Shifting the Paradigm:
Understanding Urban Encampments

A Nuanced Approach to a Growing Crisis

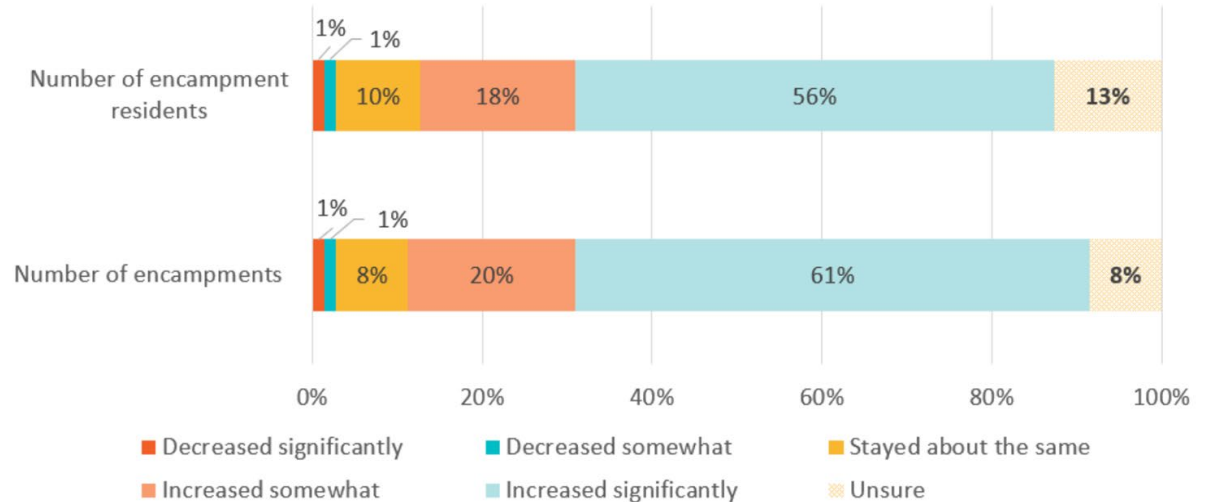HELPSEEKER TECHNOLOGIES

AMO Association of Municipalities of Ontario

NOSDA

OMSSA ONTARIO MUNICIPAL SOCIAL SERVICES ASSOCIATION

The Growing Challenge

- Complex issue involving housing, rights, and public policy

- Need for nuanced, person-centred and bold solutions
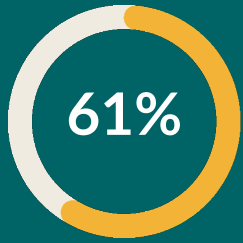
61%

of communities saw a considerable increase in encampments since COVID-19

	Number of encampment residents	Number of encampments
Decreased significantly	1%	1%
Decreased somewhat	1%	1%
Stayed about the same	10%	8%
Increased somewhat	18%	20%
Increased significantly	56%	61%
Unsure	13%	8%

Legend:
- Decreased significantly
- Decreased somewhat
- Stayed about the same
- Increased somewhat
- Increased significantly
- Unsure

Five Key Signals in Urban Encampments

Significant increase in urban encampments signals deepening housing and homelessness crisis

High-profile clearings impact media coverage, influencing local responses and increasing pressure on municipalities

Municipal governments face a complex problem; encampments symbolize the failure of tri-government collaboration

Failure to define encampments in a nuanced and data-led way prevents appropriate and effective responses

Recent legislative changes set precedents requiring more precise, human rights-based approaches

The Deepening Crisis

Location balances resource access and the desire to minimize visibility

94% of surveyed communities (68 out of 72) are dealing with encampments

66% of encampments situated in urban areas

55% located out of public sight

45% in more visible areas

Small Encampments

(2-10 people) are most common, reported by

63% of communities

Mid-sized Encampments

(11-49 people) in

35% of communities

Large Encampments

(50+ people) in

10% of communities, exclusively urban

High-Profile Clearings Shape Public Perception

Encampment clearings in major urban centers significantly influence media coverage.

Increased media attention drives internet search trends on encampments.

Public awareness and concern about encampments growing since 2021.

⊕

Media narratives shape perceptions of encampment safety and acceptability.

⊕

Increased reporting on specific incidents (e.g., fires) creates self-reinforcing cycle.
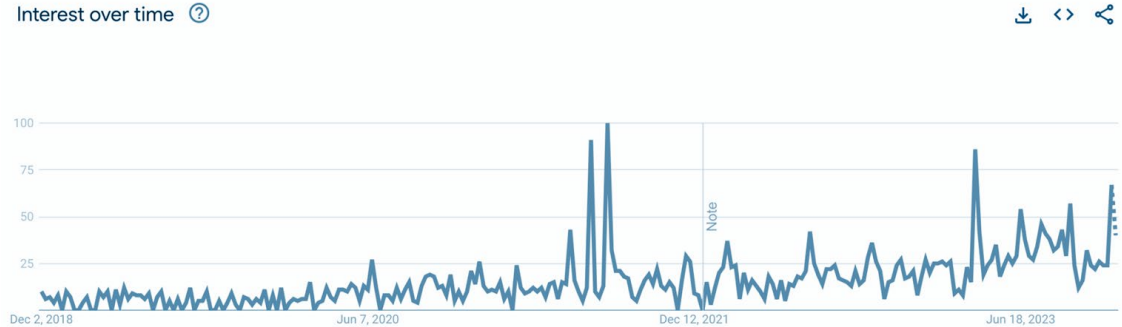
⊕

Local responses increasingly influenced by national media coverage.

⊕

Municipal governments face escalating pressure to address encampments.

Spikes in Public Interest on Encampments

June 20-26, 2021

Clearing of encampments in Toronto's Trinity Bellwoods Park.

July 18-24, 2021

Lamport Stadium encampment clearing in Toronto.

April 2-8, 2023

Dismantling of tents in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

June 18-24, 2023

British Columbia pushes changes in encampment injunctions.

September 10-16, 2023

Canadian Human Rights Commission declares encampments a human rights crisis.

November 19-25, 2023

Fire at Kensington Market encampment, Toronto; loss of life in tent in Mississauga.

Municipalities Left to Handle a Crisis

Facing immense public pressure and media scrutiny.

Provinces offloading responsibility; municipalities forced to step in.

- Caught in a paradox: tasked with management, lack resources for resolution

- Bylaw enforcement increasingly misaligned with evolving legal and societal expectations

- Competing interests within municipal jurisdictions (e.g., transit, public health, housing)
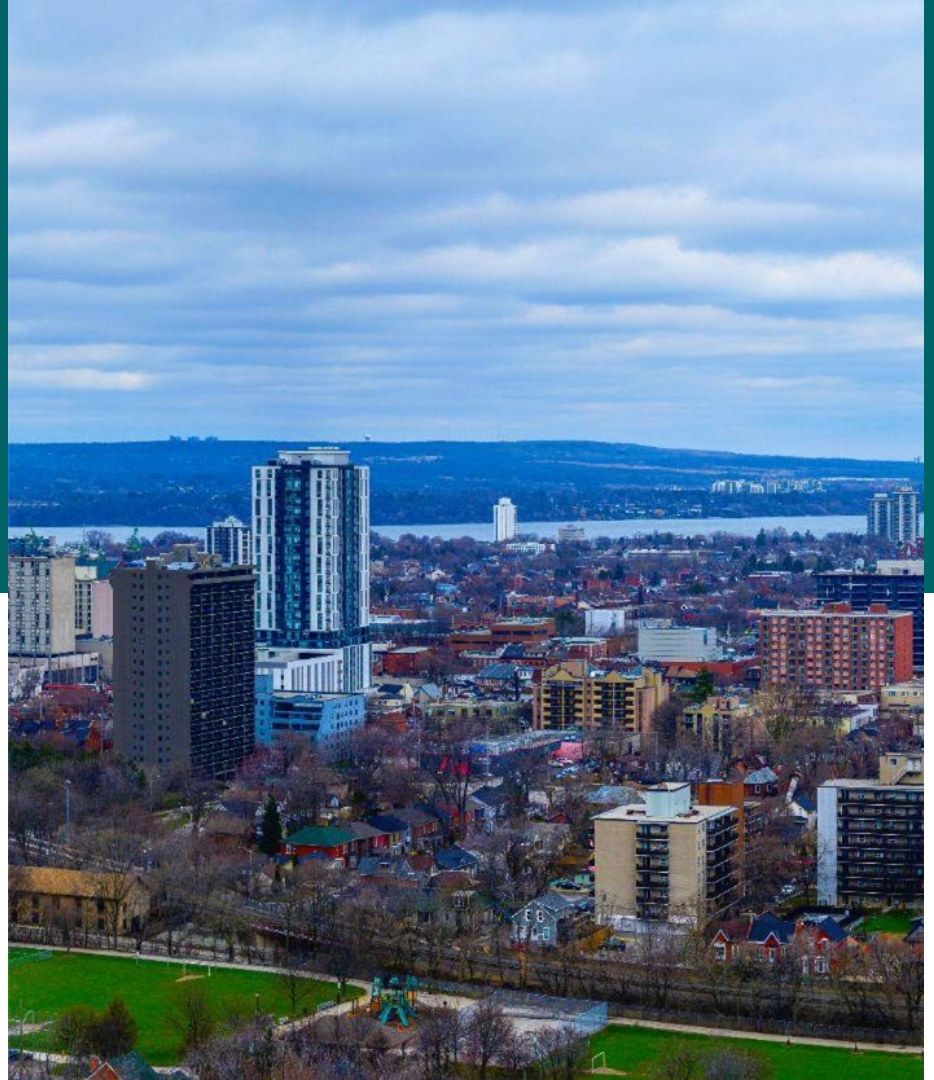
Understanding Encampments: Nuanced and Unique

Diverse communities vary significantly in their makeup, each with unique dynamics.

Overly broad solutions often fail because they apply generalized strategies to specific and varied situations.

Nuanced understanding needed to recognize the distinct characteristics and needs of each encampment, to form a coherent and flexible response.

Tailored Responses for Unique Encampment Dynamics

Examples

1. **Demographic Composition**

Varies in age, race, ethnicity, gender, and family status.

Diversity shapes community character and needs.

2. **Social Structure and Governance**

Ranges from highly structured to informal.

Structured encampments offer stability and security.

Informal ones are more transient and fluid.

3. **Resident Motivations**

Chosen for community and mutual support.

Isolation or disconnection from community is undesirable.

Some have no safe or practical alternatives.

Motivations have significant impact on efficacy of response.

4. **Size and Geography**

Varies from small groups to larger communities.

Urban or rural settings dictate resource access and challenges.

Contributor factor	Not a contributor	Somewhat of a contributor	Contributor	Significant contributor	Unsure
Shelters have restrictive eligibility criteria and/or rules	3%	10%	37%	48%	3%
Shelters at or over capacity	6%	15%	23%	54%	3%
Safety and security concerns in shelters	13%	23%	23%	38%	4%
Shelter type/bed availability doesn't match family makeup	13%	23%	34%	24%	7%
Lack of privacy, autonomy and/or dignity/respect in shelters	18%	20%	30%	25%	7%
Concerns about health in shelters	23%	34%	23%	11%	10%
Emergency shelters perceived as culturally inappropriate by users	32%	23%	14%	13%	18%
Inadequate resources at shelter	35%	30%	17%	10%	8%

From Reaction to Change

Successful models include Sudbury and Waterloo's proactive approaches.

Shift from reactive to proactive by dedicating resources.

——————————————————————————————————————

Emphasize community support while enforcing appropriate regulations.

More permissive

Providing food and resources to encampment residents who are staying in place

Dedicating land for encampment-like communities

Ensuring outreach workers visit encampments and connect with outside supports

Changing/suspending punitive bylaws (i.e. for overnight camping)

Reactive maintenance

Proactive change

Response team for '411' type complaints

Introducing stricter bylaws around loitering, etc.

Hiring private security to patrol encampment sites

Forced removal/ clearing of established encampments
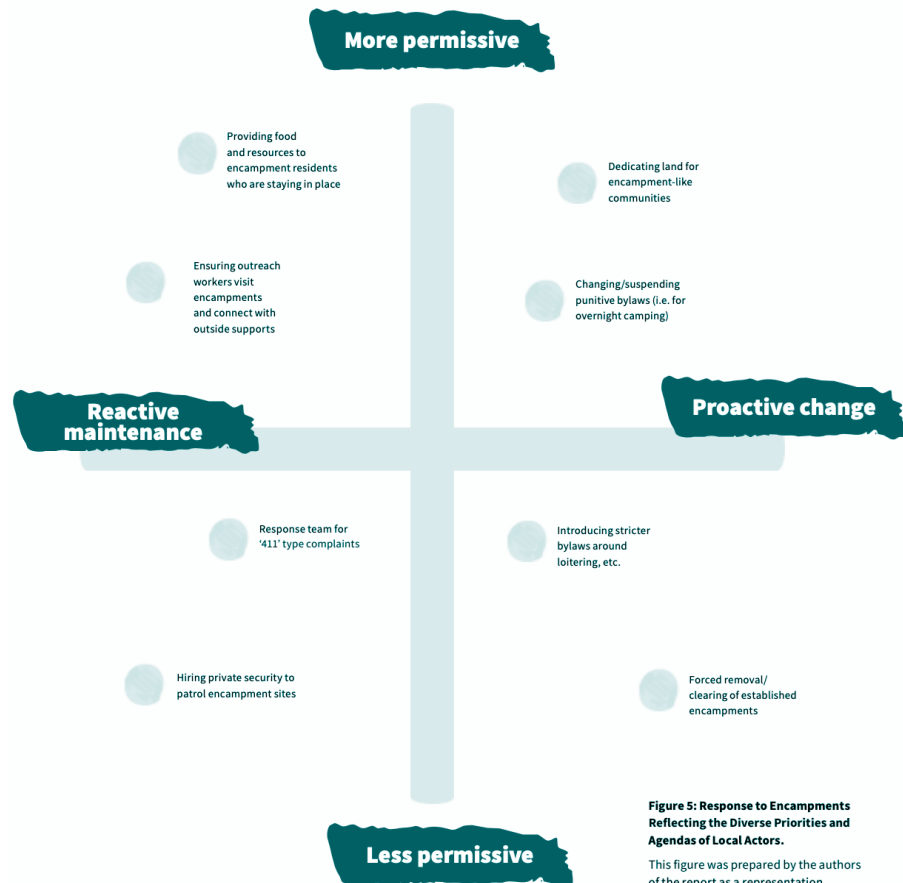
Less permissive

Figure 5: Response to Encampments Reflecting the Diverse Priorities and Agendas of Local Actors.

This figure was prepared by the authors of the report as a representation to the vast array of responses to encampments reflective of the diverse priorities and agendas of local actors. There is no statistical or mathematical significance to the specific location of each point in each quadrant.

Ending Chronic Homelessness in Ontario: Assessment of Need and Cost

Overview

Objectives

In partnership with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA), and the Northern Ontario Service Deliverers Association (NOSDA), this project is set to:

1.

Quantify the current scale and scope of homelessness in Ontario, including potential growth without further interventions.

2.

Identify and cost solutions at a provincial level to achieve a functional zero standard of chronic homelessness by 2030, as outlined by Built for Zero.

3.

Determine the investment gap between current municipal, provincial, and federal investments and the required funding to end homelessness in Ontario by 2030.

Value

This research will support:

1.

Advocacy Efforts

Findings will support advocacy to governments for necessary resources, highlighting the urgent need for solutions.

2.

Policy Development

Insights will inform policy discussions with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, aiming to influence adjustments and create programs targeting homelessness's root causes.

3.

Strategic Guidance

Providing Service Managers and District Social Services Administration Boards with data for informing local approaches and advocacy.

Methodological Framework Overview

Current State Assessment

Focus on chronic homelessness using service manager data and publicly available data.
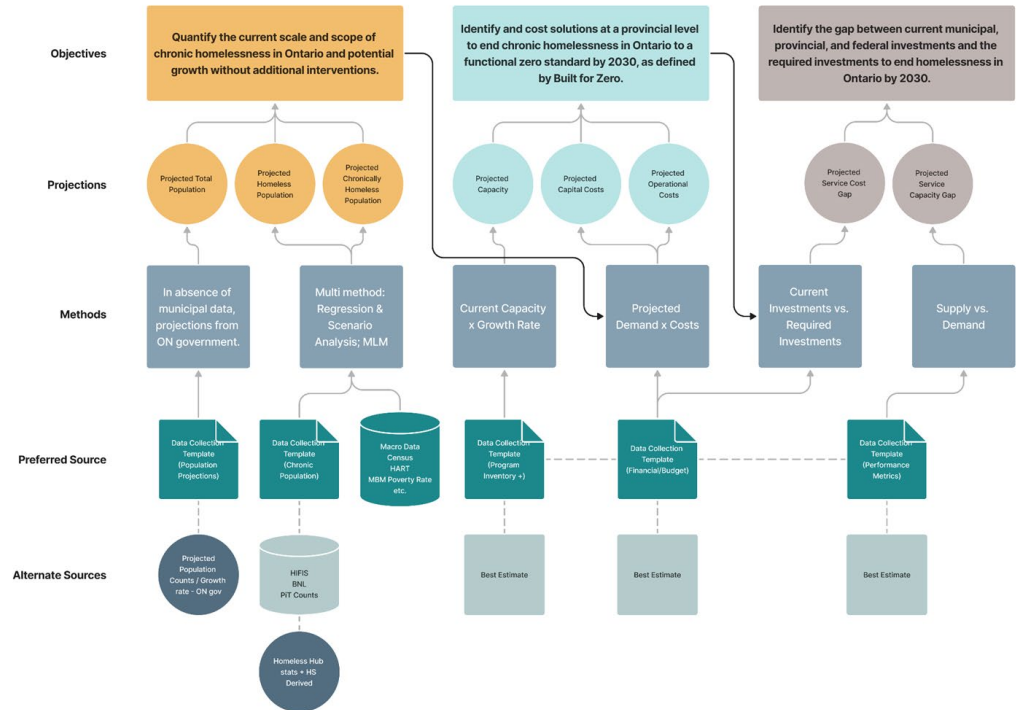
Statistical Modeling

Integrate socio-economic, demographic, and service data to identify predictors.
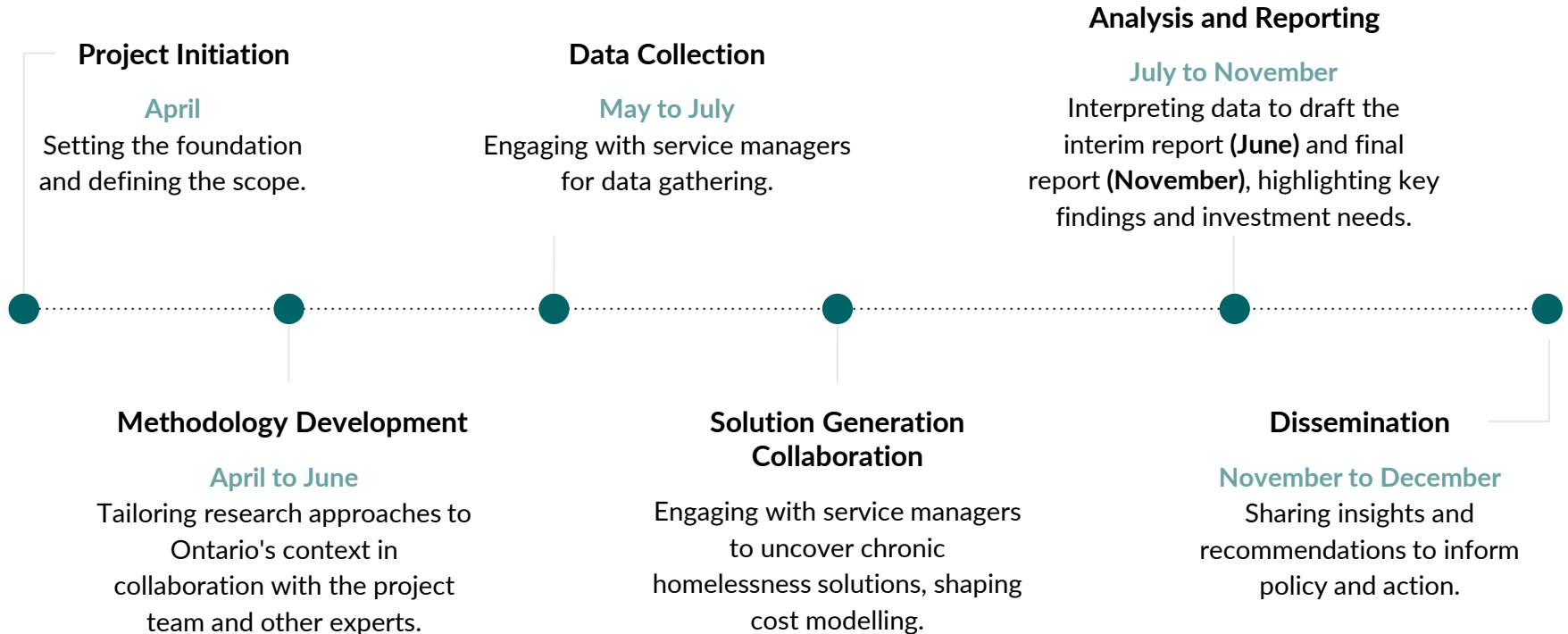
Cost Modeling

Apply multi-level cost modelling to estimate impacts and costs across scenarios.

Investment Analysis

Assess and identify funding needs for achieving functional zero homelessness by 2030.
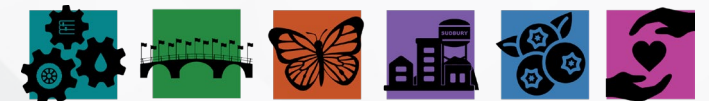
Timeline

Project Initiation

April

Setting the foundation and defining the scope.

Data Collection

May to July

Engaging with service managers for data gathering.

Analysis and Reporting

July to November

Interpreting data to draft the interim report (**June**) and final report (**November**), highlighting key findings and investment needs.

Methodology Development

April to June

Tailoring research approaches to Ontario's context in collaboration with the project team and other experts.

Solution Generation Collaboration

Engaging with service managers to uncover chronic homelessness solutions, shaping cost modelling.

Dissemination

November to December

Sharing insights and recommendations to inform policy and action.

The Sudbury Story

Greater Sudbury's Roadmap to Ending Homelessness

The Waterloo Story

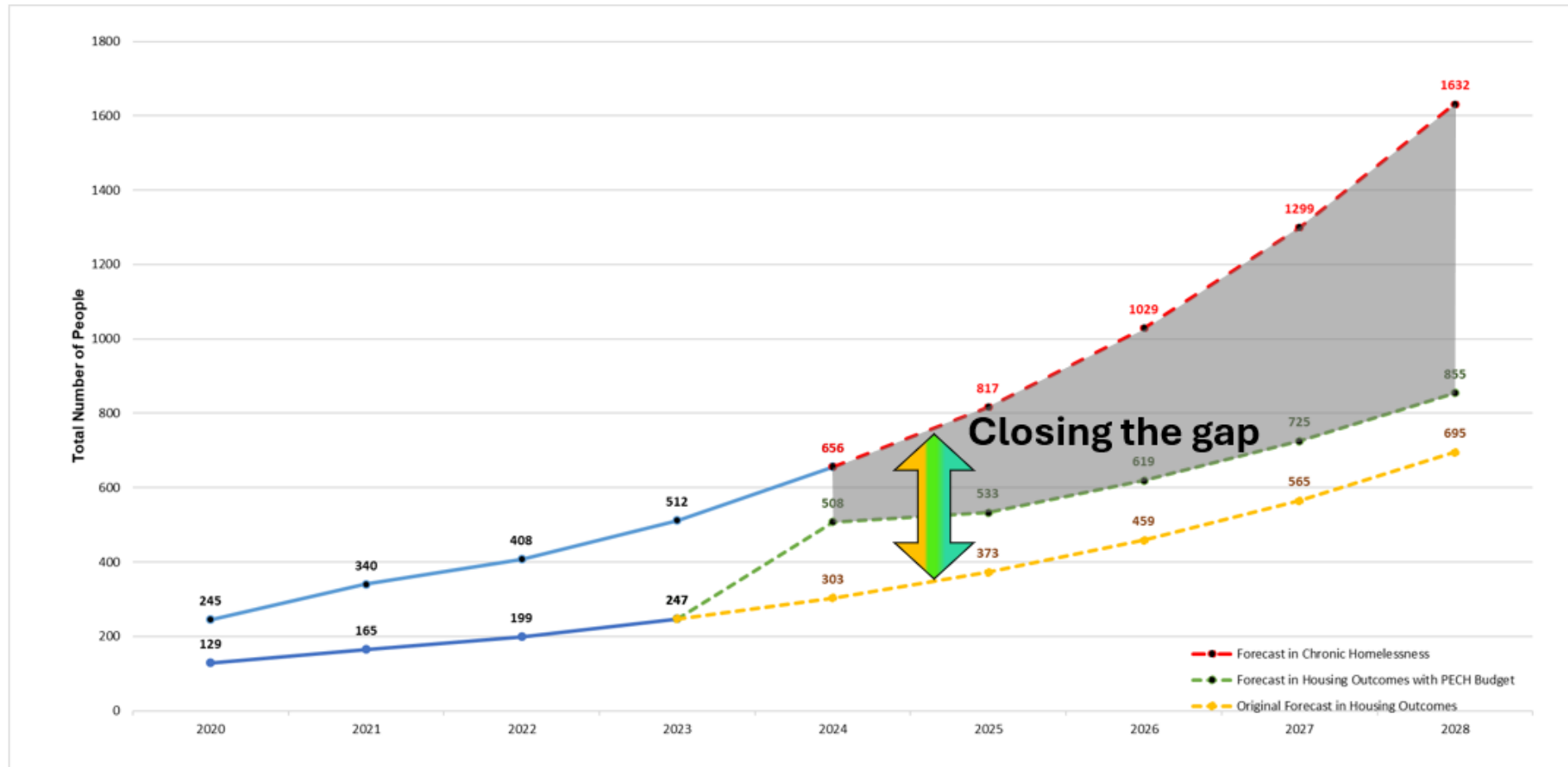**The Plan** to End Chronic Homelessness

In Community,
by Community,
for Community.

Waterloo Region's Plan to End Chronic Homelessness – Key Features

- In Community, For Community, By Community

- Centred in Lived Experience

- Structural adjustments

- New community governance

- Closing the gap

Projected Chronic Homelessness and Permanent Housing Outcomes from 2024

Greater Sudbury's Plan to End Chronic Homelessness – Key Features

- Passive versus active supports

- The four pillars of the plan
    1. Rare – prevention
    2. Brief (rapid re-housing/diversion)
    3. Non-recurring (supportive housing and wrap-around services)
    4. System-level – engaging partners for shared advocacy and system planning

- Centred in Lived Experience
    o New Lived Experience table

- Structural adjustments
    o Coordinated advocacy and coordination on system gaps

- Community partnerships to build housing of all types

- Indigenous leadership and partnerships

What's next and what's needed

- Better data
- Better coordination
  - At a municipal level
  - Within the various provincial ministries
- Whole of community responses
- Upstream prevention
- Efforts to address the hyper-financialization of housing
- Commitment to Housing First