



Safe and Well Waterloo Region

**Waterloo Region's Four-Year Community
Safety and Wellbeing Plan: 2026-2030**





Territorial Acknowledgment

Truth and Reconciliation is central to community safety and wellbeing.

The Region of Waterloo acknowledges that we live, work, gather, and learn on the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and Chonnonton Peoples.

This land is part of the Haldimand Tract. It was granted to the Haudenosaunee of the Six Nations in 1784. The tract extends six miles on each side of the Grand River.

We honour the deep connections that Indigenous Peoples maintain with this land, water, language, culture, and community. These connections continue despite generations of colonial violence, displacement, and cultural suppression.

This acknowledgement reflects a commitment to Truth and Reconciliation.

Indigenous Peoples continue to face systems failures.

They have unequal access to health, housing, justice, and community safety. These inequities are linked to historical and ongoing oppression.

In advancing Safe and Well Waterloo Region, we commit to, we commit to working alongside Indigenous communities, Elders, Knowledge Holders, and Indigenous-led organizations. This includes:

- Supporting Indigenous self-determination
- Expanding Indigenous-led spaces for ceremony, healing, and community
- Embedding Indigenous worldviews in our work
- Upholding the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission
- Upholding the Calls for Justice of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

A safe and well Waterloo Region cannot exist without justice, dignity, and self-determination for Indigenous Peoples. This plan is rooted in these principles.



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A Message from the Steering Committee

Creating a safe and well community is about so much more than responding to challenges. It is about creating conditions that allow individuals, families, and communities to thrive. It means ensuring people feel connected, supported, and safe in every aspect of their daily lives.

On behalf of the Safe and Well Waterloo Region Steering Committee, we are proud to present Safe and Well Waterloo Region: our region's 4-year Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan.

This plan reflects the shared vision, expertise, and dedication of partners and community members from across Waterloo Region. Through collaboration with community organizations, public sector partners, service providers, Indigenous communities, residents, and people with lived experience, we have identified priorities that respond to our region's needs and future opportunities. Together, we have developed a roadmap for meaningful action that focuses on prevention, early intervention, and addressing the root causes of complex social challenges.

Waterloo Region is a vibrant, diverse, and growing community. While we benefit from many strengths, we also recognize that not everyone experiences the same sense of safety, belonging, or access to opportunity. This plan acknowledges those realities and commits us to working together to reduce barriers and advance equity for all residents.

The success of this plan will depend on continued partnership, shared accountability, and a collective commitment to action. No single organization or sector can achieve community safety and wellbeing alone. By leveraging our strengths, fostering innovation, and maintaining a focus on collaboration, we can create lasting, positive change.

We extend our sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed their time, knowledge, experiences, and perspectives throughout the development of this plan. Your insights have helped shape a community-driven approach that reflects the unique needs and aspirations of Waterloo Region.

As we move forward together, we remain committed to building a Waterloo Region where all people feel safe, supported, connected, and empowered to reach their full potential.

Sincerely,

Safe and Well Waterloo Region Steering Committee



Acknowledgements

This plan acknowledges the rich contributions to community safety and wellbeing made by organizations and leaders across Waterloo Region. This work began long before the Safe and Well framework was created. It continues today.

We honour the dedication of community leaders and organizations who have worked to build safer, more inclusive, and more resilient communities. The organizations listed below played active roles in developing the Safe and Well framework and initiatives over the past four years. Many others, not listed here, continue to contribute.

This plan also builds on the foundational work of the Region’s Crime Prevention Council and Wellbeing Waterloo Region.

Community safety and wellbeing requires a systems-wide approach. It cuts across many sectors – including health, Indigenous organizations, grassroots organizations, education, social services, business, and government.

Partner organizations include:

Adventure4Change	City of Cambridge	Family & Children’s
African Women’s Alliance of Kitchener	City of Kitchener	Services of the
Cambridge Memorial Hospital	City of Waterloo	Waterloo Region
Cambridge North Dumfries Ontario Health Team	Coalition of Muslim Women of K-W	Family Violence Project Waterloo Region
Cambridge Shelter Corporation	Communitech	Food Bank of Waterloo Region
Camino Wellbeing & Mental Health	Community Care Concepts	Grassroots Growth Alliance
Canadian Mental Health Association of Waterloo Wellington	Community Health Caring / HART Hub	Hearts Open for Everyone
Child Witness Centre	Community Justice Initiatives	House of Friendship
Children and Youth Planning Table	Community Services, Region of Waterloo	Immigration Partnership
	Conestoga College	Indigenous Creatives United, ICU
	Crow Shield Lodge	Kinbridge Community Association
	Engage Rural Collective	KW4 Ontario Health Team
		Langs

Lyle S. Hallman Foundation	Sunbeam Community & Developmental Services	Waterloo Region District School Board
Muslim Social Services Kitchener Waterloo	Sustainable Waterloo Region	Waterloo Region Health Network
Muslim Women of Cambridge	The Healing of the Seven Generations	Waterloo Region Jewish Community Council
Ontario Health at Home	The Ripple Effect Education	Waterloo Regional Council
Ontario Health West	The Working Centre	Waterloo Regional Health Network
Peace for All Canada	Thresholds Homes and Supports	Waterloo Regional Police Service
Porchlight Counselling and Addiction Services	Thrive	Wilfrid Laurier University
Ray of Hope	Township of North Dumfries	Wilfrid Laurier University - Social Innovation Research Group
Region of Waterloo	Township of Wellesley	Women’s Crisis Center, Data & Evaluation
Region of Waterloo Paramedic Services	Township of Wilmot	Women’s Crisis Services WR
Rhythm and Blues Cambridge	Township of Woolwich	Woolwich Counselling
Rohingya Centre	Traverse Independence	YMCA of Three Rivers
Run for Office Waterloo Region	United Way Waterloo Region Communities	YWCA Cambridge
Sanguen Health Centre	University of Waterloo	YWCA Kitchener
Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Treatment Centre	Victim Services of Waterloo Region	Youth Advisory Group
Sexual Assault Support Centre Waterloo Region	Waterloo Catholic District School Board	
Spectrum	Waterloo Region Community Foundation	
Sporas		
Starling Community Services		





Changing Community Context

Waterloo Region is growing and changing rapidly. More than 670,000 people call the region home. It includes three cities – Cambridge, Kitchener, and Waterloo – and four rural townships: North Dumfries, Woolwich, Wellesley, and Wilmot.

The region is one of Canada's fastest-growing. It is expected to surpass one million people by 2050. Each city and township has its own distinct character.

This growth brings opportunities for innovation and community vitality. It also creates evolving community safety and wellbeing needs.

A Diverse and Growing Population

The region's population is increasingly diverse. Any plan must be embracing and inclusive of the diverse experiences and perspectives of those who call this Region home: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, African, Black, Caribbean, newcomer, and racialized communities, 2SLGBTQIA+ people, youth, older adults, people with disabilities, and multi-generation rural families.

This diversity is a strength. It also means services must be responsive, equitable, and grounded in the realities of different communities and geographies.

Complex and Intersecting Priorities

Several complex pressures are converging at once. The rising cost of living, poverty, food insecurity, and the shortage of affordable housing are widely felt. Mental health and addictions challenges have intensified. Crisis calls and doctor visits related to mental health have increased.

Communities are also concerned about hate, discrimination, and polarized public dialogue. These pressures are connected to the social determinants of health. Safety and wellbeing are shaped by lived experience, systems, policies, social identities, infrastructure, and geography.

Residents need accessible and equitable services. They need support navigating systems. They need freedom from discrimination and racism. They need inclusive and safe spaces.

Indigenous Communities

Indigenous communities in the region are diverse. Many Indigenous people live in urban areas. They need culturally responsive, Indigenous-led services and supports. Indigenous communities continue to face systemic discrimination and systems failures.

According to Statistics Canada, 9,960 Indigenous people lived in Waterloo Region in 2021. Of those, 2,855 were children and youth – about 2.2% of all young people in the region. Despite this, Indigenous communities are over-represented in correctional, justice, and child welfare systems.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action call for these systems to be overhauled. The goal is to right historical and ongoing wrongs. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission released 94 calls to Action in 2015. Eleven of these are specific to municipalities.

Community-Led Approaches

Communities have called for more community-centered approaches. These include prevention and diversion. Examples include police-free responses to mental health calls, preventative youth programs, and diversion programs through Community Justice Centres. These approaches can reduce contact with the criminal and mental health systems. They can also improve outcomes for people with complex needs.

The Region’s Strategic Plan recognizes these contexts. Community safety and wellbeing requires long-term, collaborative action. The 2026–2030 plan builds on decades of work. It incorporates lived experience, demographic trends, and community risk-based data. It positions the whole region to respond together – with compassion, equity, and shared responsibility.



Going forward, Safe and Well Waterloo Region will be developed in ongoing collaboration with communities, systems partners and municipalities. It will include more focused community data collection and deeper local engagement. It will recognize that rural needs are distinct from urban needs.



Vision and Framework

Our goal is for every person who calls Waterloo Region home to feel safe, cared for, and to have the opportunity to thrive.



To work toward this vision, the 2026–2030 plan will:

- Embed **Truth and Reconciliation**, equity, diversity, and inclusion across all our work
- Deepen outcomes across the **four strategic priorities**, with greater collaboration across priorities
- Stay responsive to **evolving community safety and wellbeing needs**
- Take a **whole-community approach** – collaborating with community organizations, systems partners, and area municipalities
- Deepen **collaboration with area municipalities**, recognizing that rural needs differ from urban needs
- Use an **evidence-based approach** – drawing on data, best practices, and community knowledge

Four strategic priorities:



Safety is more than the absence of crime or crisis.
It includes:

- A sense of belonging**
- Equitable access to services**
- Supportive relationships**
- Culturally safe environments**
- Self-determination for diverse communities and identity expression**
- Reliable pathways to help when needed**

Core Principles

Social Determinants of Health

The conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age have important influences on health. These include personal, social, economic, and environmental factors.

Equity

Fair treatment of all people that is inclusive and respectful. Equity means working toward equal outcomes and opportunities for everyone.

Diversity

People have a wide range of national, ethnic, gender, racial, and other backgrounds. Diversity includes all the ways people may differ. Everyone and every group is part of the collective and should be valued.

Inclusion

Bringing traditionally excluded individuals and groups into activities, processes, and decision-making. This is done in ways that genuinely share power.

Anti-Hate

Attitudes, actions, policies, and initiatives designed to address, oppose, prevent, and counter hate speech, discrimination, and hate-motivated crimes. These target individuals based on race, religion, sexual orientation, or other identity factors.

Anti-Oppression

Bringing awareness to biases and unearned privileges that exist in society. Disrupting the systems that create these inequities to promote equity for everyone.

Anti-Racism

Actively identifying, challenging, and changing the systems, behaviours, and values that uphold racism at all levels of society.

Truth and Reconciliation

A process aimed at addressing the harmful legacy of the Indian Residential School system. It focuses on acknowledging Survivors' experiences and fostering healing. Reconciliation requires awareness of the past, acknowledgement of harm, atonement, and action to change behaviour.

Self-Determined Communities

A community with the power, freedom, and resources to define and achieve safety and wellbeing. Solutions reflect the community's own culture and identity.

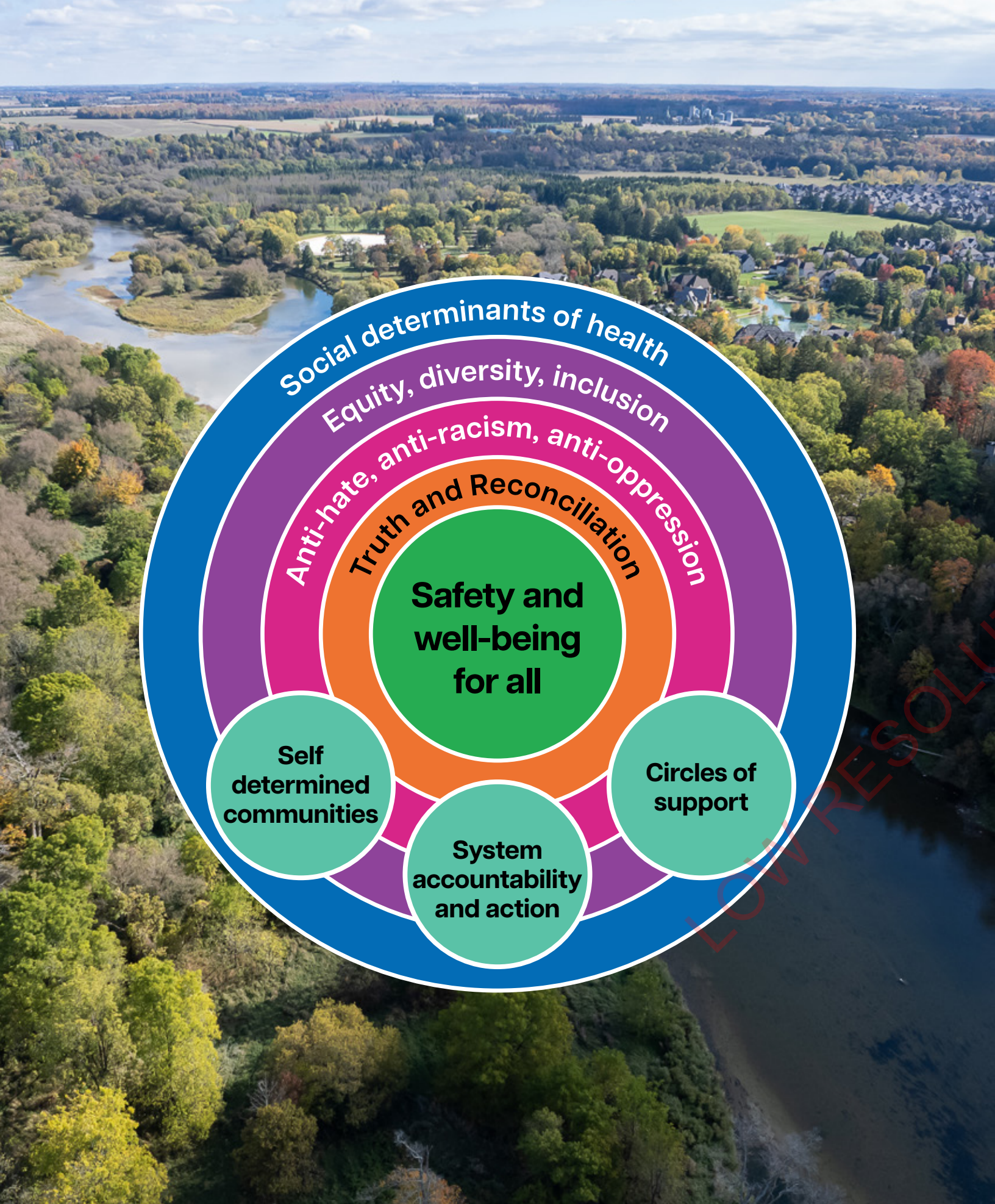
Circles of Support

Relationships that nurture safety and wellbeing. These include family, chosen family, neighbours, and friends. They provide social connection, practical help, advice, empowerment, and shared advocacy.

Accountable Systems Committed to Change

Systems that embed reconciliation, equity, diversity, and inclusion in everything they do. They redefine power dynamics between themselves, other organizations, and communities. They act courageously and try new approaches.





Provincial Context

The Community Safety and Policing Act (2019) requires every municipality in Ontario to develop a Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan. Each plan must be updated every four years.

The Act shifts the focus from reactive responses to proactive prevention. It emphasizes collaboration among community agencies, systems partners, police services, and municipalities.

The provincial framework sets out four core expectations:

- Identify local community risk-based needs and priorities
- Engage diverse sectors, systems partners, and communities
- Design integrated strategies and outcomes
- Ensure transparent reporting and accountable implementation

Planning Approaches

The Act also requires four approaches to planning. The first three are emphasized most:

- **Social Development:** Address root causes of harm and increase wellbeing before risks develop
- **Prevention:** Act early to reduce risks before they escalate
- **Risk Intervention:** Support people at immediate or elevated risk before a crisis occurs
- **Incident Response:** Respond to critical incidents and emergencies and ensure public safety



In 2022, the Region of Waterloo developed a community safety and wellbeing framework and asset map with communities across the region. In 2026, the Region is required to update the plan under the four-year cycle.

This updated 2026–2030 plan was developed in collaboration with community and systems partners. It uses ongoing community and evidence-informed strategies to support community safety and wellbeing.



Community Engagement

Between 2021 and 2025, community engagement included consultations with diverse community leaders. These leaders represented First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. They also represented African, Black, Caribbean, and racialized communities, religious groups, youth, grassroots organizations, faith communities, service providers, educators, frontline workers, and municipal partners.

Building the Framework (2021–2022)

In 2021–2022, more than 100 community and systems leaders co-created the plan framework and asset map. This process shaped the priorities and values that underpin the plan.

Community Symposiums (2023–2024)

Two community symposiums were held between 2023 and 2024.

The first, held in 2023, brought together more than 100 diverse community and systems leaders. They worked to advance shared priorities for community safety and wellbeing. Key priorities included combatting hate, safe and inclusive spaces, and mental health and addictions. Participants also highlighted housing and homelessness and belonging as core drivers of community safety. They called for deeper collaboration, commitment to reconciliation, and culturally relevant systems of support.

In 2023, the Region declared gender-based violence an epidemic. It called on the provincial government to do the same. This led to the addition of IPV, GBV, and MMIWG and 2SLGBTQIA+ Persons as a standalone priority.

The second symposium, held in 2024, was called “Forward Together: Activating Change, Amplifying Belonging.” It was hosted by the Region of Waterloo, the Children and Youth Planning Table, and Immigration Partnership. Sessions covered homelessness, youth engagement, building belonging in polarizing times, and social resilience.

Creating Action Tables and Working Groups (2023-2025)

Between 2023 and 2025, community action tables and working groups were created. They responded to community-identified priorities. Community leaders and partners continued to name the impact of hate incidents and discrimination.

Racialized, newcomer, Jewish, Muslim, 2SLGBTQIA+, and Indigenous community members shared experiences of racism and discrimination. They called for more culturally safe community spaces.

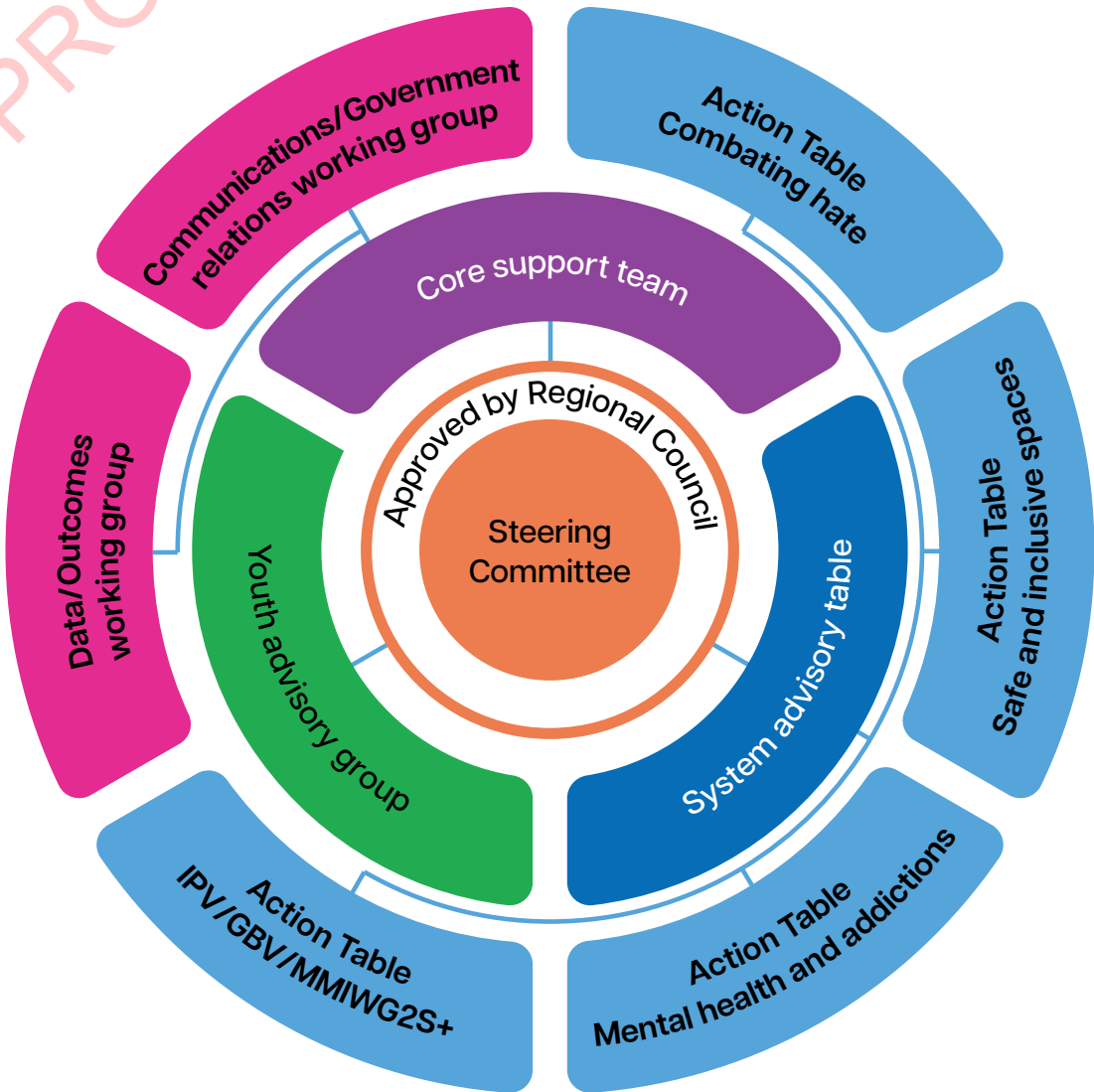
Gender-based violence was identified as a critical priority and an epidemic. Community members described barriers to accessing services. These included long wait times, complex legal processes, and the need for trauma-informed supports.

Engagement also surfaced the need for stronger, more equitable system supports. This was especially true for newcomers, young people, people with disabilities, and rural residents. Communities consistently said they want not just to be consulted, but to lead and co-design solutions.

Governance

Safe and Well Waterloo Region uses a shared leadership model. It integrates collective municipal responsibility with broad-based community ownership. The Region of Waterloo is responsible for developing and reporting on the plan under the Community Safety and Policing Act (2019), but the plan itself is community-driven.

It brings together diverse community organizations, municipal partners, sectors, and people with lived experience to collectively advance safety and wellbeing.



Steering Committee

The Steering Committee provides strategic direction, ensures accountability, and aligns resources across the region. It is made up of senior leaders from municipal government, Indigenous communities, education, health care, mental health and addictions, policing, social services, and grassroots organizations.

Advisory Committee

The advisory committee supports the Steering Committee. Their role is to enable integrated approaches, identify service gaps, surface systemic barriers, and propose coordinated strategies.

Action Tables

Action Tables are the most community-centered part of the governance structure. They advance specific actions within each priority area. The strength of Action Tables is their diversity. Members bring expertise from across sectors, as well as personal lived experience.

Action Tables were established in 2024 for three priority areas: Combatting Hate, Addressing Mental Health and Addictions, and Gender-Based Violence: Addressing Intimate Partner Violence & Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. More recently, an Action Table was established for the Creating Safe and Inclusive Spaces priority area. It will begin by focusing on safe and inclusive spaces for Indigenous communities.

Youth Advisory Group

The Region of Waterloo's Youth Advisory Group plays an important role in the governance structure, ensuring young people have a say in initiatives that advance community safety and wellbeing. The group includes more than 40 youth, ages 14 to 25..

Working Groups

- Two working groups support alignment, coordination, and implementation:
- The Data and Outcomes Working Group supports shared measurement, integrated data, and reporting
- The Communications and Government Relations Working Group supports public communications, engagement strategies, and advocacy

Core Support Team

The Core Support Team includes leaders from municipal government, the Waterloo Regional Police Service, and staff from the Region of Waterloo's Reconciliation, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion division. The team provides administrative support and helps facilitate aligned action amongst the various community tables. It ensures progress is documented, communicated and works to strengthen relationships across systems and communities.

The governance structure reflects a shift toward community-driven, equity-centered leadership. No single organization or sector can address the complex challenges of community safety and wellbeing alone. Governance is both a structure and a philosophy – one that recognizes transformational change requires shared responsibility and collaboration.





Community Needs

Safe and Well Waterloo Region uses a community needs-based approach. This ensures the plan stays responsive to emerging community needs while remaining grounded in evidence, lived experience, and shared accountability.

Qualitative and Quantitative

Both quantitative and qualitative data are used to identify needs and risks requiring cross-sector attention. Data sources include police data and broader social, economic, health, environmental, and cultural data.

These include:

- The Youth Impact Survey;
- The Waterloo Region Immigrant Survey;
- The Public Health Ontario Marginalization Index;
- and the Waterloo Region Community Wellbeing Survey.

Responsive to Community

Community voice, Indigenous knowledge, cultural expertise, and lived experience also play a critical role. Communities often name harms long before they appear in formal data.

For example, communities raised escalating hate incidents – including antisemitism and Islamophobia – before cases rose sharply in official police reporting. Indigenous communities also identified the urgent need for Indigenous-led spaces years before the Indigenous Space Needs Assessment formally documented the gap.

Community needs and risks were assessed based on their prevalence, urgency, severity, and impact on equity-deserving communities. The presence of systemic barriers and the capacity of systems to intervene upstream were also considered.

The four priorities are not mutually exclusive. They intersect with each other and with broader conditions such as housing affordability, cost of living, access to primary health care, poverty, equity, and community belonging. This is a living framework. It will evolve as the region continues to monitor data, listen to community experiences, and respond to emerging challenges.





Priority 1

Combatting Hate

Combatting hate is an urgent and growing priority across the region. Waterloo Region has recorded some of the highest per capita rates of police-reported hate-motivated incidents in Canada.

During engagement sessions, community members described experiences of Islamophobia, antisemitism, anti-Black racism, anti-Asian racism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia. Many shared fears of retaliation when reporting incidents or seeking support. Communities have noted that global crises and acts of hate amplify local harms.

The Combatting Hate Action Table

In 2024, more than 30 leaders joined together to form the Combatting Hate Action Table. They came from education, settlement, policing, justice, mental health, rural communities, youth organizations, area municipalities, faith-based groups, and grassroots organizations. They brought diverse identities and lived experiences.

The group worked to understand the current context and identify what is needed to combat hate. Key goals were identified:

- Map existing gaps in trauma-informed, culturally safe services for people and families who experience hate
- Build system accountability and action
- Identify reporting pathways
- Increase a sense of belonging
- Develop a broad public education campaign on hate and identity-based harm



Actions and Outcomes

In 2025, the Combatting Hate Action Table developed and launched a community-wide anti-hate awareness campaign: We All Belong Here. The campaign aims to address hate and harm. It aims to build a community where everyone feels safe, welcomed, and respected.

The campaign message and design were co-created by the Combatting Hate Action Table through diverse community engagement. It includes multimedia messages, a wrapped Grand River Transit bus, and translation in multiple languages.

A campaign website – webelongwr.ca – was also developed. It helps visitors find support, including:

- People experiencing hate who need help, healing, and information about reporting
- People who want to help combat hate as allies
- People who may have caused harm and are seeking support and opportunities for change

The campaign launched with 100+ community leaders and partners. Since launch, over 25 community activation events have been held across Waterloo Region. The campaign has received 128,000 views on social media and almost 9,000 visits to the website.



Priority 2

Addressing Gender-Based Violence, Including Intimate Partner Violence and MMIWG2S+

Gender-Based Violence, including intimate partner violence and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and 2SLGBTQIA+ people, is a critical concern throughout the region. Police-reported incidents of these forms of violence continue to rise year over year. So does demand for services and supports.

Survivors have identified increases in coercive control, economic abuse, sexual violence, criminal harassment, human trafficking, and digital violence. Service providers note that cases have become more complex and severe.

Many survivors face additional barriers. These include barriers related to housing, shelters, and income. They also face challenges navigating legal systems, child welfare, immigration status, and cultural stigma. In recognition of the urgent need for coordinated action, the Region of Waterloo and all area municipalities declared intimate partner violence, gender-based violence, and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and 2SLGBTQIA+ people an epidemic in 2023.

The Family Violence Project

The Family Violence Project is a collaborative of nine co-located agencies. It provides wrap-around services to support victims and survivors. In 2024, the Safe and Well Waterloo Region team provided strategic planning support to the Family Violence Project. This helped the Family Violence Project re-envision its approach to meet increased community needs, plan for sustainable growth, and centre survivors in care. Indigenous partners and members of the Waterloo Region Gender-Based Violence Leadership Strategy were included. This strengthened alignment between Indigenous-led responses and mainstream service systems.



Actions and Outcomes

Several innovative programs have been recognized as models of best practice:

- Early Intervention Program: evidence-based, trauma-informed support and education in the early stages of abusive behaviour (Women's Crisis Services of Waterloo Region and the Waterloo Region Police Service)
- Engaging Men Program: prevention through counselling and challenging harmful norms (Women's Crisis Services of Waterloo Region)
- Sexual Violence Legal Support Program: specialized legal guidance for survivors (The Sexual Assault Support Centre of Waterloo Region)

In 2025, the Action Table conducted a gender-based violence service provider survey. This mapped regional services, funding streams, and resource allocation. Provider data was analyzed by the Safe and Well Waterloo Region Data and Outcomes Working Group. Action Table members also developed a training module on the importance of understanding femicide.



Priority 3

Addressing Mental Health and Addictions



Mental health and addictions are deeply interconnected. Together, they have a significant influence on individual and community wellbeing. Safe and Well Waterloo Region recognizes that mental health and addictions services must be equitable, accessible, and trauma-informed. They must also make the most effective and efficient use of health care and community resources. The goal is to connect people in need to the right supports at the right time.

Hospital emergency departments, paramedic services, community services, and police services continue to face capacity challenges. High and frequent use of these combined resources is a key driver.

Mental Health and Addictions System Transformation Team

In 2024, the Mental Health and Addictions System Transformation Team was established. It is a collaborative initiative that brings together more than 40 community leaders and people with lived experience.

The team's goal is to align mental health and addictions work across Waterloo Region. This prevents duplication, optimizes resources, and improves impact. The Team applies an equity-driven, data-informed approach. It addresses gaps, removes harmful practices, and improves care so it is accessible, connected, and responsive.

Actions and Outcomes

- Developed a policy to compensate grassroots organizations and individuals with lived experience for meaningful participation in system transformation activities
- Strengthened relationships between community leaders and people with lived experience to align work and uncover gaps and new opportunities
- Developed and widely distributed referral tools to connect individuals to the right mental health and addictions supports across the region
- Launched a cross-sector committee to advance system responses for people with complex and high-use needs, focusing on frequent emergency department visitors
- Developed a cross-sectoral transitional housing pilot providing follow-up health care to unhoused individuals discharged from hospital. This reduces repeat emergency room visits.
- Embedded Acquired Brain Injury screening and services across multiple organizations, including outreach workers and hospital staff
- Piloted a free youth recreation project in partnership with the YMCA
- Explored the creation of a Mental Health and Addictions Data Hub with support from the University of Waterloo
- Implemented the HART Hub Waterloo Region, providing integrated health, social, and addictions support. Services include mobile clinics, extended hours, outreach teams, crisis response, employment support, and addictions care. A 12-bed transitional housing program has also launched. More than 40 agencies are engaged through in-kind support or referral pathways





Priority 4

Creating Safe and Inclusive Spaces

Safe and Inclusive Spaces emerged consistently during community consultations. Indigenous communities, racialized residents, newcomers, youth, and 2SLGBTQIA+ communities all named this as a priority. Communities emphasized the absence of culturally safe, welcoming, accessible places to gather, learn, heal, celebrate identity, and build community.

Many individuals described feeling unsafe in public spaces such as transit terminals, parks, recreation centres, and downtown cores. Others described experiences of racism, discrimination, or harassment in institutional settings. It was also recognized that when systems partners and community groups work together across sectors, these efforts collectively contribute to safer and more inclusive spaces.

Safe and Inclusive Spaces for Indigenous Communities

One of the key gaps identified was the lack of safe and inclusive spaces for Indigenous communities. While this priority will address diverse communities over time, safe spaces for Indigenous communities were prioritized first.

A new Creating Safe and Inclusive Spaces Action Table was established. It is focused on Indigenous leadership and the identification and development of safe and inclusive spaces for ceremony, healing, culturally appropriate services, and community gathering. A related gap is the systemic inequities and barriers Indigenous communities face in accessing systems, policies, processes, and resources to advance safe and inclusive spaces.

Creating Safe and Inclusive Spaces spans across a broad spectrum of priorities, including:

- Gender-based violence;
- Hate;
- Housing and homelessness;



- Recreational spaces;
- Transportation;
- And youth engagement.

Going forward, more work will be done with local area municipalities to identify strategies to build safe and inclusive spaces.

Actions and Outcomes

In 2024, the Indigenous Space Needs Assessment was completed on behalf of all area municipalities. This report identified a profound lack of Indigenous-led spaces for ceremony, youth and family programming, land-based learning, healing, and community gatherings.

Actions to date include:

- The Creating Safe and Inclusive Spaces Action Table has prioritized working toward an Indigenous service hub and a healing lodge. It will work alongside community to support community-driven initiatives to advance these priorities.
- The municipal-led Reconciliation Action Partnership has advanced several initiatives, including smudging policies in municipal buildings, free space for Indigenous groups, creation of sacred fire sites, increased Indigenous art, and the addition of Indigenous languages in public signage.
- Upstream Fund investments have supported grassroots initiatives that strengthen belonging, cultural expression, and community care. Many focus on Indigenous arts, newcomer integration, 2SLGBTQIA+ programming, Black community leadership, and interfaith belonging.



Looking Ahead

The 2026–2030 plan was developed in consultation with community members and groups from across the region. The process invited reflection on work to date, and identified evolving themes, priorities, and future actions. Over 90 community partners contributed to the consultation process.

Key Themes Identified Through Consultation

- Continued focus on the four priorities, with emphasis on measurement, dashboards, and progress reporting
- Clearer governance, administrative processes, shared learning and collaboration, and robust communication and engagement across the region
- Integration of evidence-based objectives, clear roles for partners, and shared data systems
- Responsiveness to wellbeing issues including housing and homelessness, food insecurity, cost of living, and access to health care
- Deeper embedding of Truth and Reconciliation and equity, diversity, and inclusion across Action Tables, governance, and memberships
- Deepening work with area municipalities, with distinct approaches to rural versus urban communities
- Strengthened prevention-focused interventions, including human trafficking response, diversion programs, and non-police mental health response
- A whole-community systems approach addressing rural and urban needs while avoiding duplication and addressing gaps

Over the next four years, Action Tables, working groups, and committees will develop core objectives, indicators, and action plans. These will be rooted in evidence-based practices, community knowledge, Truth and Reconciliation, and equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Within the four priority areas, key actions were identified, as well as progress indicators.

Combatting Hate



Key Actions

- Launch Phase II of the We All Belong Here campaign – focused on building understanding of identity-based hate and harm, addressing misinformation, reducing polarization, and encouraging shifts in attitudes and behaviours
- Explore protocols and policies for responding to hate incidents, and training for bystanders and allies
- Develop a community inventory of supports and resources for survivors of hate and identity-based harm, including initiatives that build solidarity between communities using restorative justice approaches
- Addressing hate requires consistent commitment across institutions, systems, and community networks. Through CHAT, Waterloo Region is strengthening its capacity to respond with compassion, respect, and coordinated action.

Indicators

- Police-reported hate crime data (Statistics Canada and Waterloo Regional Police Service)
- Centre for Mutual Wellbeing: Snapshot of Hate report: Hate is Not Okay. Name It. Report It
- Immigration Partnership Waterloo Region data
- Children and Youth Planning Table – Youth Impact Survey
- By-Law data for Region of Waterloo and area municipalities
- Waterloo Region District School Board bullying reporting tool
- Victim Services of Waterloo Region (hate crime referrals)
- Implementation and outcome evaluation of the We All Belong Here campaign, led by researchers at the University of Waterloo School of Public Health

Addressing Gender-Based Violence, Including Intimate Partner Violence and MMIWG2S+



Key Actions

- Work with GBV/IPV/MMIWG/2SLGBTQIA+ organizations and activists to identify priorities that meaningfully respond to GBV as an epidemic
- Integrate the Waterloo Region Gender-Based Violence Strategy in consultation with sector leaders
- Continue to develop and maintain a comprehensive inventory of IPV/GBV/MMIWG2S+ supports in the region
- Prioritize a response to human trafficking and its intersection with unhoused and precariously housed women
- Review Action Table membership with CSWP partners
- Enhance collaboration with Indigenous-led organizations, grassroots newcomer groups, and cultural groups
- Integrate information, programs, and messaging for newcomers
- Link culturally safe housing and healing spaces for a continuum of care

Indicators

- Shelter occupancy rates and demographics
- Program access and delivery
- Police data (occurrences and charges)
- Survivor and victim data
- Non-police reported data (community and system agencies)
- Population growth and geography
- Perpetrator data
- Statistics Canada data as baseline comparator
- Rates of early intervention and engaging men statistics
- Overall community served versus unmet demand

Addressing Mental Health and Addictions



Key Actions

- Continue to strengthen relationships between community leaders and people with lived experience
- Advance youth-focused prevention strategies, including culturally centered mental health education and expanding Youth Wellness Hubs into KW4 (Kitchener, Waterloo, Wellesley, Wilmot, and Woolwich)
- Improve support for people who frequently access episodic emergency and acute services
- Ensure equity-deserving groups have access to mental health and addictions supports, including crisis response
- Increase availability of long-acting injections for unhoused people to support stabilization and system navigation
- Improve communication between primary care and community mental health and addictions organizations
- Strengthen system planning through progress toward shared data capacity
- Pursue phased expansion of the HART Hub model and explore formal pathways with paramedic services, emergency departments, and other first responders

Indicators

- Number of police mental health and addictions apprehensions
- Number of diversions by community service organizations away from episodic emergency and acute services (to be developed)
- Number of high-frequency system users for mental health and addictions
- Percentage of youth in Waterloo Region who report their mental health as positive

Creating Safe and Inclusive Spaces



Key Actions

The next phase of work will be guided by Indigenous leadership, equity and human rights principles, deeper engagement with area municipalities, and community-led design practices. It includes:

- Ensuring greater representation of Indigenous organizations and leaders at CSWP Action Tables
- Supporting business case development for the Indigenous Community Hub
- Mapping available spaces across the region for Indigenous space needs
- Designing Indigenous-led spaces in collaboration with Indigenous leaders
- Investing in outdoor spaces for ceremony and cultural events
- Working with area municipalities to develop local strategies for safe and inclusive spaces

Indicators

- The Action Table is in early stages of development. Indicators will be developed by Indigenous leaders and organizations.



Making an Impact

As Safe and Well Waterloo Region evolves, so will its governance and administration needs. Community partners have asked for enhanced clarity and processes to ensure the plan makes meaningful progress.

There is consensus to continue focusing on the four strategic priorities. But communities also asked for the inclusion of additional priorities. These include housing and homelessness, food insecurity, the cost of living, human trafficking, and access to health care. Planning should also include data-informed forecasting to respond to evolving community needs.

- Work with the Plan to End Chronic Homelessness, Poverty Roundtable, Gender-Based Violence Leadership Group, Immigration Partnership, Engage Rural, local municipalities, and other community tables and partners to identify intersecting priorities without duplicating efforts
- Work with the Children and Youth Planning Table on youth-defined priorities and identify how to best support these through collaborative work

A Focus on Reconciliation, Equity and Belonging

Safe and Well Waterloo Region is anchored in a social justice framework. Moving forward, this framework will be embedded more deeply across the work and membership, using an intersectional lens.

Community safety interventions should prevent and divert communities from the criminal justice, child welfare, and justice systems. Community groups noted that the plan should focus on communities at higher risk of entering the criminal justice system and at risk of human trafficking.

Finally, community safety and wellbeing require a whole-community approach. Partners have emphasized the importance of a systems approach to implementing the plan across the region. Moving forward, Safe and Well Waterloo Region will focus on deepening engagement with area municipalities, specifically identifying the distinct needs of rural versus urban communities.

These themes intersect with all four priorities and shape the social conditions that underpin community safety and wellbeing. They will be integrated across all Action Tables and included in Safe and Well Waterloo Region's four-year Action Plan.

What Is Next?

Over the next four years, along with timelines, accountabilities, and intended outcomes for key actions, Safe and Well Waterloo Region will focus on

- Identifying baseline indicators for all Priority Areas
- Creating service maps and dashboards
- Establishing regular reporting processes
- Developing an Action Plan with Action Tables and Working Groups

Closing Remarks

Safe and Well Waterloo Region represents a shared, community-led effort. The goal is to build a safer, more equitable, and more inclusive Waterloo Region.

It reflects the historical and ongoing contributions and experiences of community. It honours Indigenous leadership and knowledge. It commits to long-term systems transformation through collaboration, prevention, and collective community ownership.

Together, we can create a Waterloo Region where everyone feels safe, cared for, and to has the opportunity to thrive.



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