

# Encampment Response 2023-2025 Report

Complied by: Community Social  
Development



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# 1. Executive Summary

The City of Lethbridge's Encampment Strategy represents a compassionate and adaptive response to the complex and evolving challenge of homelessness and encampments in Lethbridge. Over the past two years, by focusing on principles of safety, dignity, and coordinated care, the strategy has enabled the City to make significant strides in reducing encampment entrenchment, improving public safety, and connecting individuals to housing and support services.

Key achievements include:

- **Stabilizing a Previously Escalating Trend:** The 2024 Point-in-Time Count identified a 15% increase in homelessness since 2022. While this figure reflects ongoing pressures, it represents a significant shift in trajectory—dropping from an average annual growth rate of 19.5% (2018–2022) to just 7.1% annually (2022–2024), a nearly threefold reduction in the rate of increase.
- **Preventing Entrenchment:** Since the strategy's launch, over 2,200 encampment-related sites have been triaged and more than 85,000 kg of debris removed. The encampment response has successfully prevented the formation of entrenched encampments through early intervention and consistent field presence.
- **Shifting Public Sentiment and Community Confidence:** Public perception of encampments has improved dramatically. Negative sentiment dropped from 70.4% in 2022 to 20.1% in 2024, while positive sentiment rose from 2.8% to 45.3%, reflecting growing community confidence in the City's balanced and compassionate approach.
- **Improved Public Safety and Reduced Emergency Service Demand:** Despite a 103% increase in encampment reports from 2023 to 2024, Fire/EMS calls for service decreased by 11% and Lethbridge Police Service calls dropped by 16%, freeing up critical emergency services resources. These efforts also contributed to a 27.7% reduction in outdoor fire incidents between 2023 and 2024, a significant achievement given the historical correlation between encampments and fire hazards.
- **Successful Transition to Internal Outreach Services:** The decision to bring outreach services in-house has resulted in a 263% increase in intakes and a 318% increase in referrals. Most notably, 19 individuals exited homelessness between August 2024 and April 2025—compared to zero in 2023—demonstrating the impact of consistent, relationship-based support.

The strategy's success is rooted in its integrated approach, combining enforcement with empathy, and immediate response with long-term planning. The Encampment Response Team (ERT), internal outreach services, and key partners have worked collaboratively to ensure that encampments are addressed timely, safely, and supportively.

This report provides a comprehensive overview of the work undertaken over the last two years (Spring 2023 to Spring 2025). It highlights the significant progress made in reducing encampment entrenchment, improving public safety, and connecting individuals to housing and support service. It also acknowledges the persistent pressures and emerging trends that continue to shape this dynamic issue. The City remains committed to refining its approach, strengthening partnerships, and advancing systemic housing solutions that reduce reliance on encampments and restore dignity to all residents.

## 2. Strategic Context and Alignment

The City of Lethbridge's Encampment Strategy, approved by Council in May 2023, was developed in response to the increasing visibility, complexity, and public concern surrounding encampments across the city. It provides a structured, compassionate, and safety-oriented framework for addressing encampments while supporting individuals experiencing homelessness in their journey toward stability and housing.

At its core, the strategy is grounded in five strategic goals:

- Parks and public spaces within the community are enjoyable for everyone
- Vulnerable people are connected to wellness, housing, and social supports.
- Encampments do not become entrenched.
- Residents are informed on how to report encampments identified within the community.
- Community and City Council remain informed.

The strategy outlines a 3-tiered response model that prioritizes early intervention, outreach, and voluntary compliance, while reserving enforcement for situations where safety or community impact necessitates it. This model has enabled the City to respond to encampments in a cost and resource efficient manner that is both humane and effective, reducing the risk of entrenchment and connecting individuals to services.

Importantly, the strategy is not a standalone initiative. It is embedded within broader policy documents, including:

- The Municipal Development Plan (M
- DP) – which sets the long-term vision for land use and community development.
- The Municipal Housing Strategy (MHS) – which guides the development of affordable and supportive housing options.
- The Community Social Development (CSD) mandate – which focuses on building a resilient, inclusive, and connected community.

The strategy also complements provincial and federal priorities, including the Government of Alberta's homelessness reduction goals and the federal Reaching Home program. The integration of tools such as the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) and the creation of roles like the Housing Solutions Coordinator have further embedded the City's encampment response within a coordinated, data-informed system.

### 3. Coordinated Response Framework

The City of Lethbridge's approach to encampments is grounded in a coordinated, multi-agency framework that balances immediate response with long-term solutions. This framework is operationalized through the Encampment Response Team (ERT), internally staffed Outreach Services Team, and a network of internal departments and external partners. Together, these components form a responsive and scalable system that addresses encampments not only as public safety concerns but as critical points of intervention and connection.



#### 3.1 Encampment Response Team

The ERT is the City's frontline unit responsible for identifying, triaging, and responding to encampments across Lethbridge. Operating under a tiered response model, the ERT prioritizes early intervention and voluntary compliance, while reserving enforcement for high-risk or entrenched situations:

- **Tier 1:** Small, low-risk encampments with minimal impact.
- **Tier 2:** Moderate encampments with increasing safety or environmental concerns.
- **Tier 3:** Large, entrenched encampments with significant public safety or health risks.



*Tier 1 example*



*Tier 2 example*



*Tier 3 example*

Key responsibilities of the ERT include:

- Responding to 311 complaints and proactively identifying encampments.
- Conducting site assessments and triaging based on risk and urgency.
- Coordinating cleanups and debris removal.
- Engaging with encampment occupants to employ outreach services support and facilitate voluntary compliance.
- Collaborating with Lethbridge Fire and EMS (LFES) and Lethbridge Police Service (LPS) to manage safety risks, including fire hazards and weapons.

Since its inception, the ERT has triaged over 2,200 encampment-related sites and removed more than 85,000 kg of debris. Notably, the City has successfully prevented encampment entrenchment, a key outcome of early triaging and consistent field presence.



Figure 1: 311 Reports

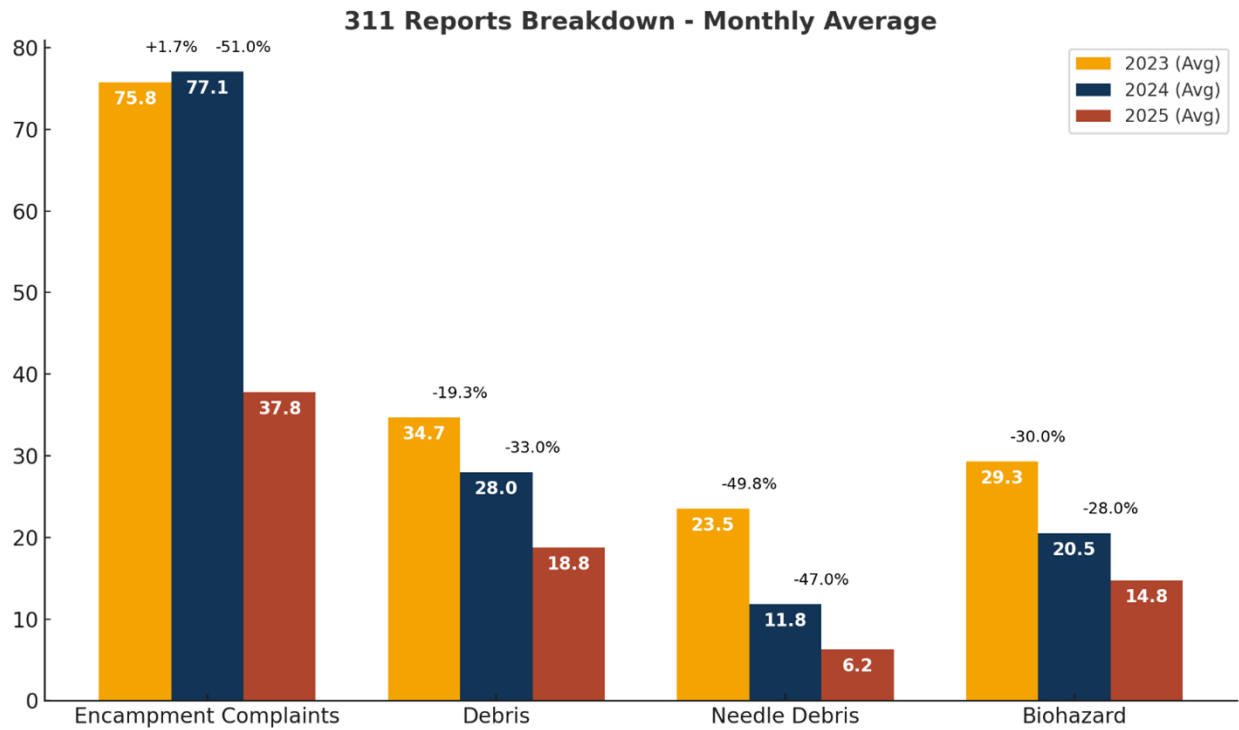


Table 1: 311 Reports

	2023 <sup>2</sup>	2024 <sup>3</sup>	2025 <sup>4</sup>	TOTAL
<b>TOTAL 311 COMPLAINTS</b>	980	1648	310	2938
<b>ENCAMPMENT COMPLAINTS<sup>1</sup></b>	455	925	151	1531
<b>DEBRIS</b>	208	336	75	619
<b>NEEDLE DEBRIS</b>	141	141	59	341
<b>BIOHAZARD</b>	176	246	25	447

1. Encampment Complaints are complaints made through 311 by members of the public.

2. 2023 data include July – December only due to initiation of operations this year.

3. 2024 data is from January to December.

4. 2025 data only represents January-March.

Figure 2: Confirmed Encampments

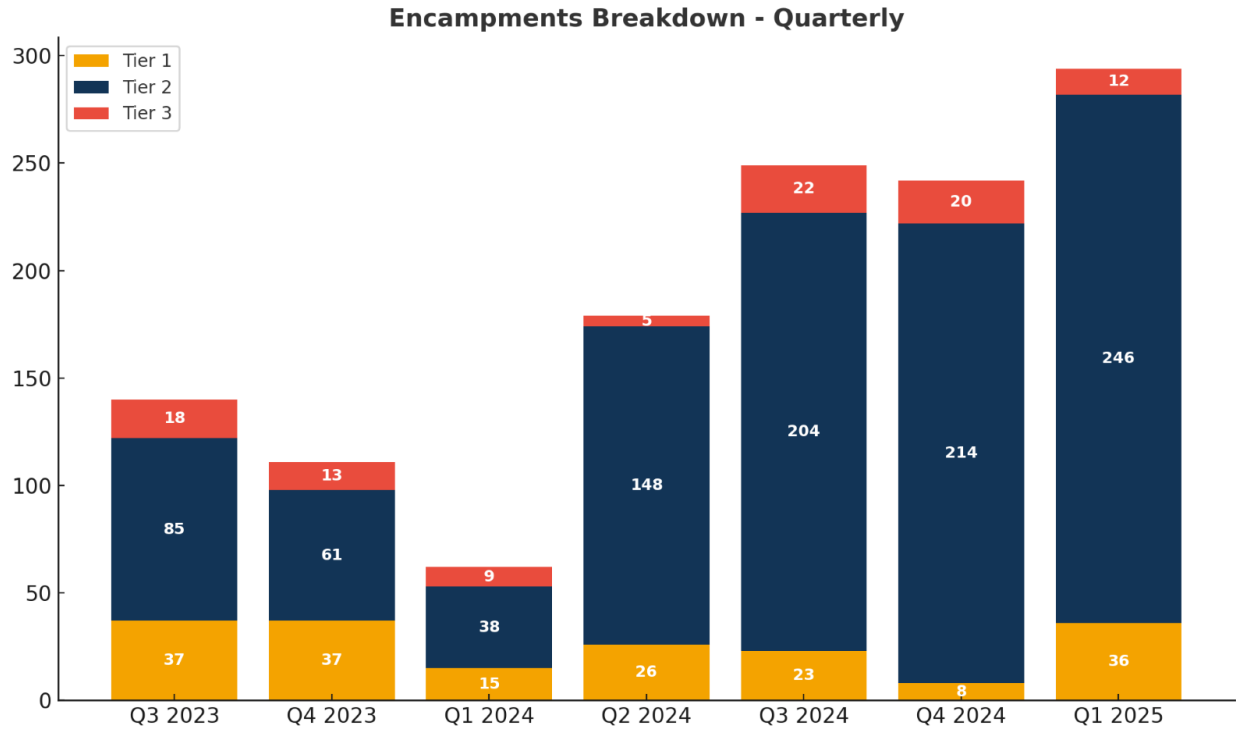


Table 2: Confirmed Encampments

	2023	2024	2025 <sup>3</sup>	TOTAL
<b>TOTAL CONFIRMED ENCAMPMENTS<sup>1</sup></b>	256	738	520	1514
<b>TIER 1</b>	76	72	62	210
<b>TIER 2</b>	149	602	434	1185
<b>TIER 3</b>	31	56	24	111
<b>ENCAMPMENTS WITH MINORS PRESENT</b>	0	8	0	8
<b>TOTAL NUMBER OF SITES TRIAGED<sup>2</sup></b>	663	1261	322	2246

1. Total confirmed encampments refers to encampments that have being triaged and fit into the tier 1,2 or 3 category, outlined in the Encampment Strategy.

2. Total number of sites triaged refers to the total amount of encampment and debris complaints responded to by the ERT.

3. 2025 data is from January to March



Figure 3: Debris Removed

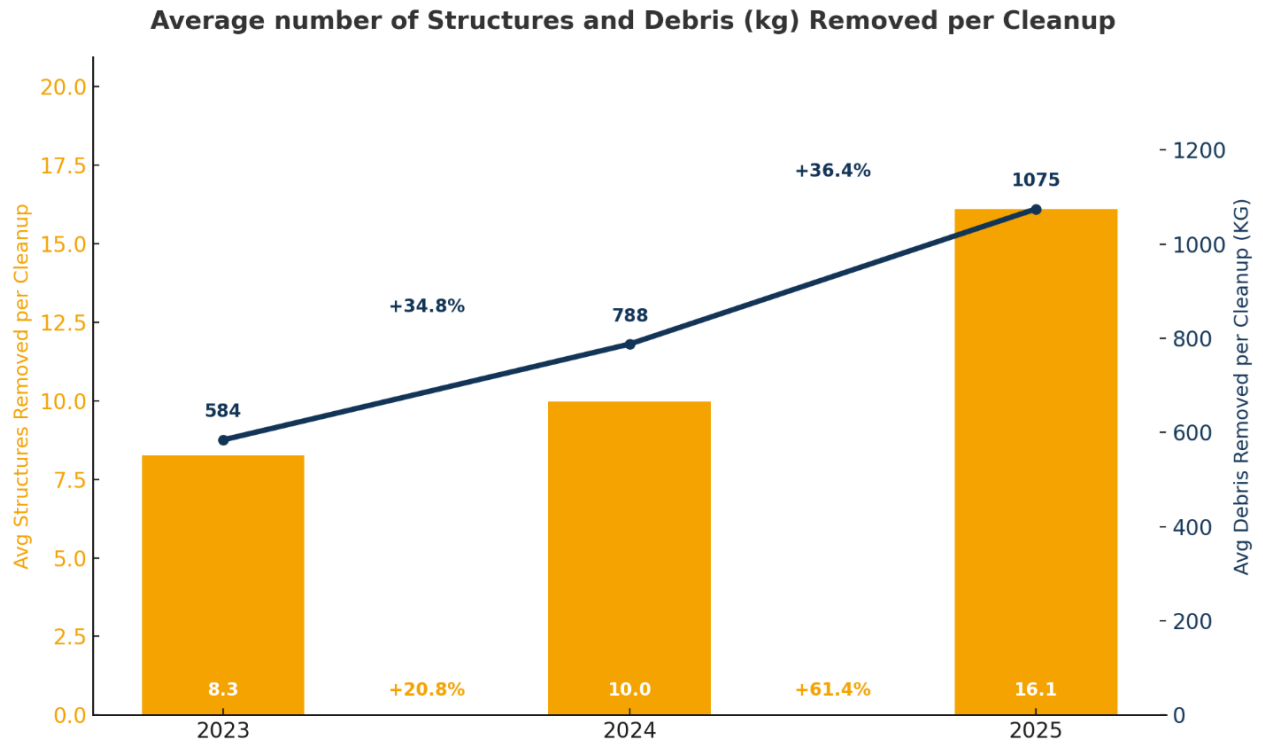


Table 3: Cleanups Held

	2023 <sup>1</sup>	2024 <sup>2</sup>	2025 <sup>3</sup>	TOTAL
<b>CLEAN UPS HELD</b>	19	57	27	103
<b>STRUCTURES REMOVED</b>	157	569	435	1161
<b>DEBRIS REMOVED</b>	11100 KG	44900 KG	29020 KG	85020 KG

1. 2023 data include July – December only due to initiation of operations this year.

2. 2024 data is from January to December.

3. 2025 data only represents January-March.



Before – Shelter Area



After – Shelter Area



Before – Stafford Dr N



After – Stafford Dr N

## 3.2 Outreach Services

In August 2024, the City transitioned from a contracted model to an internally staffed outreach team. The outreach team works closely with the ERT, LPS's Watch Program, and community agencies to streamline access to housing, health, and social supports. This shift has enabled greater integration with the ERT, improved accountability, and more consistent, person-centered support for individuals experiencing homelessness.

Key features of the internal outreach model include:

- **Person-centered case planning:** The outreach team connects with individuals to develop case plans and complete subsequent referrals, focusing on housing readiness and long-term stability.
- **Continued support:** The outreach team remains engaged with individuals until the person has exited their encampment and are considered stably housed ensuring follow-through and reducing service drop-off.
- **Data integration:** In early 2025, the outreach team was fully onboarded to the federal Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS), enhancing real-time coordination and outcome tracking.

While still early in its implementation, the impact of this model has been significant:

- A 263% increase in outreach intakes and a 318% increase in referrals from 2023 to 2024.
- 19 individuals exited homelessness between August 2024 and April 2025, compared to zero in 2023.
- Expanded services, including out-of-town transportation, to reconnect individuals with housing in their home communities.

*Table 4: Internal Outreach Services*

	2023 <sup>1</sup>	2024 <sup>2</sup>	2025 <sup>3</sup>	TOTAL
<b>INTAKES</b>	19	72	29	120
<b>REFERRALS</b>	32	134	105	271
<b>INDIVIDUALS EXITING HOMELESSNESS</b>	0	12	7	19

1. 2023 data include July to October due to the contractual timelines with the external service provider.

2. 2024 data include August to December due to internal outreach services model beginning in August.

3. 2025 data only represents January-March.

*Table 5: The Watch Outreach Services*

<b>THE WATCH OUTREACH DATA</b>	<b>2024<sup>1</sup></b>
<b>ENCAMPMENT OUTREACH</b>	14
<b>DETOX INTAKES</b>	10

1. 2024 data is from August to December, with services beginning in August.

### 3.3 Integrated Partnerships

The success of the Encampment Strategy is rooted in strong, cross-sector partnerships that enable a coordinated and compassionate response. These partnerships ensure that encampments are approached not merely as challenges to be managed, but as opportunities for meaningful intervention, connection, and care.

Key partners include:

- **Lethbridge Police Service (LPS):** Key partner in the oversight of the strategy, playing a key role in the operational response by providing safety support and assisting with enforcement when necessary.
- **LPS Watch Program:** Offers lower-intensity outreach and builds trust with individuals who may not yet be ready for formal services.
- **Lethbridge Fire and Emergency Services (LFES):** Supports fire risk mitigation, using drones to identify encampments in secluded locations like the coulees and responding to fire hazards in encampments.
- **Downtown BRZ Clean Sweep Program (CSP):** Assists with site cleanups, debris removal, and staff safety protocols.
- **Coordinated Access System:** Facilitates referrals, case management, and housing placements through a shared intake and prioritization process.
- **Unsheltered Homelessness and Encampments Initiative (UHEI):** Recent investments through the UHEI have further strengthened efforts as funding awarded to the Lethbridge Housing Authority (LHA) and Blood Tribe Department of Health (BTDH) is enabling the development of transitional housing units and expanded shelter services. These initiatives are designed to enhance, not duplicate, municipal efforts; reinforcing the strategy's emphasis on coordinated responses, housing-focused outreach, and culturally appropriate support services.





## 4. Health, Safety, and Public Perception

The Encampment Strategy has prioritized not only the reduction of encampments but also the enhancement of health and safety for encampment occupants, employees, contracted services, and the broader community. By investing in training and safe work practices while proactively addressing risks, safety concerns, and public education, the City has made significant progress in reducing hazards and enhancing relationships within the community.

### 4.1 Health and Risk Reduction Interventions

In 2024, Encampment Response Team (ERT) and outreach staff were authorized and trained to carry and administer naloxone (Narcan), a life-saving intervention for opioid overdoses. This decision was driven by the need to reduce reliance on emergency services and provide faster, on-site responses to overdose events. Since implementation, naloxone has been deployed multiple times by City staff, contributing to improved outcomes and reduced strain on emergency services.

In addition to overdose response, the ERT has worked closely with LFES to mitigate fire risks in encampments. This includes:

- The proactive removal of hazardous materials such as propane tanks.
- Fire safety education for encampment occupants.
- Coordination with Fire Prevention Officers to assess and address high-risk sites.



*Cast iron stove being removed from an encampment in the river valley*



*An encampment located in the river valley, with the support or LFEM*

These efforts have contributed to a 27.7% reduction in outdoor fire incidents between 2023 and 2024, a significant achievement given the historical correlation between encampments and fire hazards. Before and after photos below are an example of an encampment in the river bottom located through the use of Fire EMS drone. This particular effort addressed a significant fire risk as over 1,000 kilograms of debris, including a cast iron stove, propane tanks, and open flame devices, were safely removed.

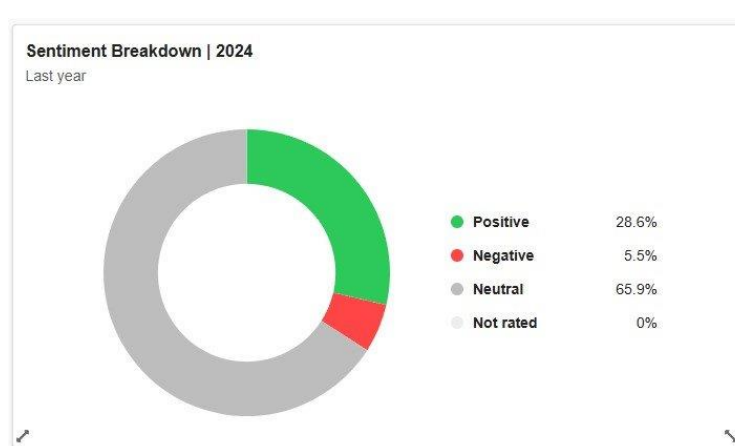
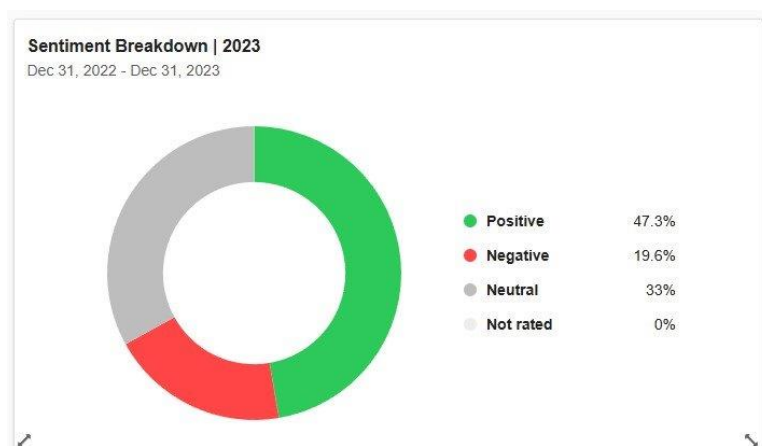


Weapons mitigation has also been a focus. In collaboration with LPS, the ERT has safely removed weapons from encampments and provided education on community safety. These interventions have helped reduce the risk of violence and improve safety for both staff and the public. Below are examples of weapons found during encampment cleanups.



## 4.2 Shifting Public Sentiment

Since the launch of the Encampment Response Strategy, public perception has shown a marked improvement. In 2022, 70.4% of residents held negative views toward encampments. By 2023, that number had dropped significantly to 19.6%, while positive sentiment rose sharply from 2.8% to 47.3%. Although positive sentiment declined to 28.6% in 2024, there was a notable increase in neutral responses, which rose to 65.9%. This shift suggests that the public increasingly sees this initiative as a standard and expected part of municipal operations.



## 5. Housing Integration

The long-term success of the Encampment Strategy depends on more than the immediate response, it requires a robust, coordinated housing system that supports sustainable, inclusive solutions. Over the past two years, the City of Lethbridge has made meaningful progress in aligning its encampment response efforts with broader housing and community wellbeing goals.

A key driver of this progress has been the creation of a dedicated Housing Solutions Coordinator position, funded through the encampment response. This position has enabled the City to take on a more deliberate role in housing-related initiatives with a focus on upstream planning, policy innovation, and strategic investments.

Key achievements under this leadership include:

- Completion of the updated Municipal Housing Strategy (MHS), which outlines clear priorities for the development of affordable and supportive housing.
- Strategic allocation of the Affordable and Social Housing Capital Fund, which leverage over \$113 million in external funding to deliver 415 new housing units, 71% of which are held at affordable rates for at least 20 years.
- Support for policy and regulatory tools, including contributions to the Land Use Bylaw Renewal Project and the development of a framework for a Non-Profit Affordable Housing Tax Rebate Grant Program, both of which support long-term affordability and enabling non-profit sector participation in housing delivery.
- Completion of a Federally mandated Housing Needs Assessment, which positions the City to access funding opportunities for housing and related infrastructure.

These accomplishments are embedded within the City's broader work to restructure governance and funding distribution processes. A major milestone in this evolution has been the (re)creation of the Community Wellbeing Advisory Board (CWAB), a community body that guides strategic investments and monitor progress.



Federal funding through the Reaching Home program has been instrumental in supporting this work. As the City is the designated community entity for both the Designated and Indigenous Communities funding streams, the Community Social Development department has leveraged Reaching Home investments to expand outreach, support housing transitions, and strengthen system coordination. These funds have also supported the development of systems that will ensure local responses are increasingly informed by data, grounded in equity, and aligned with broader homelessness reduction goals.

Together, these efforts reflect a growing recognition that housing is the foundation of community wellbeing—and that municipal leadership, supported by investment from other orders of government and community collaboration, is essential to building a system that works for everyone.

### 5.1 2024 Point-in-time Count: Progress Through Partnership

The 2024 Point-in-Time (PiT) Count (Appendices 1) offers a snapshot of homelessness in Lethbridge and provides key data in support of the City's Encampment Strategy, Municipal Housing Strategy, and Community Wellbeing and Safety Strategy (CWSS). Conducted in partnership with local service providers and aligned with national and provincial standards, the PiT Count reflects the City's commitment to evidence-based planning and community-informed action.

On the night of the count, 522 individuals were identified as experiencing homelessness in Lethbridge, representing a 15% increase from 2022. While this figure underscores the ongoing pressures facing the housing and social support systems, it also marks a significant shift in trajectory. Between 2018 and 2022, homelessness in Lethbridge grew at an average annual rate of 19%. In contrast, the 2022–2024 period saw that rate drop to just 7% annually. This reduction in the pace of growth is a clear indicator that coordinated local efforts, targeted investments, and strengthened partnerships are beginning to stabilize what was previously an escalating crisis.

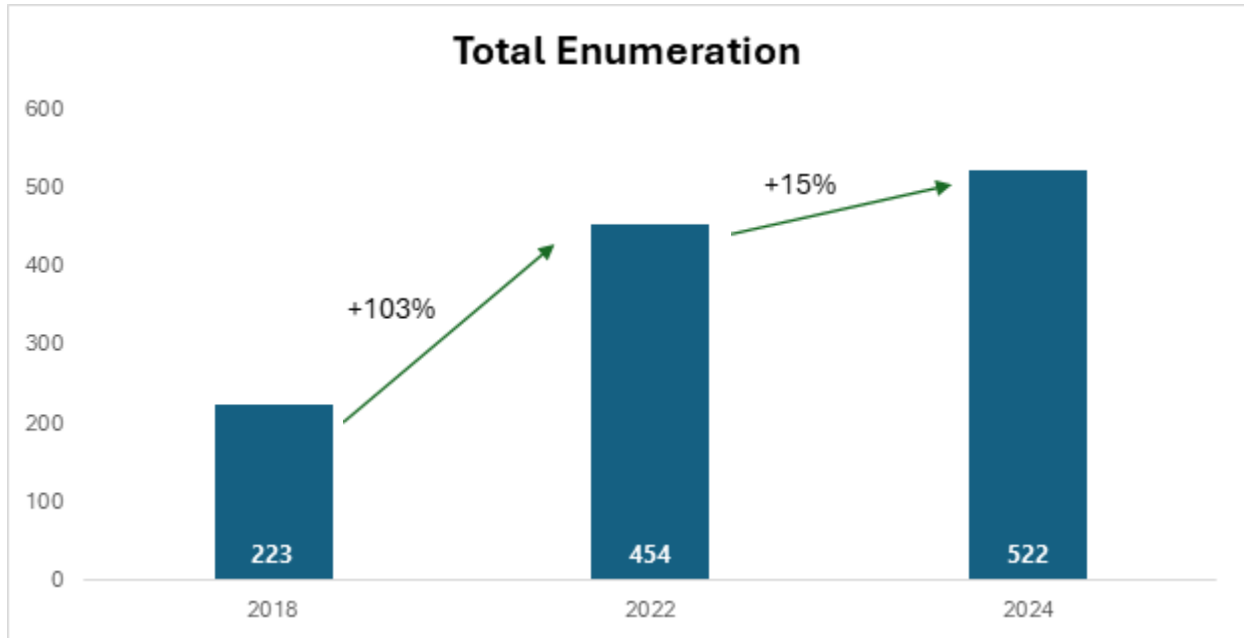
Structural barriers to housing remain a significant concern. High rent costs, lack of income assistance, and low income were the most frequently cited obstacles to securing stable housing. Although 81% of respondents had used emergency shelters in the past year, many reported avoiding them due to safety concerns, overcrowding, and infestations, highlighting the need for expanded shelter capacity and improved shelter conditions, which are being addressed from the recently completed expansion to the Lethbridge Shelter and Resource Centre.

A critical and consistent finding from the count is the continued overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in the homeless population. Of those who disclosed their racial identity, 68% identified as Indigenous. This figure reflects the deep-rooted systemic inequities that contribute to Indigenous homelessness. In response, the City has prioritized culturally appropriate and Indigenous-led solutions as a core component of its homelessness response through its strategic investment of increased funding through the Indigenous Homelessness stream of Reaching Home, and ensuring that outreach and housing services are culturally safe.



These efforts are essential to achieving equity in housing outcomes and advancing reconciliation in practice.

Table 6: PiT Count



## 5.2 Rising Demand and Systemic Strain

The 2024 Point-in-Time Count revealed a 7% annual increase in homelessness since 2022, reflecting broader social and economic pressures. This growth has translated into:

- An increase in confirmed encampments from 2023 to early 2025, in particular the increase in Tier 2 encampments, which now represent the majority of confirmed sites.
- A growing number of individuals with complex needs, including mental health, substance use, and trauma histories.

These trends place pressure on outreach, enforcement, and housing systems, many of which are already operating at or near capacity. The City's Encampment Response Team and internal Outreach have responded with agility, but the scale of need continues to grow.

## 6. Looking Ahead: Adapting to Complexity and Sustaining Progress

As the City of Lethbridge moves into the second half of 2025 and beyond, the City's encampment response will continue to align with the Encampment Strategy but will evolve operationally in response to emerging trends, operational pressures, and community needs. The first two years of implementation have demonstrated both the potential and the complexity of addressing encampments through a coordinated, compassionate, and data-informed approach. While measurable progress has been made, the work ahead will require sustained commitment, innovation, and flexibility.

### 6.1 Anticipated Trends and Pressures

Based on early 2025 data and historical patterns, several trends are expected to shape the encampment landscape:

- As encampments are becoming concentrated near services, an increase in Tier 2 and 3 encampments is expected.
- Seasonal dispersal of encampments into river valleys and less accessible areas, requiring enhanced mobility and surveillance tools.
- As participants become familiarized with the outreach program there has been an increase in individuals accessing services that support them in exiting homelessness.
- Greater complexity in service navigation, as individuals require multi-sectoral support to achieve housing readiness.

These trends are compounded by systemic pressures, including high caseloads, limited housing availability, and the growing number of individuals with mental health, substance use, and trauma-related needs. While the City's ERT and internal outreach services have responded with agility, the scale of need continues to grow and will require ongoing adaptation.

### 6.2 Operational Adjustments and Lessons Learned

The City's experience over the past two years has yielded important insights that will guide future adjustments:

- **Proactive response reduces public impact:** As 311 complaints have remained stable or declined (as shown in Figure 1: 311 Reports and Table 1: 311 Reports) and emergency service calls have dropped, there continues to be a rise in encampments. Highlighting the importance of early intervention by the ERT and outreach team in monitoring hotspot locations and addressing encampments.
- **Integrated outreach is essential:** The shift to an internal outreach model has improved continuity of care, enhanced coordination through HIFIS, and enabled a continuum of engagement through partnerships like the Watch Program.

- **Seasonal and geographic shifts require flexibility:** These shifts require flexible deployment of resources and innovative tools, such as drones and watercraft, to locate and safely access encampments in hard-to-reach areas. The ERT has recently completed the Lethbridge Police Service LEBA MB-100 Mountain Bike course and will utilize bikes for operations as needed. The City has begun piloting technologies, but further investment is needed to scale their use.



- **Balancing compassion and enforcement remains critical:** Clear enforcement protocols, consistent public communication, and a commitment to offering support before enforcement are essential to maintaining public trust.
- **Resource and staffing constraints persist:** In Q1 2025 alone, the ERT responded to 80% of the total encampment incidents recorded in all of 2024. Outreach teams are managing high caseloads with limited housing options, underscoring the need for sustained investment. As the team responds to increased community needs, it can lead to staff burnout, impacting mental health. Therefore, it is crucial for the strategy to remain adaptable and aligned with the available resources to support the well-being of frontline staff and for the long-term effectiveness of the response.
- **Data integration must continue to improve:** While HIFIS has enhanced coordination, challenges remain in capturing real-time data, measuring long-term outcomes, and aligning with provincial and federal systems.

## 6.3 Planned Enhancements

To meet these challenges and sustain momentum, the City is advancing several key initiatives:

- **Expanded outreach capacity:** Exploring different opportunities to additional seasonal staffing and/or leveraging existing partners will ensure that outreach services can meet rising demand while maintaining quality and continuity.
- **Enhanced data integration:** Continued refinement of HIFIS and internal tracking systems will improve real-time coordination and outcome measurement.
- **Technology-enabled response:** The use of drones, watercraft, and mobile tools will support access to remote encampments and improve safety for staff and occupants.
- **Fire prevention and safety education:** Building on early success, the City will expand its fire risk mitigation efforts, including tracking of propane tank removals and targeted education campaigns.

## 6.4 Commitment to Continuous Improvement

The City remains committed to listening to community feedback and incorporating it into service design, evaluating outcomes and adjusting tactics based on evidence, and investing in people, partnerships, and systems that support long-term change.

As the City looks ahead, the focus will remain clear: ensuring that public spaces are safe and welcoming for all, while supporting individuals experiencing homelessness with dignity, compassion, and purpose.