

Review of the Centralized Waiting List for Social Housing: Framework and Proposed Directions

Date:	March 4, 2013
To:	Community Development and Recreation Committee
From:	General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration
Wards:	All
Reference Number:	

SUMMARY

As has been frequently noted, the social housing system in Toronto is under increasing pressure, with high demand for rent-gear-to-income (RGI) subsidized units. At the end of 2012, there were more than 87,000 households on the centralized waiting list, the majority of whom will wait up to 6 years before moving into an RGI unit.

The key challenge for those facing long wait times remains a lack of new subsidized housing sufficient to meet demand. Against that background, the purpose of this review is to improve customer service and more effectively match applicants with available units by transforming the waiting list system into a coordinated entry point to a broader housing access system that is able to provide integrated access to a range of both short and long term housing options to meet people's needs.

Operation of a centralized system for selecting households for rent-gear-to-income social housing is a legislated requirement under the provincial *Housing Services Act, 2011*. The current waiting list system in Toronto was established following the download of social housing and has been in operation for a decade. Several recent changes and initiatives underway provide a strong foundation for a review of the centralized waiting list at this time:

- The City's *Housing Opportunities Toronto* plan called for a comprehensive review of the social housing access system to "explore how to improve service to clients, more effectively match applicants with units, and provide fair and efficient access to housing for the most vulnerable."

- The provincial *Housing Services Act, 2011*, which came into effect in 2012, provides the City greater flexibility to redesign the waiting list system to be more responsive to local needs.
- The City is currently developing a strategic Service Plan for a more integrated housing stability service system that will capitalize on the opportunities presented by the new provincial Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI).

Staff have completed the first phase of the review of the waiting list system including research, analysis of available data and review of current service processes. This report provides an overview of the findings from the first phase, and outlines next steps for the second phase of the review involving further public consultation with stakeholders, including service users, and evaluation of implementation options.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, recommends that:

1. City Council authorize the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, to consult with stakeholders, including service users, evaluate identified options and report back to Council by the first quarter of 2014 on findings and final recommendations regarding:
 - a) Implementation of a choice based system that better matches applicants with vacancies;
 - b) Changes to local rules to better address needs and challenges in the system;
 - c) Improvements to the client service experience for all users of the system;
 - d) An implementation plan for an enhanced website and technology system that enables an improved application process; and
 - e) An implementation plan to achieve better integration of the waiting list for rent geared to income housing with other housing access services;
2. City Council request the Province to replace the Special Priority Policy with long-term funding for a specialized program to provide rent supplements and appropriate supports that better meet the housing needs of victims of domestic abuse; and
3. City Council request the Province to make the legislative and regulatory changes required to provide Municipal Service Managers with greater flexibility to meet Service Level Standards with a range of service options that meet residents' diverse housing needs.

Financial Impact

The recommendations in this report have no financial impact.

The City contracts with Toronto Community Housing (TCH) to administer the waiting list system through a subsidiary corporation, Housing Connections at a budgeted cost of \$4.35 million per year, which is included in the 2013 Operating Budget for Shelter Support and Housing Administration (SSHA).

The funding required to support the ongoing review and policy development for implementing improvements in the centralized waiting list is included in the 2013 Operating Budget for SSHA. Any identified efficiencies with potential impacts for future budgets will be reported to Council with the final recommendations of the review.

The Deputy City Manager and Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this report and agrees with the Financial Impact statement.

Equity Impact

The review of the waiting list system and any recommendations that follow from it will seek to improve services provided to people applying for social housing, which includes equity seeking groups such as women, seniors, people with disabilities, individuals with mental health issues, those who are homeless and other vulnerable groups in the City of Toronto.

DECISION HISTORY

The *Housing Opportunities Toronto Affordable Housing Action Plan 2010-2020* was adopted by Council at its meeting of August 5 and 6, 2009. The HOT plan called for a comprehensive review of the social housing access system to "explore how to improve service to clients, more effectively match applicants with units, and provide fair and efficient access to housing for the most vulnerable."

<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2009/cc/decisions/2009-08-05-cc38-dd.htm>

On July 12, 2011, Council approved the report "Overview of Ontario's New Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy and Housing Services Act: Implications for the City of Toronto" and directed the General Manager of Shelter, Support and Housing Administration to report back to the Community Development and Recreation Committee on the implications and any required policy changes after the new regulations under the Housing Services Act have been released by the Province.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2011.CD5.5>

ISSUE BACKGROUND

Under the *Housing Services Act, 2011*, the provincial legislation governing social housing, the City of Toronto is required to have a coordinated access system for all City

administered rent-gear-to-income (RGI) social housing units. The current waiting list system was established following the download of social housing and has been in operation for a decade. Currently, the City contracts with Toronto Community Housing (TCH) to administer the waiting list system for all social housing projects in Toronto. TCH does so through a subsidiary corporation known as Housing Connections.

When the centralized waiting list was first established after the download of social housing, the primary purpose was to meet provincially legislated requirements for the City to maintain a centralized waiting list for RGI subsidies. However, over time, the context in which the waiting list operates has changed, and expectations about the role of the waiting list within the housing access system have evolved as well. The underlying reason that people request an application for the waiting list is that they have a need for affordable housing options. Given long wait times for RGI units, the waiting list as it is currently structured is not able to meet that need for the majority of people. Housing Connections has continued to meet the original mandate of administering the waiting list according to legislated requirements, but without Service Manager direction regarding changes to the structure and rules of the system, is unable to respond to this evolving need.

The social housing system in Toronto is under increasing pressure, with high demand for RGI subsidized units. In 2012, demand reached its highest level, with over 87,000 households registered on the waiting list at the end of the year. This was an increase of 7 percent from the year before, and over 30 percent since the list was established a decade ago. At the same time, the supply of social housing has not kept pace with the rising demand. The overall number of RGI units in Toronto has not meaningfully increased over the past decade. As a result, the majority of applicants will be left waiting up to 6 years before being housed, with some waiting much longer.

Although the Social Housing Waiting List is often used as a general indicator of need for affordable housing, there is no evidence to suggest that the waiting list is reflective of the true scope or demographic makeup of need, as many people may be discouraged by long wait times from even applying. In addition, households on the waiting list have varying levels of need. The majority of those on the waiting list are not completely homeless and are managing to maintain other housing while they wait for an RGI unit, but may be in a range of housing situations with varying levels of affordability and need.

Changes in the Operating Environment

There have been many changes in the operating environment since the centralized social housing waiting list system was created a decade ago. These changes present opportunities to improve the waiting list system. They include:

- Implementation of a Housing First approach to address homelessness, as well as development and funding of a range of new services across the City to help people find and maintain housing, including Housing Help Centres
- New technology advances and e-service initiatives

- Creation of 311 as the central service that facilitates access to all City services by telephone, as well as a range of online services
- Movement towards an Integrated Human Services approach, which encourages a move away from sector based planning towards an integrated view that places the best outcome for the people served at the centre of the process
- New affordable housing projects have, and continue to be, developed, and new housing allowance programs implemented (both of which provide alternative affordable housing options to waiting for RGI-subsidized social housing)
- Within the current climate of fiscal challenges, the City has been reviewing all services to identify opportunities for increased effectiveness and greater efficiencies

Current Context

There are several current changes and initiatives underway that provide a solid foundation for a review of the centralized waiting list at this time. In the 2009 *Housing Opportunities Toronto* plan, City Council called for a comprehensive review of the social housing access system to "explore how to improve service to clients, more effectively match applicants with units, and provide fair and efficient access to housing for the most vulnerable." Since then, the legislative context for the social housing waiting list has changed significantly. The *Housing Services Act, 2011*, which came into effect in 2012, provides the City with greater flexibility to redesign the waiting list system to be more responsive to local needs.

In addition, the Province has introduced the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI), which, beginning in 2013, replaces existing funding across the province for a range of homelessness services. The integration of existing funding streams within a program framework that provides greater flexibility to meet local needs provides a unique opportunity to re-think how services are provided to achieve greater housing stability outcomes.

As directed by Council in October 2012, the City is treating 2013 as a transition year for CHPI implementation during which staff will consult with housing and homelessness service users, providers and other stakeholders on the development of a multi-year service plan for 2014 and beyond. This plan, which will be brought forward for Council consideration in October 2013, will provide direction for the planning, management and delivery of housing stability services and identify opportunities for service integration and streamlining across the service system.

The review of the social housing waiting list is complementary to the objectives of this Service Plan, and development of recommendations will be coordinated to ensure the results are mutually beneficial and support common objectives of improved customer service and integrated access to housing stability services.

COMMENTS

This report provides an overview of the following information:

- Review framework and work to date
- Critical success factors for the housing access system
- Summary of Phase 1: Findings and opportunities
- Summary of Phase 2: Next steps and proposed directions

Review Framework and Work to Date

While the key challenge for affordable housing access remains a lack of new subsidized housing sufficient to meet demand which results in long wait times for those on the waiting list, the purpose of this review is to transform the waiting list system, beyond its current mandate of providing access to RGI subsidized social housing, into a coordinated entry point to a broader housing access system that is able to provide integrated access to a range of both short and long term housing options to meet people's needs.

The objectives for the review are as follows:

1. **System Design:** To identify opportunities to design a waiting list system that is more reflective of local needs, in response to greater legislative flexibility provided by the *Housing Services Act*.
2. **Local Rules:** To identify the impact of the City's local policies and priorities on access to and reallocation of units within social housing.
3. **Customer Service:** To identify improvements to enhance the customer service experience for all users of the system, in order to more effectively match applicants with units and better meet their housing needs.
4. **Technology:** To benchmark the Social Housing Waiting List against other e-service systems within Canada and internationally in order to recommend improvements in administrative efficiencies and customer service.
5. **Service Delivery:** To identify how the Social Housing Waiting List system could be better integrated with other existing housing access services, as well as other City services.

Staff have completed the initial phase of the review involving research and analysis from which preliminary conclusions and potential directions have been identified. Work completed to date includes:

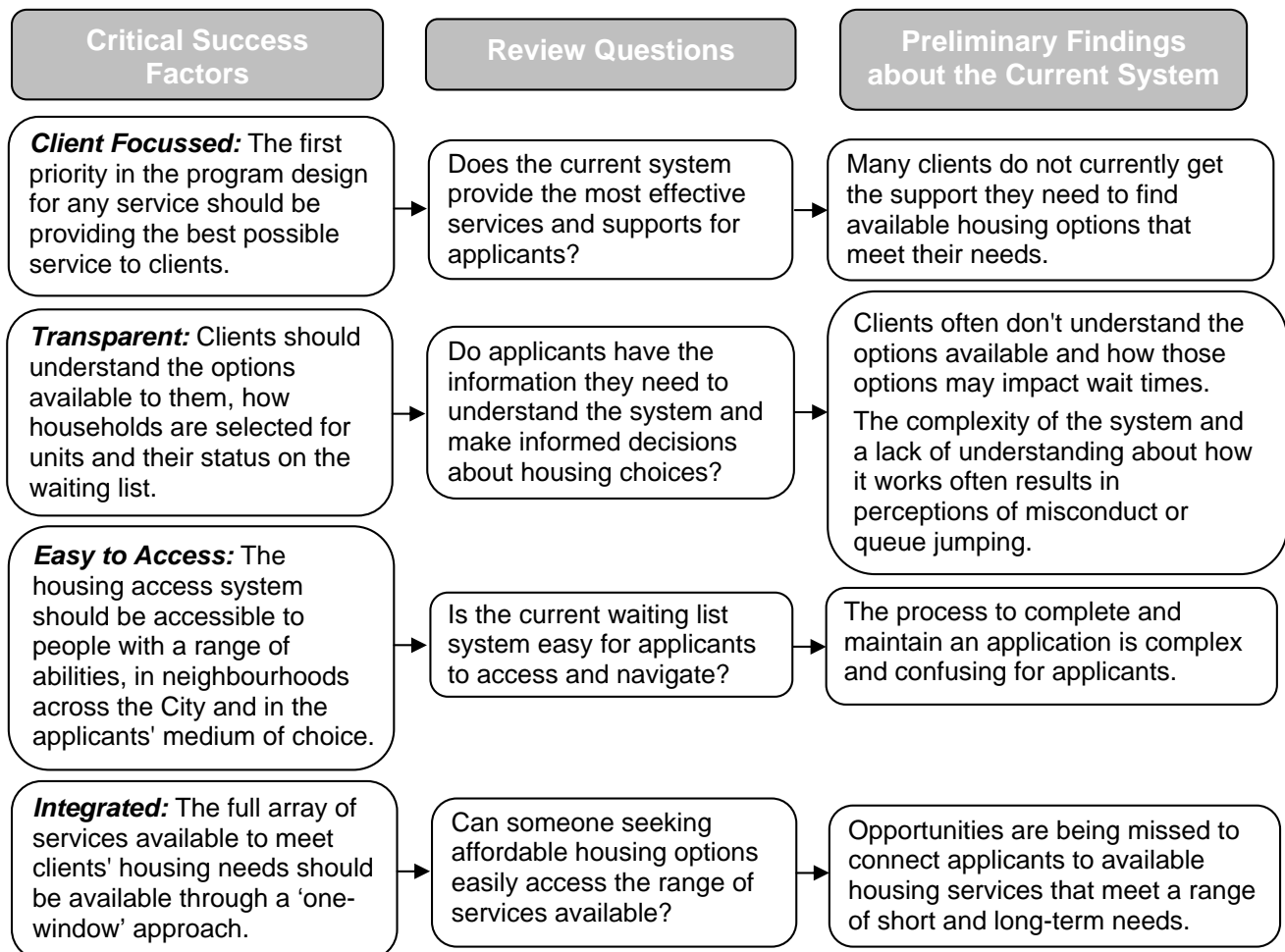
- a service process review of the waiting list and related housing access services to identify customer services improvements to processes and rules (see Attachment 1);
- data analysis of the current waiting list to identify trends related to who is on the waiting list, who is getting housed and how long people wait for housing (see Attachment 2);

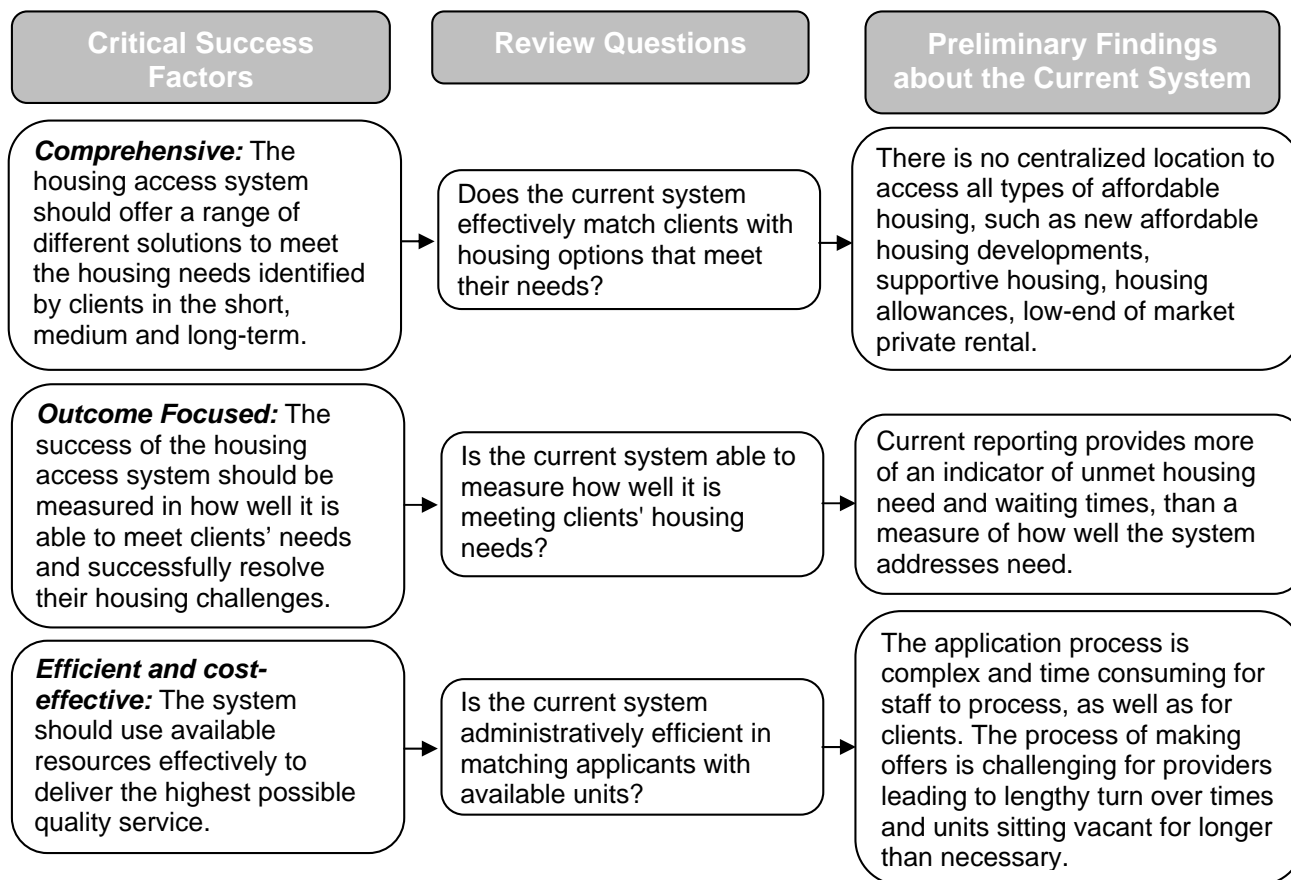
- participation in the Ontario Municipal Social Service Association (OMSSA) study examining the impact the Province’s Special Priority Policy has on wait times for access to social housing in Ontario municipalities, with the Phase 1 report released;
- research on innovative service approaches in other jurisdictions; and
- consultations with Housing Connections staff, Housing Help staff, and SSHA staff.

This report summarizes findings from this first phase of the review and outlines next steps for the second phase involving further public consultation with stakeholders and evaluation of implementation options.

Critical Success Factors for the Housing Access System

A set of seven critical success factors for the housing access system have been developed. These success factors have framed the questions about the performance of the current system to be answered through the review. The following provides an overview of these critical success factors and some preliminary findings based on the data analysis, service process review, and consultations completed to date. These questions will continue be explored further in phase two of the review.





Summary of Phase 1: Findings and Opportunities

1. System Design

Under the current system, vacant RGI units are offered on a strictly chronological basis from the waiting list – first, to the eligible applicant at the top of the list for that particular unit location and type, and then, if the unit is refused, to each successive applicant on the list. Households are permitted to refuse up to three offers of housing. Housing providers often have to contact multiple applicants to extend offers before a unit is accepted, which can result in delays filling vacant units. In addition, the current system does not allow applicants to actively participate in the housing search or matching process for available units. Applicants have little information to make informed housing choices, and after submitting their application, they can do little else but wait for an offer of housing which may take many years to come.

Opportunity: *Explore implementation of a “choice based” system that more efficiently matches applicants with vacancies and creates opportunities for applicants to have greater input into their housing choices*

One option for further exploration is moving from the current chronological system to a choice based system.

Under a "choice based" system, when a vacancy becomes available, information about the unit is advertised widely and all eligible applicants are invited to register their interest. Only households that have expressed interest in that particular unit at that time would be considered for an offer. The applicant with the highest priority (e.g. priority status or chronological application date) who indicated an interest in the unit would be given an offer.

The benefits of this type of system are that it would allow vacant units to be filled more quickly, as offers would be made only to households who had expressed an interest in that particular unit. Applicants would be able to make a more informed decision prior to expressing their interest in the unit which will likely decrease the number of offers that have to be extended before the unit is filled. Households would also be better able to judge whether a particular unit meet their needs and use this information to evaluate the trade-offs involved in, for example, expressing interest in the bachelor unit that is currently available versus continuing to wait for a one bedroom.

A move to a choice-based system would potentially create efficiencies by reducing administrative burdens associated with frequently updating client files and housing preferences. In implementing such a system, consideration would have to be given to the implications for all applicant groups, including those who would need additional supports to review available units and indicate their interest. By reducing administrative complexity, existing resources could potentially be redirected to respond to service needs of these applicant groups and provide greater supports to applicants.

Choice based systems have a proven record of success and are now the standard for many social housing authorities in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. They are also receiving increasing attention in many Canadian municipalities, particularly in Ontario.

2. **Local Rules**

Provincial legislation defines the regulations and requirements that apply to social housing in Toronto. Under the current *Housing Services Act, 2011* (and the *Social Housing Reform Act* which it replaced) the City has responsibility for establishing local rules for the waiting list system. Many of the local rules established by the City have been in effect for over ten years.

Local Access Priorities

One of these local rules defines the types of applicants who are provided priority access to RGI social housing in Toronto. In 2002 Council approved the report "Local Access Priorities for Geared-to-Income Units in Social Housing" which established that one in seven RGI vacancies be granted to "disadvantaged"

households - defined as people who are homeless, newcomers to Canada who are homeless, separated families and youth who are 16 or 17.

The Service Efficiency Study conducted by KPMG recommended that the City explore giving people who are homeless higher priority, for example, one in every six or one in every five vacancies. However, the impact of such a change would be to increase wait times for non-priority applicants even further. In addition, cost savings could only be realized by closing shelters in response to a corresponding substantial decrease in demand due to a larger volume of people who are homeless moving into social housing, which may be unlikely in the short term given the length of the waiting list.

Annual Application Updates

Another City rule under review is the annual update process. Currently, applicant households are required to update their RGI application at least once every 12 months. If there has been no contact, Housing Connections staff attempt to follow up with the household through a Confirmation of Interest letter and/or telephone contact. If no contact is made, the application is deemed "inactive." If a household with an inactive application does not have contact with Housing Connections over the next 24 months, then the application is cancelled.

On average, Housing Connections staff issue approximately 2,000 Confirmation of Interest letters monthly to applicants who have not made contact during the previous 12 months. In 2012, approximately 10,300 applications were cancelled (equivalent to 12 percent of the total waiting list) because applicants could not be contacted. This process is very time consuming for Housing Connections staff and burdensome for applicants. Under provincial legislation, the City may choose to amend this rule to allow for an applicant information update to be required only every twenty-four months.

Modified Units

Matching applicants with special needs to modified units is another area which presents challenges and may require the City to establish a local rule. Each modified unit has very specific attributes which may meet the needs of applicants with particular disabilities. Careful attention needs to be paid to ensure that the process to match applicants' particular needs with specific attributes of available units is transparent and efficient.

Referral Agreements

Currently, social housing providers may establish referral agreements with community agencies for specific units within their portfolio. These units are then filled by tenants referred by the community agency, rather than through the centralized waiting list. The community agency provides support to the tenants in

these units, who often have specialized needs, on an ongoing basis. These types of referral agreements are a valuable way for housing providers to partner with agencies in the community to provide needed supports to vulnerable tenants. However, there is currently no standard policy for these referral agreements and no centralized inventory of units filled by referral agreements.

Application Dates

The City also has discretion regarding how dates are assigned to RGI applications, which determine the status of applicants on the waiting list. Currently, each application is given a date for chronological priority based on the initial date of application. At the time of the initial application, the applicant indicates a number of specific housing choices and is placed on the subsidiary waiting lists for those buildings using the initial application date. If, at some later date, the applicant adds new preferences for a different housing provider, they are assigned a new date for that subsidiary list. If the preference is for a building with a housing provider that was on their original application, they retain the original application date for the additional building. Applicants are encouraged to expand their housing preferences in order to maximize their chances of being offered an available unit. However, the existing system of assigning multiple dates may create disadvantages for an applicant who has been on the waiting list for many years but wishes to add preferences for units with different housing providers. It also creates additional confusion and complexity for applicants in making informed housing choices.

Opportunity: Update City rules to better address needs and challenges in the system

The *Housing Services Act, 2011* came into effect on January 1, 2012. The Act provides municipalities with more authority and discretion for establishing local rules than was provided under the previous legislation. This provides an opportunity to review the effectiveness of existing local rules in light of ten years of operation, and develop recommendations for reform if appropriate. Transition to a choice based system may, in itself, provide opportunities to streamline and modernise some rules that were developed for a strictly chronological system.

3. Client Service

A number of initiatives have been introduced over the years to improve services to applicants, such as an online application process, community partner locations, and an automated telephone information line. However, the system remains, in general, difficult for applicants to navigate. There are a number of areas which currently present challenges, including:

- An overly complicated application process, particularly for people with literacy issues or who do not speak English as a first language. The process for submitting supporting documents, such as ID, also presents challenges.
- An online application process which is not user friendly, resulting in the majority of applicants continuing to submit a paper application. This is less efficient for staff and can result in duplicate applications. For example, there is no ability to save an online application in process or to track the status of an application once it has been submitted.
- Difficulty in making informed housing choices, due to a lack of understanding about information on wait times and a perceived lack of transparency about how housing allocations are made.
- An overly complicated automated telephone menu system.

Opportunity: Enhance the client service experience for all users of the system

The first phase of the review has identified a number of improvements to enhance customer service and improve applicants' experience while on the waiting list. These include:

- Simplifying the application process, including the process for submitting supporting documents.
- Options to make the initial application more straightforward and streamlined, with clear language.
- Enhancements to improve the online application experience, and consideration of the implications of migrating to a strictly online application process.
- Making more information available on the website, in an easy to access format. Particularly, more clearly communicating information about housing choices and wait times, and greater transparency about how housing allocations are made.
- Rethinking outcomes and measures for the system and how these are reported, including customer service standards.
- Making it easier for applicants to track the status of their application in process.
- Simplifying the telephone menu system.

- Exploring ways to provide more documents and services in multiple languages.

4. **Technology**

Findings from the first phase of the review indicate that improvements are needed to the online application process to make it a simple and value added service for applicants. Currently, only 40 percent of applicants choose to submit their application online. And even when applicants do submit an online application they are still required to submit additional material (such as supporting documents) by mail.

Opportunity: Upgrade technology to enhance user experience and improve system efficiency

Enhancements to technology are a critical component of improving customer service and outcomes for applicants on the waiting list who need housing assistance.

In addition to improving customer service, encouraging more people to submit their application online would reduce administrative complexity and increase efficiencies. An enhanced web based system could provide greater information to applicants about the real-time status of their application, provide tools that enable them to make housing choices more easily, and include more information about wait times and unit availability.

A redesigned and integrated website could also provide information on the entire range of housing services available in the City, along with information on how to access all available types of housing, including new affordable housing developments, supportive housing, housing allowances, and low-end of market private rental.

In order to implement a choice based system, as described above, a technology system that supports such an approach would be required.

5. **Service Delivery**

Integrated Service Delivery

The current model of service delivery for the waiting list system has been in place for a decade without significant changes or review. Since that time, a number of substantial changes have occurred in the housing service system, including implementation of a Housing First approach to address homelessness, increasing involvement of Community Partners in the application process (including the nine City funded Housing Help Centres across the city), and introduction of the City's 311 service. The introduction of the provincial Consolidated Homelessness

Prevention Initiative and the City's development of a new Service Plan for housing stability services also provide appropriate context to review how waiting list services can be provided in a more integrated and customer centred way within an evolving service system.

Special Priority Policy

The Province maintains responsibility for service responses to victims of domestic abuse, for example through direct funding and administrative oversight of Violence Against Women (VAW) emergency shelters. The provincial Special Priority Policy, which mandates that victims of domestic abuse are given first priority for any vacant RGI units, has been used by the Province to achieve a provincial service objective through the municipally managed social housing system. This policy has had significant impacts on waiting times for other applicants. Although they represent just 2.4 percent of households on the waiting list, SPP applicants account for close to one-third of all applicants housed in Toronto. An Ontario Municipal Social Service Association (OMSSA) study examining the impact of the Special Priority Policy in Ontario municipalities confirms that this is consistent with the experience of municipalities across the province.

Victims of domestic abuse are not well served by this policy which can still result in waiting times of on average 3 to 4 months, and also leaves these vulnerable people without the supports they need after being housed.

The Special Priority Policy in effect transfers the financial burden for a provincial service responsibility to municipal governments. This is problematic in a constrained fiscal environment.

Greater flexibility to meet Service Level Standards

The provincial *Housing Services Act, 2011* establishes prescriptive service level standards and regulates an inflexible formula for providing RGI subsidies that the City is required to adhere to. This is inconsistent with the principles of local autonomy that underpin the *City of Toronto Act* and the direction established in the provincial Long Term Affordable Housing Strategy to provide more flexibility and shift greater authority for priority setting and service planning to municipalities. Virtually no new RGI housing has been created in the past ten years, while new affordable housing developments and housing allowances have been implemented. Under the current rules, the latter are not counted towards meeting the Service Level Standard. Affordable housing program developments and housing allowances are important tools in facilitating access to affordable housing. The prescriptive rules related to RGI not only tie the City's hands financially, but also prevent Service Managers from providing a range of flexible and innovative service responses that more effectively meet the varying needs of households on the waiting list.

Opportunity: Achieve better integration of the range of housing services available to meet the full range of applicants' housing needs

A number of potential options for more integrated service delivery have been identified for further investigation, including:

- Decentralize more administrative authority for housing applications to Housing Help Centres, so they become community hubs for all housing services.
- Integrate a full spectrum of housing help supports into Housing Connections so that all applicants are able to access a suite of housing services wherever they apply.
- Explore the role of integrated human service delivery at the City, including housing application services provided at shared counters and/or use of existing City information and application processing systems such as 311 and Employment and Social Services.

Opportunity: Request the Province to make the legislative and regulatory changes required to provide Service Managers with greater flexibility to meet residents' affordable housing needs

It is recommended that Council request the Province to make the changes required to allow the City to provide a range of affordable housing options, not just RGI subsidies, to meet our Service Level Standard and better meet the needs of those on the waiting list.

It is also recommended that Council request the Province to replace the Special Priority Policy with long-term funding for a specialized program to provide rent supplements and appropriate supports that better meet the needs of victims of domestic abuse.

Phase 2: Next Steps and Proposed Directions

In the second phase of the review of the waiting list system, staff will undertake further analysis of options, take immediate action to implement policies and processes that improve the waiting list system in the short-term and use pilot projects to identify and evaluate opportunities for system reform, as outlined below. Staff will ensure that all stakeholders, including applicants, are engaged in the review through a stakeholder consultation plan.

1. **System Design: Pilot a Choice Based System and Identify Options for System-Wide Implementation**

One opportunity to evaluate how a choice based system would work in the Toronto context is to develop a pilot project using a limited number of units and a specific group of applicants. TCH has a number of units, usually bachelor apartments, that are harder to rent and sit vacant for several months at a time while they offer the unit to each of the applicants in priority order on the waiting list. At the same time, homeless applicants on the waiting list wait on average 2½ years for housing, despite having priority for one in every seven vacancies.

Staff will work with TCH to develop a pilot program to test a choice based-type system for up to 250 units. A system will be developed to provide a detailed description of eligible vacant units on a regular schedule. The listing of vacant units would be made available to designated partner agencies such as shelter providers and Streets to Homes staff, where housing workers would assist their clients to indicate which units they are interested in within the timeframe specified (e.g. within two weeks or a month). The client with the highest priority on the waiting list (i.e. the earliest application date) who indicated their interest would be given an offer of housing for that unit.

This pilot is expected to better connect people who are homeless to vacant units. It will also allow staff to evaluate both the opportunities and possible challenges of a choice based system and identify recommendations for broader implementation of a choice based approach across the whole waiting list system.

2. **Local Rules: Implement Identified Changes and Evaluate Further Options**

A number of areas where improvements to local rules are required have been identified through the first phase of the review. Staff will continue work to implement changes and evaluate options as outlined below. Further proposed changes may emerge through consultation with additional stakeholders in phase two. Any recommended changes to current local rules will be reviewed carefully against the equity impact on existing applicants and the social housing system as a whole.

Evaluate Eligibility Criteria for Homeless Priority

Staff will review the definition and eligibility requirements for being assigned the homelessness priority status to determine any possible improvements, for example focussing eligibility more specifically on clients moving directly from the streets or shelters.

Assess Impacts of Moving to an Application Update Every Two Years

Staff will evaluate the costs and benefits of requiring applicants to update their application only every two years, rather than annually. Potential administrative efficiencies will be weighed against any negative impacts, such as the risk of increasingly out-of-date contact information for applicants. Staff will also review what applicant information is required to be updated through this process.

Develop Improved Process for Allocating Modified Units

Staff will review how to create a new process for advertising and tracking modified units that allows better matching between the modified features of available units and applicants' service needs.

Establish Policies for Approval of Referral Agreements

Staff will review policies related to referral agreements to ensure full transparency and that the City's housing policy objectives are being met.

Implement a Single-Date RGI Application

Moving to a single application date system will reduce complexity and improve housing options for applicants. Staff will work with Housing Connections to develop an implementation plan to move to a one application date system as soon as possible.

3. Customer Service: Develop an Implementation Plan to Improve the Application Process

During the first phase of the review, a number of improvements to enhance customer service and improve the experience of those on the waiting list were identified. Through phase two of the review, additional options to improve the application process will likely be identified through consultation with stakeholders. Staff will review the options identified and develop a plan to implement these changes.

4. Technology: Review Options to Enhance Software Platform and Website

Improvements to existing technologies are required to enhance customer service and improve system design. Enhancements to the website could be done in one of three ways: enhancement of the existing software platform, purchasing a new customized software platform or developing a new system from scratch. Staff will review these options, evaluate costs and benefits and develop an implementation plan for consideration by Council.

Any improvements to the web technology will also be considered within the framework of the City's eService Strategy which is based on the principle of integrated and people centred service delivery through an individual's channel of choice.

5. Service Delivery: Pilot a Shared Counter and Advance Other Service Integration Opportunities

As part of the work being undertaken to develop an integrated Service Plan for the Housing Stability Service System and implementation of the new CHPI program, there is an opportunity to pilot integration of housing services into the development of the City's strategy for shared counters. Staff will work with Employment and Social Services and Children's Services to offer housing help services, including waiting list application services, at the shared counter recently opened at Metro Hall. This pilot will advance the City's goals of integrated human service delivery and provide an opportunity to evaluate how housing services can be further integrated with other services across the City.

Staff will also review additional options to provide a better integration of the social housing waiting list with other housing access services and develop an implementation plan, in coordination with the Housing Stability Service Plan for CHPI.

Consultation Process

The initial phase of this review has involved some consultation with key stakeholders, including frontline shelter and Streets to Homes staff, Housing Help Centre staff, and Housing Connections staff. There are other community stakeholders, along with applicants themselves, who should have input into how the waiting list system can be improved. Staff will develop a stakeholder engagement plan to solicit input from these groups, which will help to inform final recommendations.

Conclusions

After further consultation with stakeholders and exploration of the options identified above, staff will report back to Council with an implementation plan to improve the waiting list system to enhance customer service and provide integrated access to a range of both short and long term housing options to meet people's needs.

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: How the Waiting List System Works Summary
Attachment 2: Social Housing Waiting List Statistical Profile Summary

Attachment 1 How the Waiting List System Works Summary

The following is a brief summary of how the waiting list system for rent geared to income social housing currently operates, extracted from a larger Service Process Review study of the social housing waiting list and related housing access services, conducted by Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration.

System Administration

The operation of a centralized system for selecting households for rent-geared-to-income (RGI) subsidized housing is a legislated requirement under the *Housing Services Act, 2011*. The current waiting list system was established when the administration of social housing was transferred from the Province to the municipalities.

Of the City's 93,000 social housing units, just over 70,000 are subsidized RGI units which are allocated through the waiting list. These include all subsidized units in the Toronto Community Housing portfolio as well as units in more than 240 smaller private non-profit and cooperative housing providers that operate under City administration.

At the time the waiting list was created, the City contracted with Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCH) to administer and operate the centralized waiting list system through a subsidiary corporation known as Housing Connections. The total annual funding provided to Housing Connections to operate the waiting list is \$4.35 million. The City provides 100% of the funding for administration of the waiting list, through the City's administrative agreement with TCH. There are approximately 32 staff at Housing Connections responsible for administration of the waiting list.

Housing Connections provides services to clients through a variety of channels, including an online application, automated telephone system, in-person and mail. In 2012, Housing Connections received over 23,000 total applications for RGI assistance. On average, Housing Connections receives between 50 and 70 new waiting list applications per business day.

Housing Connections also maintains a network of Community Partners located across Toronto. These agencies sign an agreement with Housing Connections to access parts of the waiting list application system on behalf of their clients, participate in regular network meetings and are increasingly involved with providing client support for the waiting list application process. The Community Partners include the nine Housing Help Centres (HHCs) that the City funds. There is at least one Housing Help Centre in each Community Council District, where they serve as community hubs for a range of housing access and eviction prevention services as well as providing local access for applicants seeking help with their waiting list application. Clients can also access housing services in different languages through the Housing Help Centres.

Application Process

Applicants to the social housing waiting list can choose to submit a 6 page manual application by mail or in person, or complete an online application. After the online application has been completed and submitted electronically, the applicant is required to print, sign and submit two additional consent and declaration forms to Housing Connections. Fifty nine percent of applications continue to be submitted in the manual form. Both manual and online applicants are also required to submit proof of status in Canada and proof of age for all members of the household. Approximately one-third of applications submitted are incomplete or improperly filled out and need to be returned to the applicant to be resubmitted.

Special Priority Policy Applications

Provincial legislation requires that victims of domestic abuse are given priority for all social housing vacancies ahead of any other applicants. Applicants wishing to qualify for priority consideration under the Special Priority Policy (SPP) are required to submit a declaration of abuse including proof of cohabitation and a confirmation of abuse including details of the abuse signed by a person who has a professional relationship with the applicant. In 2012 Housing Connections staff approved nearly 1,400 applications for SPP.

Local Priorities

In addition to the provincial Special Priority Policy, under the *Housing Services Act, 2011* the City has the authority to establish local priorities for access. In 2002 Council approved the report "Local Access Priorities for Geared-to-Income Units in Social Housing" which established that one in seven RGI vacancies would be granted to a disadvantaged household. Eligible disadvantaged households include people who are homeless, newcomers to Canada who are homeless, separated families (with a dependent in the care of the Children's Aid Society) and youth who are 16 or 17 at the time of application.

Housing Preferences

Applicants are required to indicate their housing preferences on their application. They can do this either by selecting geographic zones or specific building addresses. Their names are then added to each of the subsidiary lists for those specific buildings or to all the buildings within the geographic zone selected. If applicants use the manual form, they have very little information on which to make these housing choices. If they use the online application, they may use the housing selection maps available on the Housing Connections website which provide basic information about location, amenities and length of waiting list.

Housing preferences can be updated at any time, however, each time an applicant adds a preference for a building operated by a different provider, the date for placement on the

subsidiary list is the current date, not their original application date. If for example, when an applicant applied in 2008, they selected three TCHC buildings, but then in 2011 added a preference for a co-op building, their chronological ranking on the waiting list for the co-op building would be 2011, rather than their original 2008 application date.

Annual Updates

Applicant households are required to update their information at least once over a 12 month period. If there has been no contact within the previous 12 months, then a "confirmation of interest" letter is sent to the applicant. If the applicant does not respond to the letter within 60 days, their status on the waiting list is changed to "inactive". If the applicant does not contact Housing Connections within the next twenty four-months to re-activate their application, then their status changes to "cancelled".

On average, Housing Connections staff issue approximately 2,000 Confirmation of Interest letters monthly to applicants who have not made contact during the past 12 months. Close to half of these COI letters are returned by the applicant to Housing Connections within 30 days. The roughly 900 to 1,000 COI letters which remain outstanding after 30 days require staff to attempt contact with the applicant over the telephone. On average, roughly half of these applicants will eventually be reactivated, while the other half will be cancelled. In 2012, approximately 10,300 applications were cancelled (12 percent of the total waiting list).

Offer of Housing

Housing providers are responsible for selecting households for vacant RGI units from the list of eligible applicants provided to them by Housing Connections according to the priority rules. Each filled vacancy typically requires multiple offers of housing to be extended to applicants. Of all vacancies filled through the centralized waiting list, fewer than half are filled within a month. On average, providers make approximately 3 offers of housing to fill each vacant unit. In some parts of the City, providers will need to make up to 6 or 7 offers before they can find a willing applicant. Applicants can refuse up to 3 offers of housing.

Attachment 2

Social Housing Waiting List Statistical Profile Summary

The following is a brief summary of key facts about who is on the waiting list, who is getting housed and how long they are waiting, extracted from a larger study of data available from the social housing waiting list, conducted by Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration.

Who is on the waiting list?

- The waiting list is primarily families with dependents (42%) and singles (or couples) without dependents (32 percent).
- However, between 2004 and 2010, the share of senior households (i.e., households with at least one member aged 59 years or older) on the waiting list increased from 20% to 31%.
- The proportion of priority applicants on the waiting list has doubled since 2004, from 3,110 priority applicant households, representing 6 percent of the total active waiting list to 9,129 households, or 13 percent of the waiting list in 2012.
- One third of households are working poor, while 40 percent are on some form of social assistance. About 15 percent of the total households in receipt of Ontario Works in Toronto are also on the waiting list for social housing.

Who is getting housed?

- Just over 3,700 households (roughly 1 in 20 applicants) were housed in 2010, the lowest total since the list was established. This number has increased slightly but remained low in 2011 (3,937) and 2012 (3,902).
- Special Priority Policy (SPP) applicants who are victims of domestic abuse account for close to one-third of all housing offers – although they represent less than 3 percent of households on the waiting list. The number of SPP households on the waiting list increased dramatically from 286 in 2004 to 1,784 in 2012. Unlike other groups, growth in the number of SPP applicants housed has reasonably kept pace with the number of applicants: 617 housed in 2004, 1,275 in 2012.
- The City's local priorities identify disadvantaged households (homeless applicants, youth, and separated families), who receive priority for 1 in every 7 vacancies. For these groups, the number of households housed has remained fairly consistent at an average of 721 households housed per year. However, at the same time, the number of disadvantaged applicants on the waiting list has almost

doubled. The result is that for every disadvantaged household housed, 8 remain on the waiting list.

- Regular chronological applicants, representing close to 87 percent of the CWL, receive only 47 percent of housing vacancies – this compares to 73 percent of vacancies for chronological applicants in 2004. Their numbers increased steadily on the CWL, from 46,220 in 2004 to 63,840 in 2012. At the same time, the number housed each year dropped precipitously, from 3,870 in 2004, to less than half that number, 1,702, in 2012.

What factors affect housing waiting times?

- While the average wait time for all applicants is 3.3 years, average wait times vary significantly for different groups. One quarter of applicants are housed within 6 months, while another quarter waits for more than 5 years.
- SPP applicants are housed within 3-4 months on average, disadvantaged households on average within 2.5 years, and for chronological applicants the average wait is 4.6 years.
- Beyond priority status, three key attributes of a household's application can have a considerable impact on waiting times. These include: unit size, provider type, and geographic location.
- Average wait times can vary up to 2 to 3 years depending on unit size. The average wait for a bachelor unit is 3.1 years for chronological applicants, while the average wait time for a one bedroom unit is 6.4 years. While 62 percent of applicants request a one bedroom unit, they make up just 35 percent of the supply. By contrast, only 3.3 percent of applicants request a bachelor unit, which make up 23 percent of the supply.
- Wait times are greatly affected by the types of providers selected, particularly housing co-operatives. For non-priority applicants, average wait times generally tend to be longest for those housed in co-operatives and rent supplement units in private market buildings (just under 6 years). The wait times tend to be shortest for those housed in TCHC developments (approximately 4 ½ years).
- Wait times vary significantly based on the location choices of applicants. The five largest geographic zones (of 15 total zones), in terms of annual turnover, accounted for 51% of all placements during the observation period.
- Many people give up before they get housing. After 5 years, twice as many non-SPP applications will fall off the active waiting list (42%) than will successfully receive housing (17%).