

City Council Report

REPORT NUMBER 099-2026-Growth-Strategy & Engagement

DATE

PREPARED

February 11, 2026

FILE

**CITY COUNCIL
MEETING DATE**

February 17, 2026

SUBJECT

Declaring a Homelessness Humanitarian Crisis – City Council

RECOMMENDATION TO CITY COUNCIL

WITH RESPECT to Report 099-2026, we recommend that City Council declare homelessness a humanitarian crisis in the City of Thunder Bay, recognizing the urgent risks to life, health, safety, and dignity for people experiencing homelessness; the disproportionate impacts on Indigenous peoples; and the broader implications for community safety and well-being;

AND THAT Administration be authorized to finalize and issue a joint declaration of humanitarian crisis related to homelessness with Anemki Wajiw (Fort William First Nation) and Nishnawbe Aski Nation;

AND THAT Administration report back twice a year to the Quality of Life Standing Committee on progress, impacts on community safety and well-being, and outcomes of intergovernmental and partner advocacy;

AND THAT any necessary by-laws be presented to City Council for ratification.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Homelessness in Thunder Bay is a humanitarian crisis, marked by ongoing human suffering, elevated health and safety risks, insufficient housing and shelter options, disproportionate impacts on Indigenous peoples, and a scale of need that exceeds the capacity of any single organization or order of government.

On February 3, 2026, leadership from Anemki Wajiw (Fort William First Nation), Nishnawbe Aski Nation, and the City of Thunder Bay met to strengthen collaboration in response to this crisis. Leaders acknowledged the ongoing impacts of colonization leading to a disproportionate impact of homelessness on Indigenous people, recognized gaps in current

approaches and available resources, and affirmed that both immediate action and longer-term system change are required.

This report recommends that City Council declare homelessness a humanitarian crisis. The declaration is intended to formally recognize the urgency and human impact of homelessness, reinforce collective action, and strengthen coordinated advocacy with provincial and federal governments. It would also provide a unified framework to support practical, outcomes-focused action that improves community safety and well-being for all residents.

DISCUSSION

Context

On February 3, 2026, leadership from Anemki Wajiw (Fort William First Nation), Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), and the City of Thunder Bay met to strengthen dialogue and collaboration in response to the ongoing impacts of the homelessness crisis, including the disproportionate impacts on Indigenous peoples. Leaders noted long-standing systemic conditions – including the ongoing effects of colonization, recognized gaps in current approaches and available resources, and affirmed that no single organization or order of government can resolve this crisis in isolation.

All parties agree that both immediate supports and longer-term system changes are required, and that progress must be grounded in respectful relationships, shared understanding, and tangible outcomes. Unanimously, leaders agreed that the humanitarian crisis related to homelessness is real and requires coordinated action. All parties committed to continuing dialogue and working together to seek the resources and system-level changes needed to close existing gaps.

This local reality reflects broader provincial trends outlined in a report commissioned by the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA), and Northern Ontario Service Deliverers Association (NOSDA) - [*Municipalities Under Pressure One Year Later: An Update on the Human and Financial Cost of Ontario's Homelessness Crisis*](#) (Municipalities Under Pressure).

The report indicates that nearly 85,000 Ontarians experienced homelessness in 2025, representing an increase of approximately 50% since 2021. It is important to note that Northern Ontario is experiencing the fastest growth in homelessness in the province, with known homelessness increasing by more than 37% in a single year and more than doubling since 2021. Northern communities now account for close to 10% of all known homelessness in Ontario, despite representing approximately 5% of the provincial population.

The report identified that Indigenous peoples comprise approximately 40% of the homeless population in Northern Ontario, aligning with local data that similarly demonstrates highly disproportionate representation of Indigenous peoples among those experiencing

homelessness. This pattern situates Thunder Bay's experience within a broader northern and provincial context, shaped by longstanding inequities and systems that have not been able to keep pace with the scale and complexity of need.

Current Actions and Collective Approach

Alongside community partners, the City of Thunder Bay and District of Thunder Bay Social Services Administration Board (TBDSSAB) play distinct but complementary roles in responding to homelessness. Important progress has been made locally, and both provincial and federal governments have increasingly come to the table in recent years with program funding and targeted investments. While these contributions have helped stabilize parts of the system and expand capacity, pressures remain.

City of Thunder Bay

Within its municipal role and capacity, the City continues to advance both immediate and longer-term actions focused on outreach, coordination, land use, safety, and advocacy. Current City-led efforts include:

- Implementing of the 10-Part Enhanced Encampment Response Action Plan, grounded in a human rights-based approach;
- Funding and implementing the Temporary Village to expand system capacity;
- Operating an Encampment Response Team to engage directly with people sheltering outdoors and support connections to services;
- Activating of the City's Severe Weather Response Plan as required;
- Investing \$5.58 million into the Affordable Rental Housing Funding Program, supporting the creation of 168 affordable and deeply affordable units; and
- Developing a Housing Affordability Strategy to support meeting current and future housing needs in a cost-effective, sustainable, and publicly beneficial way by identifying supply/demand gaps and reducing barriers to affordable housing development.

These actions reflect the City's commitment to acting within municipal authority, while recognizing that the scale of need exceeds local capacity. Findings from [Municipalities Under Pressure](#) reinforce that municipalities across Ontario are increasingly required to take on the costs of homelessness through emergency responses, by-law enforcement, public safety measures, and outreach, despite lacking sustainable funding mechanisms to address underlying causes.

District of Thunder Bay Social Services Administration Board (TBDSSAB)

The City of Thunder Bay recognizes the significant financial support from the province to help address homelessness. Under the *Ontario Housing Services Act, 2011*, TBDSSAB is appointed as the Service System Manager for both community housing and homelessness prevention services in the District of Thunder Bay. TBDSSAB's [Impact Highlights: November](#)

[2025](#) notes a total allocation of \$58.1 million across these programs. Of this amount, the homelessness prevention-specific annual allocations include:

- \$6.8 million toward transitional and supportive housing capital projects;
- \$3.6 million toward homelessness supports and outreach services; and
- \$2.65 million toward emergency shelter operations.

Additionally, as noted in TBDSSAB's [Board Report 2025-29](#), several provincial funding envelopes have supported the creation of hundreds of units of affordable, transitional, and supportive housing since 2019, with more to come in 2026. These investments reflect TBDSSAB's critical role in stabilizing and strengthening the homelessness service system.

The actions outlined above are not exhaustive; many Indigenous organizations, nonprofits, health care providers, and community agencies play a critical role in responding to homelessness, offering innovative work every day to support people experiencing homelessness and increase local capacity.

Despite strong efforts across the local system, homelessness continues to increase in Thunder Bay. This local trend aligns with province-wide pressures identified in the [Municipalities Under Pressure](#) report, including nearly 2,000 encampments across Ontario, chronic homelessness accounting for more than half of known homelessness, and growing housing waitlists. Together, these indicators show that current interventions, though contributing to system stability, are not sufficient to keep pace with increasing demand.

Declaring a Humanitarian Crisis

A humanitarian crisis exists when conditions place human life, health, safety, or dignity at sustained and unacceptable risk. This occurs when existing systems and resources are insufficient to meet basic needs, including safe and adequate shelter. These crises are marked by preventable harm, heightened vulnerability, and the need for coordinated action across multiple sectors and orders of government.

Administration advises that the current state of homelessness in Thunder Bay is a humanitarian crisis based on the following factors:

- Loss of life and elevated health and safety risks to people sheltering outdoors, particularly during periods of extreme weather;
- Persistent gaps between community need and available shelter, housing, and support services;
- Disproportionate impacts on Indigenous peoples, reflecting the ongoing effects of colonization and systemic inequities; and
- A scale and complexity of homelessness that exceeds the capacity of any single organization or order of government to resolve independently.

Declaring homelessness a humanitarian crisis in Thunder Bay would formally recognize these realities and affirm that the situation extends beyond routine service pressures, creating an urgent threat to community safety and well-being. The declaration is intended to:

- Publicly acknowledge the urgency and human impact of homelessness;
- Affirm a shared commitment to collective action;
- Strengthen coordinated advocacy with other orders of government; and
- Support efforts to secure additional resources and system transformation.

While this declaration is an important statement of values and urgency, it must also be understood as part of a broader, coordinated response that requires active participation from all system partners. Its purpose is not symbolic alone, but to provide a unified framework for collaboration, advocacy, and practical action to address immediate risks while advancing longer-term solutions to improve community safety and well-being in Thunder Bay.

Next Steps

While the TBDSSAB was not part of the initial call from Indigenous leadership or the February 3, 2026, meeting, its legislated role as Service System Manager for housing and homelessness services makes it an integral partner in advancing solutions. All parties recognize that meaningful progress requires the full participation of TBDSSAB. Following the presentation of Report 098-2026 to the Quality of Life Standing Committee, the TBDSSAB formally accepted an invitation to join and support these efforts moving forward.

A leadership table will be convened with Anemki Wajiw, Nishnawbe Aski Nation, the District of Thunder Bay Social Services Administration Board, and the City of Thunder Bay. This table will focus on aligning priorities, coordinating immediate and long-term actions, advancing shared advocacy, and establishing mechanisms to monitor progress. Additional key community partners may be identified and invited to participate as this work evolves.

CONSULTATION

On February 10, 2026, the Quality of Life Standing Committee considered [Report 098-2026](#) and its recommendations, which were unanimously endorsed.

During Committee discussion, members sought clarification regarding the purpose and practical utility of a declaration. Administration advised that a declaration would:

- Help bring leadership from Anemki Wajiw, Nishnawbe Aski Nation, the City, and other partners together under a formalized commitment to collectively examine system change within the community;
- Strengthen coordinated advocacy for additional, multi-ministerial supports required to address this complex issue; and
- Provide a clear framework for aligning future reports and recommendations with Council's identified priority.

Discussion also acknowledged the important role of other orders of government in addressing key drivers of homelessness, including mental health, addictions, healthcare, and poverty.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATION

There are no financial implications associated with this report. Administration will return to Council seeking direction should the need for financial resources arise.

BACKGROUND

February 10, 2026, Report 098-2026 from R. Willianen, Supervisor – Encampment Response, K. McMonagle, Manager – Indigenous Relations, and L. Costanzo, Manager – Community Safety & Well-Being was presented and endorsed by the Quality of Life Standing Committee.

February 3, 2026, Political and Administrative leadership from Anemki Wajiw, Nishnawbe Aski Nation, and the City of Thunder Bay met to strengthen dialogue and collaboration in response to the ongoing impacts of the homelessness crisis.

January 29, 2026, His Worship Mayor Ken Boshcoff issued a response letter to Chief Solomon and Grand Chief Fiddler inviting a meeting to discuss next steps.

January 23, 2026, Chief Solomon from Anemki Wajiw (Fort William First Nation) and Grand Chief Fiddler from Nishnawbe Aski Nation issued a letter to the Mayor and City Council calling on the City of Thunder Bay to declare a State of Emergency on Homelessness.

REFERENCE MATERIAL ATTACHED

None.

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REPORT SIGNED AND VERIFIED BY

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Date (02/13/2026)