HRM lost more beds for the unhoused than it's gained, but advocates say more beds

doesn't always make for a better situation

JANUARY 30, 2022 BY ETHAN LYCAN-LANG AND LESLIE AMMINSON LEAVE A COMMENT

Despite the opening of new modular units in Dartmouth two weeks ago, HRM has lost more beds for the unhoused in the past five months than it's gained. But without more transitional housing, emergency bed won't make a difference in a stagnant system, advocates say.

In a recent Instagram post, P.A.D.S. Community Network calculated the shortage: with the closure of the emergency shelter at the Gerald B. Gray Arena in Dartmouth — which accommodated 35 people — and the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre's shelter space on North St. — which accommodated 40 — the city's at a net loss of 13 emergency beds. That calculation takes into account the new Dartmouth modul units and the tiny shelters built on church grounds but doesn't include the hotel rooms where some unhoused people are currently residing.

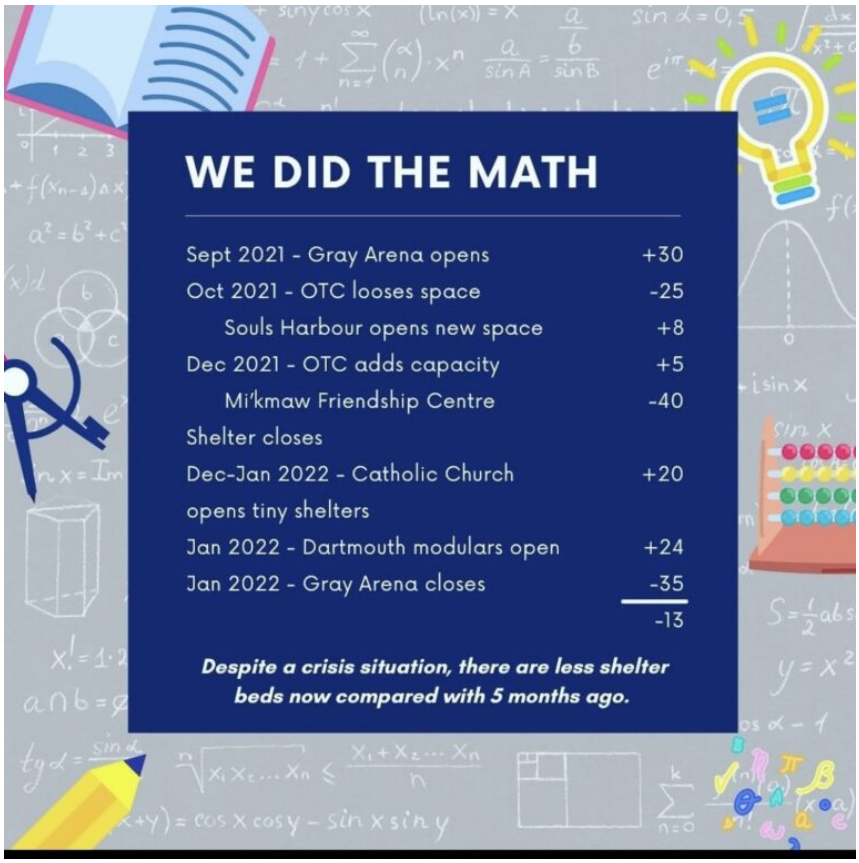

Photo: PADS/instagram

P.A.D.S. is a grassroots organization that sprung up after the city evicted homeless residents from publi parks in August. The acronym stands for "permanent, accessible, dignified, safer" — the kind of housing the organization wants for everyone living in HRM.

But P.A.D.S. says until people are no longer sleeping outside, the fight for that kind of housing has been put on the back burner.

"[P.A.D.S.] has had to move towards advocating for just stopgap warming centres," spokesperson Victor Levack said in an interview.

Lack of low-barrier options

Levack is particularly worried about the lack of low-barrier shelters in the city right now, which house people who might struggle to hold onto a shelter space because of substance use or behavioural issues

Until the modular homes opened in Dartmouth, the Out of the Cold Community Association was operati a low-barrier space out of the Gray Arena. Since it's moved on to running the transitional housing units,

the organization is no longer operating an emergency shelter.

"People have a hard enough time getting housing and then they're even more discriminated against wh they, you know, have mental health issues or have been incarcerated or are addicted to some sort of substance," Levack said.

Without the Gray Arena shelter space, Levack worries some people will be left with nowhere to go.

Dartmouth modular units a success

One of the modular units in Dartmouth. Photo: halifax.ca

Meanwhile, at the site of the new modular units in Dartmouth, things are going smoothly.

In an interview, Out of the Cold's executive director Michelle Malette said the residents of the new units have been very happy in the space, and the organization hasn't heard any complaints from neighbours the area either.

The kitchen, staff office, and two accessible units have yet to be completed. The delay, Malette said,

likely comes down to a shortage of building supplies. But she said the units themselves, which she estimates are about nine feet by nine feet, are equipped with all the essentials. There are six units in each trailer, which combined house 26 people, and so far residents have had no issues getting along ar sharing common spaces such as bathrooms.

Malette said she understands people are concerned about the number of shelter beds in the city, but tha having more beds doesn't always make for a better situation.

"I think it's interesting that people are talking about the loss of beds through Out of the Cold. But before COVID, you know, we had kind of an odd situation where we had a bigger space at the Friendship Cent [separate from the recently closed shelter run by the Friendship Centre on North Park Street in Halifax], and we allowed more people to sleep than we ever had," she said. "But that didn't really make it great. We kept I think at that time, 30 beds, but there was no privacy. And that was very chaotic."

Malette said even though the Gray Arena supplied people with a place to sleep, it was not an ideal situation. It was cold, everyone slept on the ground, and the shelter's relationship with neighbours in the area had become strained.

"The idea of living in the arena was never meant to be any length of time," she said. "We were very hap to leave there."

"I understand people from the outside may be looking at it and saying there's a loss of shelter beds, but we've just taken shelter beds and turned them to what we're doing: permanent housing."

Technically, the modular units are meant to be temporary housing, but are a more stable option for peop trying to transition into permanent housing.

The modular units will be in place for at least five years, and provincial funding for wraparound services — which Out of the Cold delivers — has been approved for the next two years.

Shelter system overwhelmed

Shelter beds, too, Malette said, are meant to be a temporary help for people experiencing homelessnes In the past, Out of the Cold required people staying in its shelter to be actively searching for housing. Now, with the current rental market, Malette said that expectation is no longer reasonable.

"Now there just really isn't housing," she said. "So it's not possible to expect people to be moving on in s weeks."

Since people aren't able to transition from shelters to alternative housing, Malette said the shelters are packed with long-term residents. Shelters aren't meant to operate like supportive housing, she said, but right now they're filled with people who would be better served by that kind of model.

"There's actually very little folks moving on to [permanent] housing. So the shelter system is quite stagnant."

With more housing options like the new modular units, that backlog could start moving again.

Right now, Out of the Cold is only operating the modular units, but does have outreach staff checking in on some people who were moved from the Gray Arena to a hotel while they wait for the Halifax modular units to open. The Halifax units were initially scheduled to be completed by now, but construction has undergone significant delays. They are now expected to open in March.

Province funding other housing initiatives

Travelodge Suites in Dartmouth is shown in a Google Streetview image from 2018.

In an emailed statement, Department of Community Services spokesperson Christina Deveau said the closures of the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre and Gray Arena shelters hasn't resulted in more people being unhoused.

Deveau said people who were sleeping at those shelters have been moved to hotels while they wait to l placed in supportive housing. She added that the $850,000 of funding that had been earmarked for the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre shelter before its closure will now cover hotel costs for those people.

The province has also committed $1.6 million for the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre to operate the Diamond Bailey House, which it says will add 32 new shelter beds — specifically for Indigenous people experiencing homelessness — and 21 supportive housing units into the system. The Diamond Bailey House is expected to open in the spring. Clients of the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre who've been staying in hotels will be moving there when it opens.

Additionally, on Thursday, the municipal, provincial, and federal governments announced a new supportive housing project to be funded through a mix of federal and provincial funding. The federal funding comes through the Rapid Housing Initiative. The project will turn the former Travelodge Suites c

Windmill Road in Dartmouth into supportive housing units for 65 tenants. The units are expected to ope in March.

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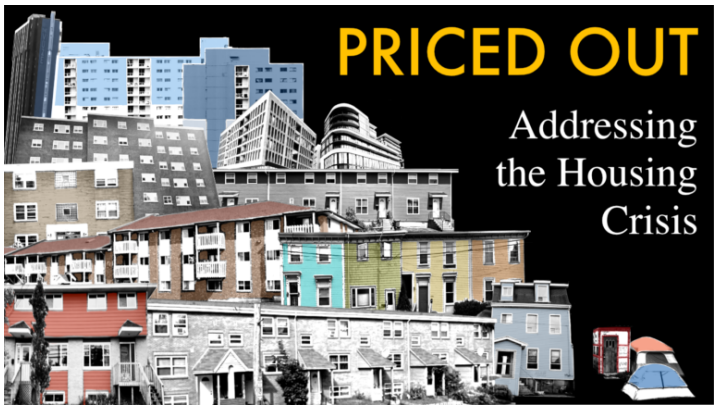

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THE TIDELINE, WITH TARA THORNE

Episode 71 of The Tideline, with Tara Thorne, is published.

Amy Sherman-Palladino is both a thrilling and confounding creator of television — best known for Gilmore Girls, she also helmed a single season of the much-missed Bunheads, and has seen the biggest success of her long television career with The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel, a 1950s-set series starring Rachel Brosnahan as an upscale New York woman who becomes a (gasp!) stand-up comedian. Tara is joined by her friends Denise Williams and Holly Gordon for a

dissection of the just-aired fourth season, including all the Gilmore universe people who showed up (some VERY unwelcome), Susie's sexuality, ASP's blind spots as a writer, production budgets, and that time they were spoiled for Gilmore by the Warner Brothers studio tour. Plus a new song from Don Brownrigg!

Listen to the episode here.

Check out some of the past episodes here. Subscribe to the podcast to get episodes automatically downloaded to your device — there's a great instructional article here. Email Suzanne for help.

You can reach Tara here.

UNCOVER: DEAD WRONG

In 1995, Brenda Way was brutally murdered behind a Dartmouth apartment building. In 1999, Glen Assoun was found guilty of the murder. He served 17 years in prison, but steadfastly maintained his innocence. In 2019, Glen Assoun was fully exonerated.

Halifax Examiner founder and investigative journalist Tim Bousquet has followed the story of Glen Assoun's wrongful conviction for over five years. Now, Bousquet tells that story as host of Season 7 of the CBC podcast series Uncover: Dead Wrong.

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