



FORT ST. JOHN

The Energetic City

Council's Response Committee on Housing and Emergency Shelter (CRCHES) Update Report

Committee Activities | September 2024 - January 2025







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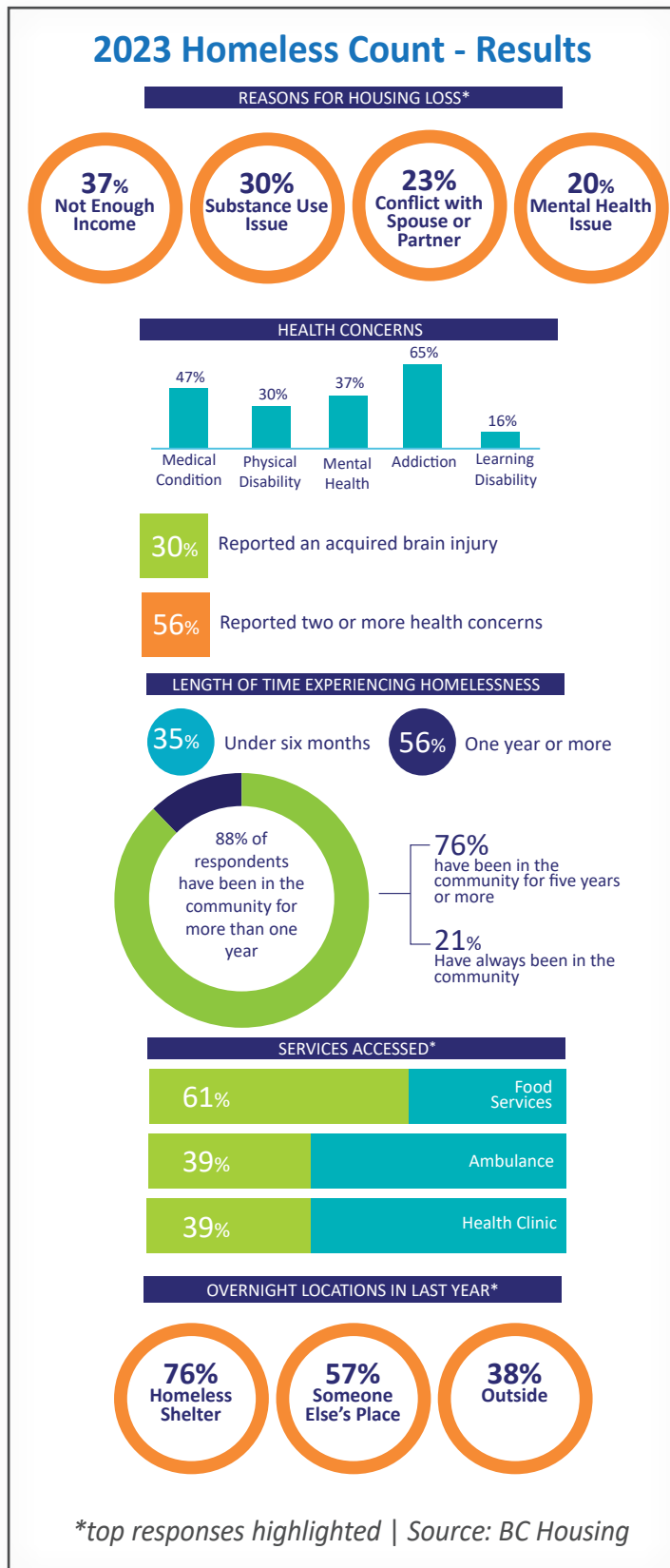
Executive Summary

This report highlights activities and recommendations from Council’s Response Committee on Housing and Emergency Shelter (CRCHES) from September 2024 – January 2025.

The City of Fort St. John recognized the growing challenges associated with people experiencing homelessness and potential impacts on the community. In response, Council established the CRCHES in September 2024 to assess these impacts, engage with interested parties, and develop comprehensive solutions. The Committee, consisting of Councillor Trevor Bolin, Councillor Gord Klassen, and Councillor Sarah MacDougall, aims to understand and address the effects of housing insecurity on the community, engage with community partners to gather diverse insights, and develop actionable strategies to enhance the well-being of all community members.

The committee has focused on acting swiftly to meet its purpose and this report provides a summary of actions and initiatives taken within the first five months.

Homelessness is a complex issue, and Council is dedicated to understanding and representing the community’s needs, promoting public safety, supporting the services offered locally, and advocating to other levels of government for action.



What we've been doing

CRCHES was established with five objectives. This section highlights the progress on each of the objectives.

Objective 1 - Assess the Impact of Homelessness: Conduct an analysis of how homelessness affects various aspects of the community, including public safety, health, housing, and economic stability.

CRCHES has gathered relevant information through discussions with the community, RCMP, businesses, and those who provide services. Data from previous reports about the local situation has been reviewed by the committee and discussions with various business owners and employees have provided insights about some of the challenges faced by businesses. The Committee reviewed RCMP data from January to October 2024. This data revealed that homelessness-related incidents accounted for a low percentage of total RCMP calls of service.

Data from BC Housing about local funding and housing availability has not been forthcoming, despite multiple requests made by staff.

Objective 2 - Engage Stakeholders: Facilitate dialogue with community members, businesses, service providers, and unhoused individuals to gather diverse perspectives and concerns.

The committee has formally met with the City's Community Safety Manager, RCMP, Car 60, and a local social worker. Informally, many discussions have taken place with individuals experiencing homelessness, businesses, and community members.

Guests have been invited to committee meetings, correspondence reviewed at committee meetings, and the proactive approach of meeting people where they are. The Committee accompanied City staff to connect with individuals experiencing homelessness who were temporarily sheltering outdoors near Walmart. The Committee also hosted an opportunity to meet with persons sheltering outdoors. A business walk took the committee into businesses to discuss challenges.

Objective 3 - Develop Comprehensive Solutions: Formulate strategies and policy recommendations to address the root causes of homelessness, identify support services, and improve the quality of life for the unhoused population and the community.

The committee is gaining an understanding of comprehensive solutions for homelessness with careful, deliberate steps, recognizing the complexity of the issue and the need for nuanced, adaptable approaches. Given the multifaceted nature of homelessness, which involves root causes such as housing affordability, mental health, substance use issues, stigma, and economic inequality, combined with our remote location and limited support services, CRCHES is committed to formulating strategies and policy recommendations that evolve in response to emerging needs and changing circumstances.

The approach involves continuous research and collaboration with interested parties to ensure that recommended solutions would be responsive and effective once implemented. As the community works towards identifying and expanding support services, the committee remains flexible to take these actions into consideration and refine their strategies to improve the quality of life for all residents. This process requires ongoing reflection and adjustment to ensure that both immediate needs and long-term solutions are addressed.

Objective 4 - Raise Public Awareness: Educate the public on the issues surrounding homelessness and promote understanding and empathy.

The committee is proud to be learning about the complexities surrounding homelessness and is committed to sharing knowledge with the public to raise awareness and challenge the stigma that often surrounds individuals experiencing homelessness.

Two releases have been issued on behalf of the committee, and plans are underway to provide committee information and resources on the City's website. Preparing and presenting this report is another way that the committee is raising public awareness.

Objective 5 - Foster Community Partnerships: Build collaborations between government agencies, non-profits, businesses, and other stakeholders to support the committee's initiatives.

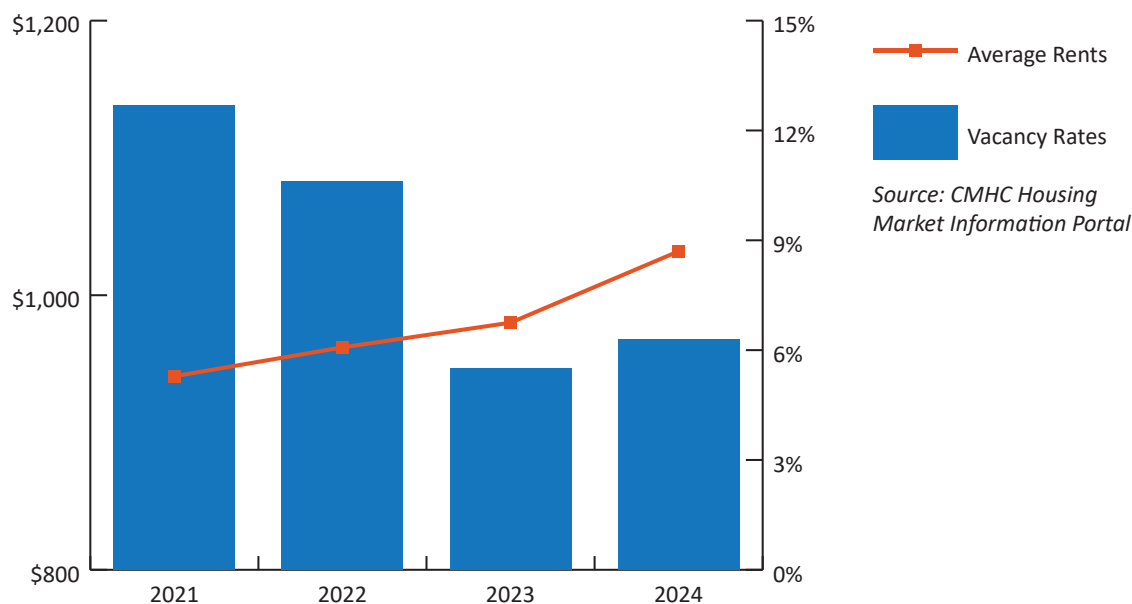
CRCHES has made considerable strides in fostering partnerships through regular communication with interested parties, including the RCMP, social service providers, business owners, and other local agencies. These collaborative efforts have allowed for a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness, as well as the needs of those who are temporarily sheltering outdoors. By engaging in dialogue, the committee has strengthened relationships between community organizations. The committee has become a point of contact for individuals and organizations to submit ideas, insights, and solutions related to housing instability. This streamlined communication channel has encouraged greater involvement and collaboration, empowering the development of effective and sustainable solutions for individuals experiencing homelessness and the broader community.

What we've been learning

Housing insecurity has become more visible in many communities across the country. Although many communities have unhoused residents, each community has situations and circumstances that are unique to their region and location. CRCHES has met locally with individuals experiencing homelessness who have generously shared their stories and situations. These are people who have spent years in the community, some attending school in the region as children or relocating to the area for opportunities as young adults decades ago.

Housing insecurity is a housing problem, and there is a housing crisis happening all across Canada. There are simply not enough homes in Canada to meet the needs of the population in terms of availability and affordability. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) projects a housing shortage of 3.5 million housing units across Canada by 2030, including an estimated supply gap of 500,000 units in BC.

The 2023 point-in-time homeless count identified 102 people as experiencing homelessness, with approximately 40 people staying outside or in a makeshift shelter or tent in Fort St. John. The 2024 City of Fort St. John Housing Needs Report identified themes through community feedback that there is a need for support for those experiencing homelessness and that rental supply is limited and not affordable.

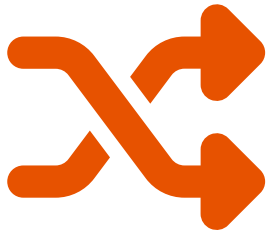


The rental vacancy rate in Fort St. John has been decreasing, from 12.7% in 2019 to 6.3% in 2024. As housing vacancy lowers, rental rates increase. For many people, including people on fixed incomes, what little vacancy is available is not affordable.

What is Homelessness?

Homelessness describes the situation of an individual or family with housing that is:

Not permanent



Not stable



Not appropriate



Who are people experiencing homelessness?

In short, anyone can experience homelessness. Some people have more barriers than others in terms of accessing and maintaining housing and may get squeezed out of the housing market. These barriers are often systemic, meaning that they are built into the institutions that are meant to help us. Below is a list of potential barriers but by no means is it exhaustive.

Financial barriers:

- Inadequate financial resources and income support programs, including poverty-level wages and fixed incomes (such as Old Age Security)
- Rising costs of living, especially rent and food prices
- Income support policies that punish you (for example, when you become incarcerated and your rent payments are cut off, you are then released without housing options)

Health barriers:

- Lack of resources and long wait lists to get support for mental, cognitive, behavioural or physical health-related issues

Societal barriers:

- Discrimination in housing, employment and other areas of society - for reasons of disability, gender, family structure, pets, criminal record, mental health history
- Racism
- Impacts of family or relationship breakdowns

Many people face multiple challenges from the items listed above. Sometimes appropriate housing and supports don't even exist to address the depth of need.

What is housing?

There are many forms of housing to meet the needs and wants of individuals and families. The following are all examples:

- Own home
- Private market rentals
- Non-market housing (affordable housing owned by the government or community groups)
- Room rentals/bedsitters
- Supported housing (with staff supports)
- Long-term care homes
- Living with parents, family or friends

What is not housing?

Unsheltered homelessness involves sleeping in a place unfit for habitation, including sidewalks, abandoned buildings, vehicles, tents, and so on (also called “rough sleeping”). Sheltered homelessness is a little trickier to define. People can be “sheltered” without being “housed” - as in, they may have a roof over their head but are still experiencing homelessness.

What is the importance of supports?

In addition to housing, a key ingredient is access to individualized, person-centred supports. While accessing supports are not mandatory to accessing housing, supports must be in place that allow for the self-determination and choice of those accessing supports.

Typical supports, which vary from person to person, may include the following:

- Individual goal planning
- Navigating services, including transportation and healthcare
- Building healthy social connections (family, friends, landlords, neighbours)
- Basic life skills (cooking, cleaning, hygiene)
- Mental health and addictions supports

How do we work together?

Government at all levels have a responsibility to solve the housing crisis. Government must work with community, service providers, non-profits, and individuals within living and lived experience of homelessness.

Further, we all have a role to play to ensure that housing is available and affordable to all our neighbours.

The words we use are also important to ensure we don't stigmatize and retraumatize people experiencing homelessness.

Together, we create a system of care. What entities play a role in this system?

Provider	Entity
Federal Government	National Housing Strategy
	Ministry of Housing and Municipal Affairs
Provincial Government	Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction
	Ministry of Children and Family Development
	Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
	BC Housing
	Northern Health
Community Service Providers	Salvation Army
	Fort St. John Women's Resource Society
	Fort St. John Friendship Centre
	Community Bridge

What are businesses saying?

CRCHES conducted a business walk in early December 2024 to discuss the impacts of crime, shoplifting, and mischief on local businesses in our community.

During discussions with local businesses, the committee heard:

- Theft is an issue, but not necessarily done by those experiencing homelessness.
- Some concerns related to unnecessary loitering or using the business as a warm up shelter
- Food theft is a significant concern
- Proactive measures, such as security, prevents loss and leads to better outcomes
- Business location plays a role
- Involving RCMP leads to better outcomes
- There were also discussions and questions on clarifying the role of the City's Bylaw Services team

What are the Committee's Recommendations

Housing insecurity is a complex situation requiring local community-based solutions, therefore the Committee makes the following recommendations:

That Council authorizes CRCHES to request to meet with the Minister of Housing and Municipal Affairs, Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General, and the Minister of Health to discuss potential solutions, including a Co-op Housing Pilot Program in Fort St. John.

That Council advocates to the Provincial Government, through NCLGA and UBCM, the following topics:

- Sustainable funding for Co-op Housing programs in rural communities
- Provide local governments with additional funding streams to address housing insecurity, including proceeds from civil forfeiture, cannabis and liquor taxes, and casino revenues



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