



2025 Pre-Budget Submission



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John Howard Society of Ontario

T: 416-408-4282

W: www.johnhoward.on.ca

@jhsontario

About the John Howard Society of Ontario

For more than 90 years, we've worked to keep the humanity in justice.

Today we continue to build a safer Ontario by supporting the people and communities affected by the criminal justice system. Our 19 local offices deliver more than 80 evidence-based programs and services focused on prevention, intervention and re-integration across the province. These range from helping youth develop the life skills that will let them achieve their full potential, to helping families navigate issues of criminal justice, to providing job training for those leaving incarceration so they can contribute to their community in a meaningful way. We promote practical, equitable policies while raising awareness of the root causes of crime and calling on Ontarians to share responsibility for addressing them. Within the system itself, we advocate for the fair treatment of every individual. Each year, our work impacts the lives of more than 100,000 Ontarians.

Introduction

Please accept this document as the John Howard Society of Ontario's (JHSO) submission for the 2025 pre-budget consultations. Thank you for considering our submission.

Ontario has reached a critical tipping point as communities grapple with soaring homelessness levels, drug toxicity deaths and overburdened court and correctional systems. As the province tackles compounding issues in these areas, innovative evidence-based solutions are urgently needed to promote public safety, address homelessness and improve court efficiencies for the benefit of all Ontarians.

The following submission outlines four key recommendations to promote public safety, efficiency, and equity. These recommendations, in short, are:

1. Invest in dedicated transitional housing for individuals released from provincial correctional institutions.
2. Enhance investments in the Bail Verification Supervision Program (BVSP) to meet growing case complexity and expand "bail beds" to communities across the province.
3. Introduce pre-charge screening processes in Ontario.
4. Increase base funding for the community justice sector.

Transitional Housing

Ontario's housing crisis is starkly visible with at least 1,400 homeless encampments across the province¹. There is a bi-directional link between homelessness and incarceration, with experiences of one contributing to the other. Our research shows that an increasingly high proportion of admissions to provincial correctional institutions report having no fixed address.² In short, jails are becoming the shelter of last resort. However, this form of "shelter" has costly, negative consequences. People exit provincial jails often with worsened mental and physical health conditions, and any previous attachment to social services are interrupted, resulting in increased reliance on expensive emergency services. Over 80% of individuals inside provincial correctional institutions are on remand with limited access to programming or release planning while incarcerated to address underlying issues or support their re-entry.³ In addition to those entering jail without shelter, others lose their housing due to interruptions in income and the inability to pay rent during incarceration. As a result, many Ontarians leave provincial corrections with no options except shelters or sleeping rough on the streets.

¹ AMO Survey of Municipal Service Managers and DSSABs & The Shift Municipal Engagement Guidance. (2024). Homeless encampments in Ontario. In *AMO | Homeless Encampments in Ontario*.
https://www.amo.on.ca/sites/default/files/assets/DOCUMENTS/Homelessness/2024/AMO_Homeless-Encampments-in-Ontario_2024-07-02.pdf

² John Howard Society of Ontario. (2022). No Fixed Address: The Intersection of Justice Involvement and Homelessness.
<https://johnhoward.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/No-Fixed-Address-Final-Report.pdf>

³ Stats Canada. (2024) Average counts of adults in provincial and territorial correctional programs.
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3510015401&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.7&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2018+%2F+2019&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2022+%2F+2023&referencePeriods=20180101%2C20220101>

Housing is a critical factor in successful reintegration, making it an essential element of public safety. Stable housing reduces the likelihood of recidivism by providing a foundation from which individuals can build their lives, find employment and reconnect with loved ones. Targeted investments into housing for justice-involved individuals can also help address factors linked to homelessness, such as mental health challenges and substance use issues, and reduce the financial strain on emergency services, healthcare systems, and correctional facilities.

Adequate housing with connected support services plays an important preventative role. Ensuring people have both shelter and services to meet their needs prevents criminal activity and acute health or social issues. We commend your government for recognizing the need for supportive housing with the investment of \$152 million over three years to support individuals facing unstable housing conditions, mental health and addictions challenges. To meet the need in the province, however, increased investment into the supportive housing sector is crucial as experts estimate the need for an additional 40,000 units.

Communities across Ontario require a diverse range of affordable and supportive housing options. One type of housing plays a particularly important role for individuals with experiences of incarceration in a critical period –transitional housing for people exiting provincial correctional institutions. Transitional housing in this context refers to short-term housing with supports to prepare individuals for long-term housing. Ontario used to have dedicated transitional housing for people exiting provincial corrections – provincial halfway houses – until they were shuttered in the 1990s. Other provinces, such as Quebec, still have these housing resources. Dedicated transitional housing provides structure, support and supervision, allowing for a more gradual re-entry, which is often critical to stabilize individuals post-release and promote housing readiness. For people who have cycled through homelessness and justice involvement, gaps in life skills can create a barrier to accessing and maintaining housing. Transitional housing for this population provides access to health care, food, counselling, substance use supports and employment services as well as supports to build conflict resolution skills, cleanliness, money and time management capabilities. It's also fundamental to interrupting the often-cyclical nature of release, re-arrest and re-incarceration that characterizes some of the most high-need populations who intersect with the justice system.

There is an urgent need in the province for investment into existing supportive housing and to add new units to meet the growing demand. When considering provincial strategies to adequately house Ontarians, it is crucial to consider the unique needs of individuals with justice involvement, particularly in the critical period post release from incarceration. Transitional housing provides stabilization for people transitioning from corrections to increase the likelihood of following conditions, attending probation and following through on reintegration plans and referrals. It also connects individuals to employment supports, health services and other key programs to interrupt the cycle of homelessness and incarceration and ultimately improve community safety.

Key recommendation:

1. **Invest in dedicated transitional housing** for individuals released from remand and sentences served in provincial correctional institutions. Investments should include capital costs and operational funding for community agencies to provide supervision services, health and social supports.

Bail Supervision and Residential Programs

Bail verification and supervision programs (BVSP) play a crucial role in Ontario's bail system by providing supervision and connection to supports to address underlying criminogenic factors. BVSPs provide a cost-effective alternative to pre-trial detention and have a proven track record of ensuring individuals return to court and comply with the conditions of their release. Caseworkers not only monitor compliance with conditions but also connect people with essential services, such as housing, mental health counselling, substance use treatment, and employment resources. These interventions help to reduce the likelihood of reoffending and support reintegration. BVSPs collaborate with other community agencies to create a holistic support network for individuals on bail.

Investments into BVSP in 2024 allowed the program to continue to operate without service disruptions considering some locations were previously operating at a significant deficit. With critical pressures addressed, there is now an opportunity to enhance the BVSP to increase capacity and respond to growing case complexity. As issues with mental health, substance use and homelessness intensity, the BVSP must be adequately resourced with specialized staff to meet evolving client needs. Continued enhancements to the BVSP will allow more eligible Ontarians to be appropriately supervised in the community. In addition to easing the burden on the overstrained correctional system, the BVSP's comprehensive supervision and wraparound supports help reduce the risk of breaches and offending, ultimately advancing public safety.

In some jurisdictions in the Province, BVSP providers have funding to offer "bail beds" -- residential facilities that provide shelter and supervision for individuals without a fixed address. These beds serve BVSP clients who were experiencing homelessness when charged, those who lost their housing, or individuals unable to return to previous accommodations due to release conditions. If these beds were not available, these individuals would cost the province significant dollars as a result of prolonged detention. Finding suitable residences or residential sureties for individuals who could be safely released into the community also results in expensive and unproductive delays in our criminal courts. Providing supervised housing, that are not shelters but that are supportive and structured establishments, helps stabilize populations who have more complex needs. Residential bail programs also offer enhanced supervision to ensure compliance with conditions and reduce the risk of offending. Beyond promoting public safety, these programs represent significant cost savings for the province, as bail beds operate at a fraction of the cost of provincial correctional beds. Additionally, clients benefit from access to community-based programming and mental health supports, fostering long-term stability.

Residential bail programs currently exist in some areas of the province including Ottawa and Thunder Bay. In areas of the province without residential bail programs, BVSP workers cite lack of housing as a priority issue for clients hindering individual progress and compliance with their conditions. The current model for bail beds could be expanded to other areas of the province relatively quickly. With appropriate resources, it could also be tailored to suit the needs of individuals deemed higher risk, such as those charged with gang and firearm-related offenses. A model with more intensive staffing levels

and additional supports for clients deemed higher risk, would provide an effective, individualized alternative to incarceration in provincial correctional facilities.

Key recommendations:

1. **Invest in BVSPs** to increase capacity and enhance the programs to meet heightened levels of severity and need. Expanding the BVSP through improved staffing ratios, more intensive case management and enhanced mental health and substance use support will allow for more efficient releases and improved individual outcomes, translating to cost savings and improved public safety.
2. Invest in an **expansion of bail bed programs** into communities across the province. With adequate investment, bail beds could also take on higher risk clients, saving the province in costs related to correctional stays and improving individual outcomes.

Pre-Charge Screening

Over 50% of criminal charges in Ontario are withdrawn, stayed, dismissed or discharged. Out of a total of 95,865 decisions made in 2022-23, 53,659 were stayed or withdrawn⁴. This means half of charges laid ultimately did not meet the threshold for prosecution or were resolved through diversionary measures. Cases that are later dropped for not meeting the charge screening threshold represent a drain on court resources. Additionally, the experience of being charged only to have those charges withdrawn can result in serious negative consequences to individuals including pre-trial custody, financial hardship from income or employment loss, housing loss, legal expenses, reduced employment prospects, and harm to their reputation.

Ontario's post-charge screening method contrasts with pre-charge screening models implemented in other provinces such as British Columbia, Quebec and New Brunswick. These jurisdictions require prosecutors to review charges before they are formally laid. This proactive approach significantly reduces the frequencies with which charges are withdrawn or stayed. For instance, in British Columbia, only 32% of criminal cases in 2022-2023 ended with charges being withdrawn or stayed- far lower than Ontario's 56%.⁵

Changing the charge screening processes in Ontario can address these inefficiencies. Currently, Crown prosecutors in Ontario review charges after a person is charged with a crime by the police,

⁴ Government of Canada, Statistics Canada. (2024, October 3). *Adult criminal courts, number of cases and charges by type of decision*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3510002701&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.7&pickMembers%5B1%5D=2.2&pickMembers%5B2%5D=3.1&pickMembers%5B3%5D=4.1&pickMembers%5B4%5D=5.2&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2013+%2F+2014&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2022+%2F+2023&referencePeriods=20130101%2C20220101>

⁵ Brockbank, N., & MacMillan, S. (2024, December 2). Ontario mulling having prosecutors approve criminal charges before police lay them. CBC. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ontario-prosecutors-police-laying-criminal-charges-1.7397189#:~:text=Criminologist%20Christopher%20Williams%20recommended%20seven,those%20criteria%2C%20prosecutors%20withdraw%20it>.

evaluating whether prosecution aligns with the public interest and if the charge has a reasonable prospect of conviction. Charges may be withdrawn for a number of reasons, but by using more efficient means to assess them earlier in the process through pre-screening practices, there is a potential for the saving of considerable time, money and individual impact.

A pre-charge screening model is different from the model of embedded Crowns currently in operation at select police divisions, where Crown Counsel is made more accessible to police officers to provide guidance around bail decisions, but approval of charges is not required. However, embedded Crown programs demonstrate the benefit of early Crown involvement. From a survey conducted at 51 Division on the program, 65% of respondents said the project prevented them from laying a charge they would have otherwise laid, and all surveyed officers recommended the project to continue.⁶

Switching from a post-charge to a pre-charge screening model in Ontario could yield several benefits. It would prevent charges that fail to meet prosecutorial standards from clogging up the court system. This would enhance efficiency, reduce court backlogs and free up resources for more serious cases. A pilot project of the pre-charge screening model was conducted in Alberta by the RCMP. In this pilot project, it was found that the screening process reduced the number of charges laid by 29% and commenced cases by 21%.⁷ The Alberta RCMP has since announced the expansion of the pre-charge model across the province.⁸ By ensuring that only charges that meet the prosecutorial threshold are laid, the significant costs and human impacts of charging and incarcerating an individual necessarily will also be avoided.

Key recommendations:

1. **Ontario should introduce pre-charge screening protocols, starting in three jurisdictions for a 6-month period followed by an evaluation to assess impact.** A protocol should be established in those jurisdictions where police officers carry out an investigation and propose charges based on the evidence they identify. This would be submitted to Crown attorneys who would then confirm charges before they are laid. The project should be evaluated by examining any changes to the number of charges later withdrawn, the number of charges laid, court time spent on hearing the charges and assessments of the protocol from the perspectives of police, courts and corrections.

⁶ Toronto Police Service. (2024). *From impact to Action: Final report into anti-Black racism by the Toronto Police Service: Chapter 6 - Arrests, Charges, and Artificial Intelligence: Gaps in policies, procedures and practices*. <https://www3.ohrc.on.ca/en/framework-change-address-systemic-racism-policing#:~:text=%5B14%5D%20This%20data%20strongly%20suggests,some%20of%20these%20negative%20outcomes.&text=Ontario's%20Crown%20Prosecution%20Manual%20includes,in%20the%20criminal%20justice%20system>.

⁷ Toronto Police Service. (2024). *From impact to Action: Final report into anti-Black racism by the Toronto Police Service: Chapter 6 - Arrests, Charges, and Artificial Intelligence: Gaps in policies, procedures and practices*. <https://www3.ohrc.on.ca/en/framework-change-address-systemic-racism-policing#:~:text=%5B14%5D%20This%20data%20strongly%20suggests,some%20of%20these%20negative%20outcomes.&text=Ontario's%20Crown%20Prosecution%20Manual%20includes,in%20the%20criminal%20justice%20system>.

⁸ Government of Canada, Royal Canadian Mounted Police. (2024, January 11). *Alberta RCMP moving towards a pre-charge approval model*. Royal Canadian Mounted Police. <https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/news/2024/alberta-rcmp-moving-a-pre-charge-approval-model>

2. Ontario should also begin to **track and publicly report on the reasons charges are withdrawn or stayed to develop a better understanding** of when why and at which point in the court system charges are dropped.

Base Funding Increase for the Community Justice Sector

Agencies in the community justice sector, including local JHS offices, provide critical services including housing supports, employment services, life skills programming, peer mentorship, reintegration services, mental health services and substance use support. These programs serve individuals of all genders and ages and focus on prevention, reintegration and intervention.

Adequate funding for community justice programs is essential for the police, courts, correctional system and Justice serving agencies like the John Howard Society as they struggle to meet the increasing demand for services within the constraints of existing resources. Rising costs due to inflation and stagnant or marginal funding increases exacerbate this challenge. Current base funding levels leave agencies unable to effectively compete in the labour force. Given the complexity of client needs, staff must possess significant qualifications and expertise to deliver effective programs. Yet, the funding available for salaries is insufficient to attract and retain candidates with the required skills. These recruitment and retention difficulties lead to longer waitlists for services and contribute to burnout among remaining staff.

A well-supported community justice sector not only improves outcomes for individuals but also helps to reduce offending and hospitalization rates, ultimately saving the province significant costs associated with incarceration and emergency services.

Key recommendation:

1. The provincial government should **issue a meaningful increase in base funding** to transfer payment agencies delivering community services on behalf of the youth and justice ministries to enable them to recruit and retain the skilled workforce necessary to deliver high quality services to Ontarians.