports for people who are unhoused, particularly those with complex health needs, remain insufficient. This perception highlights a critical area of concern for the community and signals a strong public mandate to expand and strengthen coordinated mental health, addiction, and housing supports.

The survey included several questions that explored public attitudes toward homelessness in the District.

Overall, responses suggest both a recognition of the severity of the current situation and a mix of views about how housing should be prioritized. Nearly three-quarters of respondents, 285 (70 percent), agreed that the current homelessness crisis is the worst it has ever been in the District.

When asked about prioritization, 200 (49 percent) agreed that people who are unhoused should be prioritized for new vacancies in government-funded housing, while 117 (29 percent) disagreed and 89 (22 percent) were neutral or uncertain.

**Community Perceptions of Homelessness: Prioritization, Severity, and Empathy
(Percent of Respondents)**



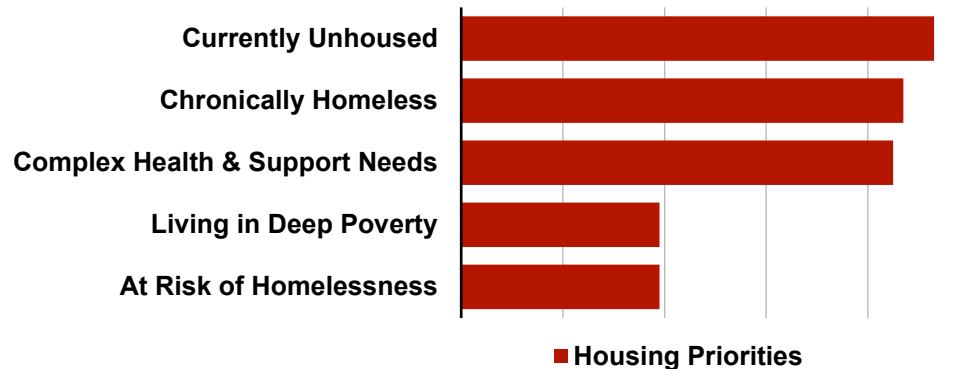
Finally, 266 (65 percent) agreed that people who are unhoused are deserving of empathy, compared to 43 (10 percent) who disagreed and 100 (25 percent) who were neutral or mixed.

Taken together, these results suggest that while most respondents recognize the scale of the current crisis and express empathy toward people experiencing homelessness, fewer hold clear views about prioritizing them for limited housing opportunities.

When asked which groups should be prioritized first for new housing investment, respondents showed a clear preference for addressing homelessness directly. The highest priorities were people who are currently unhoused, followed closely by those who have been unhoused for extended periods and people with complex health or support needs.

Community housing investment priorities (ranked first through fifth)

Far fewer respondents ranked people living in deep poverty or those at risk of becoming unhoused as top priorities.



This suggests that residents see the most urgent need in responding to visible and persistent homelessness, rather than in preventive or poverty-focused interventions.

Housing Stability and Personal Risk of Becoming Homeless

Most respondents reported feeling secure in their current housing, but the data reveal that many households still experience notable pressures and vulnerabilities.

Among 396 people who answered, 230 (58 percent) said they had no concerns about their current living situation. However, 166 (42 percent) reported at least one concern. The most common issues were the ability to pay rent or utilities (82

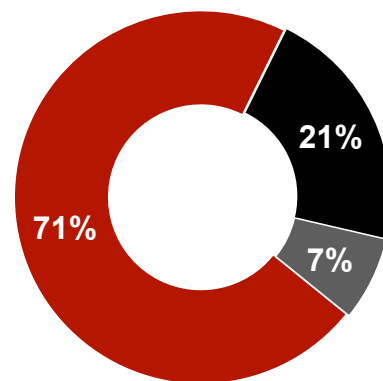
respondents, 21 percent), followed by safety (44 respondents, 11 percent) and condition of housing (32 respondents, 8 percent). A smaller number cited concerns about eviction or overcrowding.

When asked whether they felt at risk of becoming unhoused in the next year, 34 (9 percent) said yes and another 67 (17 percent) were unsure. Together, this represents more than one in four respondents who either feel at risk or uncertain about their housing stability.

Belief in the Potential for Change

Despite clear concerns about housing affordability and service gaps, most respondents remain hopeful that meaningful progress can be made. Among 375 people who answered this question, 268 (71 percent) said they believe communities across the District can make measurable reductions in homelessness over the next five years. Only 80 (21 percent) said they do not believe such change is possible, while 27 (7 percent) skipped the question.

Respondents who believe measurable reductions in homelessness are possible



This optimism suggests that many residents still see homelessness as a solvable issue — one that requires coordinated action, sustained investment, and shared accountability across local governments and community partners.

“We keep building temporary fixes, but people need real homes and real supports that don’t disappear after a few months.” — Survey respondent

Community-Identified Solutions

A total of 306 people offered written suggestions, providing a strong qualitative picture of how residents believe homelessness in the District can be reduced. Six dominant themes emerged:

1. Expand affordable and supportive housing options

By far the most frequent theme. Many respondents called for building more affordable housing, reducing rents, and developing units with on-site supports for people with complex needs. There was a strong sense that the housing supply simply does not meet current demand.

2. Increase mental health and addiction supports

Respondents emphasized that housing stability often depends on access to treatment, counselling, and harm reduction services. Many suggested co-locating supports or funding outreach programs that connect people to care.

3. Improve coordination and accountability among service providers

A recurring message was the need for stronger collaboration across government, social services, and community partners. Several comments pointed to system fragmentation, duplication, and the need for clearer responsibility for results.

“There’s too much talk and not enough coordination. Until services actually work together, people will keep falling through the cracks.” — Survey respondent

4. Strengthen prevention and early intervention

Many respondents urged more focus on keeping people housed — through rent subsidies, eviction prevention, or income supports — rather than waiting until homelessness occurs.

5. Address stigma and build public understanding

A notable number of comments encouraged education campaigns, community forums, or school initiatives to shift attitudes toward homelessness and increase empathy.

6. Enhance emergency and transitional responses

Some respondents also called for better-resourced shelters, temporary housing, and winter response options to bridge gaps while permanent housing is developed.

These responses reflect a pragmatic optimism: residents recognize that homelessness is complex but believe tangible progress is achievable through expanded housing, better coordination, and sustained investment in supports.

Comparing Perspectives: People with Lived Experience and the Broader Community

While the community survey reflects a broad range of perspectives, the responses from people with lived or living experience of homelessness offer a particularly important lens. Their answers highlight how experiences of housing instability shape perceptions of community, safety, and hope for change. Comparing their responses with those of other residents reveals both deep disparities and shared commitment to progress.

Sense of support

When asked if they have someone they can count on for help if there is an issue with their housing, people with lived or living experience were far more likely to say they do not have someone they can rely on. Of the 52 lived-experience respondents who answered this question, 33 (64 percent) disagreed, 5 (10 percent) gave neutral or mixed responses, and only 14 (27 percent) agreed. Among other respondents in the community, 154 (46 percent) disagreed, 39 (12 percent) gave neutral or mixed responses, and 144 (43 percent) agreed. This contrast shows that people with lived experience face deeper social isolation and have fewer supports to turn to in moments of housing crisis. While community members overall also expressed limited confidence in their support networks, the gap between these groups highlights the greater vulnerability that persists for those who have experienced homelessness firsthand.

Current housing concerns

Two-thirds of people with lived experience (44 respondents, 67 percent) reported at least one concern about their current living situation. The most common issues were the ability to pay rent or utilities (26 people, 39 percent), followed by safety (9 people, 14 percent) and condition of housing (5 people, 8 percent). Among other residents, only 122 (27 percent) reported any concerns at all, with 325 (73 percent) indicating they had none. This contrast underscores the much higher levels of housing stress faced by those who have personally experienced homelessness.

Belief in potential for change

When asked whether communities throughout the District can make meaningful and measurable reductions in homelessness over the next five years, 36 (82 percent) of respondents with lived or living experience said yes, while 8 (18 percent) said no. Among other community members, 232 (76 percent) said yes and 72 (24 percent) said no. Despite experiencing higher levels of housing instability and fewer supports to rely on, people with lived experience actually showed a higher level of optimism about the community's ability to make progress.

Taken together, these results show a complex mix of vulnerability and hope. People with lived or living experience of homelessness face greater financial and safety concerns and have fewer social supports to draw upon, yet they also demonstrate remarkable resilience and belief in the possibility of change. Their perspectives provide essential insight into what real progress requires and why those with lived experience must have a central voice in shaping the path forward.

SUMMARY OF INSIGHTS FROM SITE VISITS AND SECTOR ENGAGEMENT

Engagement with service providers and key informant interviews revealed a dedicated workforce of front-line and management staff who show up every day to meet the increasing (and often high complexity of) needs of the people served in shelters, drop-in centres, homelessness prevention, in-reach/outreach activities, housing and case management supports, etc. Based on responses to a service provider survey, 30% of staff working in the homelessness response system in Sault Ste. Marie has been attached to the sector for 3 years or less. Unlike many Canadian communities in the post-pandemic restriction era, the majority of survey respondents had worked in the sector for significant lengths of time - 42% had worked in the local system for 4 to 14 years, and an additional 18% had worked in the local sector 15 years or longer. As the majority of newer staff are working in front-line positions, the need for comprehensive professional development, supervision and coaching activities must remain a priority in Sault Ste. Marie in the years ahead.

Philosophically, the dedication to seeking housing options as the only solution to homelessness was evident during site visits and also in the service provider survey. For example, 88% of survey respondents identified that “housing is a right for every person, regardless of income, substance use, health issues, etc.. In addition, 59% agreed or strongly agreed that every member of their staff team believed that everyone currently experiencing homelessness in Sault Ste. Marie should return to permanent housing as quickly as possible. Surprisingly, however, only 51% of survey respondents identified that funded agencies practice Housing First and/or Housing Focused approaches in their daily work. Capacity building initiatives to improve alignment with evidence-informed strategies and practices will be important in Sault Ste. Marie.

To further amplify the need for alignment with proven housing-focused activities, 95% of service providers that completed the survey demonstrated a strong belief that, in order to be successfully housed, clients should receive lots of life skills training and connections to support services while they are in shelter. Such a focus on “housing readiness” approaches is not aligned with evidence-informed shelter service delivery and amplifies the crisis response mindset that was often evident in homelessness response service delivery in the community. When identifying the purpose of shelter, an additional 73% of respondents identified that the primary goal of shelter work was “to create programs and services that prepare people to be successfully housed while they stay with us”. Only 11% of respondents identified that the primary goal of shelter was to act as a primary connection to housing. Unexpectedly, only 8% of respondents identified that the goal of shelter was “to provide a safe place for people to have their basic needs met”. Such a “housing readiness” service orientation likely contributes to longer stays in homelessness and fewer exits to housing than hoped.

Although only 11% of survey respondents believed that the previous Community Plan to prevent and end chronic homelessness had been effective, 76% of respondents identified that their organization was committed to preventing and ending homelessness locally. Given the modified chronological access to Community Housing as well as the prioritization and matching processes for access to specialized Supportive Housing options, it is not surprising that 76% of survey respondents recognized that local community housing and non-profit housing operators support the work of housing and supporting people recovering from homelessness.

During site visits, interviews and survey responses, it was evident that housing-focused problem-solving for households experiencing a housing crisis could be enhanced. The survey results revealed that only 45% of respondents identified that homelessness prevention and shelter diversion activities were performed at the access points to the homelessness response sector. Enhancements in widespread and consistent delivery of prevention and diversion activities will assist in decreasing the inflow of new people into sheltered and unsheltered homelessness.

The development and implementation of a strong policy and procedure framework for all services and programs was also identified as an important enhancement moving forward. For example, only 21% of survey respondents agreed that current “policies and procedures support clients in moving into permanent housing in the most rapid and streamlined way possible, without unnecessary service pre-requisites, rules, or program requirements.” It was also witnessed that for organizations that had well-developed policy documents, these expectations and procedures were not often practiced consistently in service delivery. On numerous occasions, it was shared that the demands facing staff and organizations far outweigh the resources available to meet the increasing complexity of needs demonstrated by service participants and the increasing intolerance towards people experiencing homelessness and those working in the sector within the community. Although the dedication to service excellence was apparent, many staff teams in the homelessness and housing system are experiencing fatigue, vicarious trauma and a desire for enhanced resources, coaching and supervision.

INSIGHTS FROM PEOPLE WITH LIVED AND LIVING EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS IN SAULT STE. MARIE

Direct engagement with people experiencing homelessness and navigating the local system of care across Sault Ste. Marie provided an important perspective on how homelessness is experienced and responded to at the community level. These conversations reinforced that homelessness is not the result of a single factor, but a combination of personal, relational, and structural circumstances that shape how people enter, move through, and attempt to exit the system.

For some individuals, homelessness followed an unexpected relationship breakdown or loss of housing despite steady work and strong skills. One participant reflected, “I very quickly went from a walk-in closet to a garbage bag,” capturing how suddenly housing stability can disappear and how limited the pathways are to recover from that loss. Others spoke about wanting to return to their home communities but having no clear option or support to do so. Across all groups, people expressed a deep sense of disconnection from the broader community and described feeling safest only within program spaces. Women in particular spoke about personal safety concerns that limited their willingness to spend time in the community.

Many participants reacted emotionally to the focus group event itself. When asked about their assets, strengths, or aspirations, several noted that these questions felt unfamiliar—that they had forgotten they even had strengths or dreams to name. It was a reminder that when systems focus primarily on needs and deficits, people can lose sight of capacity, skills and resilience. Strength-based approaches are essential to rebuilding not only housing stability, but also confidence, purpose, and connection to community.

A consistent message was the gap between temporary shelter options – when available - and permanent housing. Even within Bridge Housing programs, participants described feeling that their next step was uncertain and that the supports to move forward were not clearly defined. The length of time many had spent in programs contributed to confusion about their purpose and outcomes, with some viewing them primarily as places that meet basic needs rather than as part of a broader housing pathway.

Despite these challenges, strong peer relationships and mutual support were evident. Participants often helped one another navigate the system, share information about housing opportunities, and offer encouragement to those newly experiencing homelessness. The skills, experience, and empathy of peer support staff were particularly valued, though many in these roles felt their contributions were underutilized and not fully integrated into the system’s design or mission.

Operational issues also shaped the daily experience of homelessness. The lack of personal storage, the need to carry belongings throughout the day, and the impact of certain procedural routines—such as line-ups and building access schedules—added stress and sometimes created unintended barriers to participation in meals or community activities. Concerns about the quality of

food, particularly among men's programs, further illustrated how daily living conditions affect health, well-being and engagement.

Together, these observations reveal both the resilience of individuals experiencing homelessness and the limitations of the current service environment. People demonstrated resourcefulness, community, and a desire for stability, yet faced persistent structural and procedural obstacles that made progress difficult. These insights underscore the need for a coordinated, housing-focused system that offers clear pathways forward, values lived-experience and peer support, and strengthens safety, dignity, and belonging for everyone it serves.

A Road Map for Moving Forward

PRINCIPLES GUIDING THE HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN

The vision guiding this Strategy and Action Plan is clear: homelessness in Sault Ste. Marie will be rare, brief, and non-recurring. Every individual will have access to safe, appropriate, and affordable housing, supported by a coordinated system that promotes well-being, belonging, and long-term stability.

Such a vision aligns with national and provincial commitments, including Canada's Reaching Home Strategy and the Ontario Homelessness Prevention Program. It also reflects the community's values of compassion, collaboration, and accountability.

The following guiding principles underpin all aspects of this plan:

1. **Housing First and Housing Focused** – Permanent housing is the foundation for stability, recovery, and community participation.
2. **Lower-Barrier and Inclusive** – Services continuously reduce access barriers while maintaining safety and community trust.
3. **Culturally Safe and Person-Centred** – Programs honour the diverse identities and strengths of Indigenous peoples, women, youth, and people with lived experience.
4. **Data-Driven and Accountable** – Planning, funding, and performance are grounded in transparent, evidence-informed decision-making.
5. **Collaborative and Coordinated** – Partners across sectors share responsibility for system outcomes and collective impact.
6. **Prevention and Stability** – Early intervention and post-housing supports prevent homelessness and promote long-term success.

Together, these principles establish a foundation for sustained progress over the next decade. They emphasize not only the importance of service coordination but also the central role of compassion, respect, and empowerment in ending homelessness.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

The following six strategic priorities define the core direction of the 10-Year Homelessness Strategy. Each represents a key pillar of system transformation, designed to align programs, funding, and partnerships toward a single shared goal: ending homelessness in Sault Ste. Marie. These priorities are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, collectively advancing a coordinated, housing-focused system of care that is equitable, data-driven, and sustainable.

Priority 1: Strengthen Housing-Focused Responses and System Flow

Sault Ste. Marie's emergency shelter and bridge housing programs are the community's primary points of entry for individuals experiencing homelessness. These programs must evolve into fully housing-focused environments that prioritize permanent housing outcomes over temporary accommodation. Transitioning the men's shelter to a 24/7, lower-barrier operation will eliminate forced exits, enhance stability, and align with national best practices for Housing First and Housing-Focused Shelter models.

OrgCode's system review identified opportunities to strengthen shelter performance through consistent staffing, enhanced case management, and integration with the broader coordinated access system. Moving from a crisis orientation to a housing-focused approach will enable clients to engage in individualized housing planning from the point of entry, supported by intensive case management and goal-oriented service delivery.

Key implementation actions under this priority include:

- Transition the men's shelter to a 24/7 operation, eliminating forced exits and increasing staff coverage to support continuous engagement.
- Adopt a lower-barrier model that allows for flexibility in service participation while maintaining clear safety expectations.
- Implement standardized training for all staff in trauma-informed care, harm reduction, de-escalation, and motivational interviewing.
- Establish a policy framework to ensure consistent, transparent practices across all shifts and programs.
- Integrate housing navigation supports within the shelter to ensure every client has a housing plan within their first week of stay.

- Strengthen Bridge Housing fidelity by defining entry criteria, lengths of stay (typically under 9 months), and measurable move-on outcomes.

Expected outcomes include reduced average shelter stays, increased rates of housing placement and retention, and higher staff satisfaction and consistency. A fully housing-focused system will improve throughput, reduce chronic homelessness, and create a more stable, solution-oriented service environment.

Priority 2: Improve System Access, Coordination, and Integration

An effective homelessness response system relies on Coordinated Access—a standardized and transparent process that ensures individuals are connected to the most appropriate housing and supports based on assessed need, rather than program availability or point of entry. In Sault Ste. Marie, the Hart Hub will function as a central Coordinated Access and system-navigation hub, complementing other access points across the community such as shelters, outreach teams, warming centres, hospitals, and justice-based referrals.

The Hart Hub plays a critical role in engaging individuals who may not otherwise be consistently captured through traditional shelter-based or program-specific entry points. As a low-threshold, centralized location, the Hub provides a predictable place where individuals experiencing homelessness—including those who are unsheltered, intermittently sheltered, exiting institutions, or disengaged from formal services—can be identified, assessed, and connected into the broader homelessness response system. This reduces reliance on individuals self-navigating a complex service landscape and helps address common barriers such as service avoidance, past negative experiences, mobility challenges, or lack of documentation.

Through the Hart Hub, individuals are connected into Coordinated Access using a standardized intake and assessment process, regardless of where they first present. Referrals may originate from outreach teams, shelters, warming centres, hospitals, correctional facilities, or community partners. Once assessed, individuals are added to the By-Name List and prioritized for housing and supports based on acuity and vulnerability, ensuring equitable and needs-based access across the system.

Effective service integration requires aligned intake protocols, shared case conferencing, and real-time data sharing across participating agencies. When shelter, outreach, bridge housing, and housing providers coordinate through common Coordinated Access tools—such as a shared By-Name List,

comprehensive resource inventory, and consistent prioritization rules—individuals experience **predictable and seamless transitions** through the system, from unsheltered homelessness to shelter or bridge housing and, ultimately, to permanent housing.

Positioning the Hart Hub as a **central coordinating and navigation function**, rather than the sole entry point, strengthens system accountability, reduces duplication, shortens time to housing, and ensures that individuals who are least likely to access services independently are intentionally connected and supported through to housing stability.

Key implementation actions include:

- Fully integrate the Hart Hub as a central Coordinated Access function, ensuring all referrals and assessments align with shared Coordinated Access protocols, regardless of the point of entry.
- **Adopt a shared data platform (HIFIS 4)** across all homelessness programs, supported by standardized intake tools, consent processes, and outcome tracking to enable real-time system visibility.
- Establish regular (weekly) case conferencing for high-acuity individuals, bringing together housing workers, outreach teams, shelter staff, Indigenous service partners, and other relevant supports to coordinate responses and remove barriers to housing.
- Implement cross-training between Hart Hub, shelter, and outreach staff to reinforce consistent service philosophies, trauma-informed and housing-focused practice, and clear role alignment across the system.
- Develop a system navigation guide for service users, frontline staff, and the broader community, clearly outlining available programs, eligibility criteria, and referral pathways to reduce confusion and improve access.

Through a coordinated access approach, Sault Ste. Marie will strengthen transparency, reduce duplication, and improve the timeliness and equity of housing placements. By 2030, homelessness services will be connected through a shared Coordinated Access framework, supported by consistent data, joint accountability, and system-wide performance measurement.

Priority 3: Advance Equity and Indigenous Leadership

Indigenous peoples continue to experience homelessness at rates disproportionate to the general population, a reflection of historical and ongoing systemic inequities. A just and effective homelessness response must therefore embed Indigenous leadership, cultural safety, and reconciliation principles throughout all levels of governance, policy, and practice.

This priority reflects a commitment to Indigenous data sovereignty and to co-developing a consistently adopted Indigenous definition of homelessness that aligns with the local context. Indigenous organizations and knowledge holders will have formal roles in governance, service design, and evaluation to ensure programming is culturally grounded and responsive.

Key implementation actions include:

- Establish an Indigenous Governance Circle to advise on homelessness strategy, implementation, and evaluation.
- Co-develop an Indigenous definition of homelessness to guide local service delivery and data reporting.
- Fund and expand Indigenous-led housing and support programs, including outreach and cultural safety initiatives.
- Require all homelessness service providers to complete Indigenous cultural safety and anti-racism training.
- Ensure Indigenous representation across all levels of decision-making and staff teams.

These actions advance reconciliation and ensure the system respects and uplifts Indigenous knowledge and community-led solutions. By 2035, the system will reflect shared governance and accountability between Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners.

Priority 4: Prevent Homelessness and Sustain Housing Stability

Preventing homelessness is both humane and cost-effective. Evidence demonstrates that small, flexible interventions — such as mediation, diversion, or rental arrears assistance — can prevent homelessness for most households facing eviction or housing loss. Sault Ste. Marie will establish a structured

prevention framework to keep people housed and minimize inflow into the homelessness system.

The prevention system will focus on upstream engagement through coordinated access, hospitals, corrections, and community agencies. Building capacity for housing-focused problem-solving and rapid response will ensure that people experiencing a housing crisis can be supported without entering sheltered or unsheltered homelessness.

Key implementation actions include:

- Embed structured diversion and prevention conversations at all service entry points.
- Create a Homelessness Prevention Fund to provide flexible financial assistance for arrears, utilities, and moving expenses.
- Develop discharge protocols with hospitals, corrections, and treatment facilities to ensure no one exits into homelessness.
- Offer post-housing follow-up supports for at least 12 months to improve stability and reduce returns to homelessness.
- Establish partnerships with landlords to mediate tenancy issues and reduce evictions.

By reducing new inflow and returns to homelessness, Sault Ste. Marie will decrease demand on shelters and support long-term housing stability. Prevention will become a core function of the homelessness system rather than a peripheral activity.

Priority 5: Build and Leverage Affordable and Supportive Housing Supply

The lack of affordable and supportive housing is one of the greatest barriers to ending homelessness. Addressing this requires a coordinated approach that aligns capital investments, rent supplements, and partnerships across all levels of government, as well as private and non-profit sectors.

The 10-Year Plan positions the DSSAB, the municipality, and local partners as catalysts for increasing the stock of deeply affordable and supportive housing. New developments must be guided by By-Name List data to ensure housing

creation matches actual community needs — such as units for individuals with high acuity, families, and seniors.

Key implementation actions include:

- Develop a multi-year Affordable and Supportive Housing Plan aligned with the Homelessness Strategy.
- Prioritize funding for deeply affordable and supportive units targeting those experiencing or at risk of homelessness.
- Incentivize private landlords through rent supplements, damage mitigation funds, and partnership agreements.
- Explore modular, adaptive reuse, and mixed-use development opportunities for rapid housing expansion.
- Leverage federal and provincial funding programs, including Reaching Home and the CMHC Co-Investment Fund.

These actions will create a sustainable pipeline of affordable and supportive housing options. By 2035, at least 1,160 new units will be added to the housing continuum, reducing reliance on emergency shelters and increasing long-term stability.

Priority 6: Strengthen Community Partnerships and Accountability

Sault Ste. Marie's progress on homelessness depends on strong partnerships, transparent communication, and shared accountability. Ongoing engagement with community members, neighbourhoods, and people with lived experience ensures that policy decisions are responsive and informed by real-world experiences.

The creation of a Community Relations Committee will formalize collaboration between service providers, municipal leaders, Indigenous partners, and residents. This committee will serve as a feedback mechanism, addressing public concerns, monitoring progress, and fostering mutual understanding between services and the community.

Key implementation actions include:

- Establish a Community Relations Committee with representation from service providers, DSSAB, Indigenous partners, and lived experience experts.

- Publish quarterly public progress reports tracking shelter utilization, housing placements, and system outcomes.
- Develop an annual System Scorecard to evaluate progress and highlight key performance indicators.
- Host community forums and educational events to build public understanding and reduce stigma around homelessness.
- Promote shared accountability by ensuring all partners report on performance and contribute to continuous system improvement.

This commitment to transparency and collaboration will strengthen community trust, improve communication, and sustain momentum over the full 10-year horizon.

IMPLEMENTATION AND GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

The successful realization of this 10-Year Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan depends on a structured and collaborative implementation approach. Sault Ste. Marie's homelessness response system will evolve through phased transformation, anchored in shared accountability, evidence-based practice, and strong local leadership.

The implementation framework is structured around four progressive phases that align with OrgCode's system design methodology and build on recommendations validated through community engagement and data analysis.

Phase	Years	Focus Areas	Core Deliverables
Phase 1: System Stabilization	2025–2026	Shelter transformation, governance establishment, and workforce training	Transition men's shelter to 24/7 operations, implement lower-barrier practices, launch Community Relations Committee, initiate cross-agency training.
Phase 2: Integration and Expansion	2027–2029	Hart Hub integration, prevention programming, and bridge housing fidelity	Full implementation of Coordinated Access, prevention fund operational, standardized data-sharing agreements.
Phase 3: Scaling and Equity	2030–2032	Indigenous leadership, housing development, and system evaluation	Formal Indigenous governance structures, creation of 150 new supportive housing units, system performance review.
Phase 4: Sustainability and Continuous Improvement	2033–2035	Evaluation, adaptive management, and workforce sustainability	Comprehensive evaluation, annual reporting, continuous training programs, plan renewal for 2036–2045.

Cross-Sector Governance Table

Implementation will be guided by a cross-sector Governance Table chaired by the DSSAB, with representation from municipal leadership, CMHA, Indigenous partners, service providers, and people with lived experience. This structure ensures decisions are collaborative, data-informed, and transparent. OrgCode Consulting Inc. recommends quarterly implementation reviews and annual updates to monitor progress, identify emerging trends, and adjust strategies as needed. By embedding adaptive management principles, the system will remain responsive to changing conditions and opportunities.

RISK MANAGEMENT

Transforming the homelessness response system carries inherent risks. These must be identified, monitored, and mitigated to ensure sustainable progress. OrgCode's risk analysis identifies five primary areas of concern:

1. **Data Limitations** – Incomplete or inconsistent data may hinder system-wide performance measurement. Mitigation: strengthen data governance, implement data quality training, and expand HIFIS participation.
2. **Funding Instability** – Shifts in provincial or federal funding priorities may impact program continuity. Mitigation: diversify funding sources and advocate for multi-year funding commitments.
3. **Workforce Capacity** – Recruitment and retention challenges in homelessness services may limit implementation. Mitigation: invest in professional development, competitive compensation, and Communities of Practice.
4. **Regional Service Demand** – Sault Ste. Marie's location may attract clients from surrounding districts, creating capacity pressures. Mitigation: formalize service agreements with neighbouring communities and adjust capacity planning accordingly.
5. **Meeting the Changing Needs of People Served** – Increases in toxic drug supply and mental health crises may elevate service complexity. Mitigation: strengthen partnerships with public health and mental health sectors and enhance harm reduction supports.

By proactively addressing these risks, Sault Ste. Marie can ensure the homelessness system remains resilient, adaptable, and focused on long-term impact.

HOUSING NEEDS AND FINANCIAL INVESTMENTS

Emergency Shelter Capacity, 2026-2035

Shelters are a critical element of any homelessness response system. When operated with a housing-focused orientation (meaning the purpose of each stay is to resolve homelessness, not warehouse it), shelters become a key driver for housing outcomes.

At present, Sault Ste. Marie's shelter system has a chronic lack of available beds, especially for individual adult males. Turn-away information, qualitative data from people with living experience, and front-line accounts confirm that people seeking safety and stability are regularly unable to access shelter beds. The consequences are immediate and dire: unsafe couch surfing, sleeping outdoors, or engaging in high-risk survival strategies such as exchanging sex for a place to stay. These realities create moral, public health, and fiscal imperatives that demand decisive intervention.

Due to the men's shelter operating on a first-come, first-served basis, limited capacity undermines both continuity in case planning and the development of trust, ultimately impeding progress toward achieving housing outcomes. In other words, one shelter practice is disrupting efforts to assist people in exiting homelessness. People repeatedly denied entry due to full shelters often disengage from services altogether, which is a pattern that leads to chronic homelessness, deterioration of health, and increased public costs across emergency, policing, and hospital systems.

The table below outlines the recommended shelter capacity by population group, which encompasses existing and recommended new capacity:

Population	Recommended Daily Shelter Capacity
Youth	16
Individual Adults	82
Couples and Families	18
TOTAL	116

These recommendations assume that 90% of beds will be consistently occupied across all population groups, providing limited surge capacity (up to 100%) during extreme weather and other emergencies. Without these beds in place, the system will remain reactive rather than responsive, perpetually chasing crises rather than preventing them.

If shelter expansion is delayed beyond the next 18 months, the number of people requiring shelter is projected to rise disproportionately due to worsening economic conditions and inflationary rent pressures.

Net New Housing Needed by Level of Affordability of Housing, 2026-2035

Over the next decade, Sault Ste. Marie faces two simultaneous housing pressures: (1) meeting current unmet demand, and (2) accommodating population growth (expected to exceed 6,000 new residents between 2022 and 2031) alongside a shift toward smaller, single-person households.

The most acute demand will continue to come from single adults with very low and low incomes. By 2031, approximately 7,500 households will fall within these categories (earning below \$36,500 annually, with almost 1,000 of these households having an Annual Household Median Income of \$14,600 or less), placing them well below affordability thresholds in the private rental market.

Without a significant increase in affordable supply, especially as it pertains to Community Housing that provides rent-geared-to-income, these households will experience a cascade effect: increasing shelter use, straining social services, and inflating costs of reactive interventions such as emergency rooms and police interactions.

Demand needs to be considered through the lens of support needs for the households. The episodic volume of homelessness (understood as households that experience homelessness but do not reach the length of time or frequency of episodes to constitute chronic homeless status) suggests that demand for net new units will be greatest in Community Housing that is Rent Geared to Income (at least 839 units), as well as Time Limited Subsidies and Shallow Subsidies (at least 682 subsidies) to have housing needs met in the private market more affordably.

These projections assume a stable economy and a slow population increase. However, given uncertainty in the steel sector and broader economic headwinds, these numbers are likely conservative. If economic decline accelerates or rental inflation persists, housing affordability will worsen faster than projected, meaning these figures may understate true need by upwards of 30%.

To avoid this, new affordable and supportive housing must be developed aggressively within the first half of the planning window (2026–2030) to absorb current unmet demand before demographic and economic pressures compound.

	Bachelor/ One- Bedroom	Two- Bedrooms	Three or more Bedrooms	TOTAL
Rent Geared to Income (Community Housing, Permanent Supportive Housing)	723	93	23	839
Private Affordable (no rental assistance)	100	59	40	199
Rental Assistance (Time limited subsidies, shallow subsidies)	584	62	36	682
Program Fees Geared to Income (transitional housing, bridge housing)	112	10	0	122
TOTALS	1,519	224	99	1,842

New Housing by Level of Support Provided in Housing, 2026-2035

The depth of need among unhoused people in Sault Ste. Marie has intensified due to multiple intersecting crises: rising opioid use and related brain injuries, untreated mental health conditions, aging among chronically homeless individuals, and the widening gap between social assistance incomes and market rents. These realities require housing that integrates supports, not simply units at lower rents.

Type of Housing with Supports	Recommended Number of New Units
Site-based Permanent Supportive Housing	262
Scattered-site Supportive Housing (Housing First programs)	168
Transitional Housing	50
Bridge Housing	72
TOTALS	552

Site-Based Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH)

PSH should be reserved for chronically homeless individuals with disabling conditions, which is the group driving the highest cost and complexity across

systems. The proposed 262 new PSH units would stabilize health, reduce emergency service reliance, and serve as a backbone for the city’s homelessness strategy. Every year of delay will increase per-unit cost and erode system effectiveness, as current chronically homeless individuals experience accelerated health decline and have more interactions, on average, than non-chronically homeless individuals.

Scattered-Site Housing with Supports

Expanding scattered-site housing, where case managers visit the person in their home on a frequent basis, by 168 units is essential for people with episodic homelessness or those early in their chronic trajectory. Case management and rental subsidies must grow concurrently; otherwise, units without adequate support risk tenancy failure.

Transitional and Bridge Housing

Transitional housing should target specific populations (youth, people exiting institutions, survivors of violence), while Bridge Housing should serve as a structured pathway for those cycling through chronic homelessness or repeatedly losing housing. Without these, the system lacks the “bridge” between shelter and permanent housing, thereby leaving high-acuity individuals stranded.

Estimated Capital and Operating Costs

Capital Costs

The table below outlines low and high estimates for capital costs for different dwelling types:

Category	Low Estimate	High Estimate
Emergency Shelters	\$6.9M	\$29.0M
Permanent Supportive Housing and Community Housing	\$91.7M	\$111.4M
Transitional Housing and Bridge Housing	\$31.1M	\$38.4M
TOTAL (10-Year)	\$129.7M	\$178.8M

The following assumptions are made in projecting capital costs:

- Capital costs are focused on new construction, not acquisition rehab, which, depending on the site and condition of the existing property, may lower costs.
- Capital costs in Northern Ontario are approximately 10% higher than elsewhere in the province when available data for new construction in Thunder Bay, North Bay, Sudbury and Sault Ste. Marie was analyzed and compared to capital cost estimates for new construction in Ottawa, the Greater Toronto Area and southwestern Ontario.
- Emergency shelter has estimates for adaptive reuse and more dormitory/warehouse style on the low end of the estimates, and smaller pods with greater privacy on the higher end of the estimates.
- Private affordable housing will not require any capital funding via dedicated homelessness response investments.
- Land can be provided for free by the local, provincial and/or federal government, and suitable lands have already been identified and align with local zoning.
- Implementation is not unduly delayed because of NIMBY, labour shortages or material shortages.
- Construction inflation in Northern Ontario has hovered around 7% annually, which means construction costs, even on the higher end of estimates, may increase dramatically if implementation is not focused heavily on the first five years of the plan.

Operating Costs for New Units

Type	Low Estimate	High Estimate	Low Estimate New Units	High Estimate New Units
Emergency Shelters	\$38,000 per bed per year	\$55,000 per bed per year	\$4.41M	\$6.4M
Permanent Supportive Housing	\$21,500 per unit per year	\$52,000 per bed per year	\$5.63M	\$13.6M
Scattered Site Housing with Supports	\$14,000 per unit per year	\$22,000 per unit per year	\$2.4M	\$3.7M
Transitional Housing	\$20,000 per unit per year	\$32,000 per unit per year	\$1M	\$1.6M
Bridge Housing	\$26,000 per unit per year	\$35,000 per unit per year	\$1.87M	\$2.52M
TOTAL			\$15.31M	\$27.82M

The following assumptions are incorporated in forecasting operating costs:

- Operating costs for new units are accounted for and are over and above whatever operating funds are allocated to existing programs and buildings.
- Staff engaged in the delivery of these housing types will earn a living wage.
- Rental subsidies for Scattered Site units still foresee tenants dedicating at least 60% of gross monthly income on housing, with time-limited subsidies and rental assistance covering the remaining 40% per month per unit.
- Maintenance and repair costs are higher than a typical facility, given the wear and tear and damages caused by the population served.
- Higher estimated costs for Permanent Supportive Housing are influenced by adding clinical expertise on staff rather than relying on community partnerships.

The Cost of Delay: A Critical Warning

If Sault Ste. Marie waits to act; today's projections will become tomorrow's underestimations. Housing need is not linear; it compounds. Rising costs, aging populations, and stagnant income assistance mean that a three to five-year

delay could increase both capital and operating costs significantly, perhaps up to double what is estimated currently.

Immediate, front-loaded investment in shelter capacity, supportive housing, and affordability measures will not only reduce suffering but also bend the cost curve, making future response more financially and operationally feasible.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Accountability is a defining feature of this plan. Progress will be tracked using a performance measurement framework aligned with national benchmarks and local priorities. Key indicators will be published quarterly through a community dashboard and annually in a System Performance Report presented to Council and the community.

Core indicators will include:

- Total number of individuals housed annually and retained for 12+ months.
- Average length of stay in shelter and bridge housing programs.
- Rate of returns to homelessness within 12 months of housing placement.
- Number of individuals diverted or prevented from entering homelessness.
- Indigenous participation in governance, workforce, and program delivery.
- Community satisfaction and neighbourhood impact survey results.
- Annual reductions in chronic homelessness and encampment populations.

Evaluation will be embedded into the governance process, with an interim review in 2031 and a full system evaluation in 2035. Findings will inform future planning cycles, ensuring continuous improvement and accountability.

Supplementary Resources & Evidence Base Used in this Report

1. OrgCode Consulting Inc. (2025). Final Submission for SSM RFP 2025CAO-01-P.
2. Strategies-Recommendations Support Document (2024). Evidence on housing-focused, trauma-informed, and lower-barrier practice.
3. OrgCode Consulting Inc. (2023). Housing-Focused Shelter Practice Guide.
4. Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (2023). Coordinated Access and By-Name List Guide.
5. CMHC (2024). Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy – Outcomes Framework.
6. Government of Canada (2022). Urban, Rural, and Northern Indigenous Housing Strategy.
7. CAEH (2022). Homelessness Prevention Framework.
8. OrgCode Consulting Inc. (2022). Housing First and System Transformation Toolkit.
9. OrgCode Consulting Inc. (2023). Community Relations and Public Accountability in Shelter Practice.
10. OrgCode Consulting Inc. (2014). Sault Ste. Marie Housing and Homelessness Plan Update. City of Sault Ste. Marie.