

Draft Aylmer-Elgin-St. Thomas Community Safety and Well-Being Plan Update – June 2025

Introduction

The Aylmer-Elgin-St. Thomas Community Safety and Well-Being (CSWB) Plan was created to make our communities safer, healthier, and more connected. It brings together local organizations, leaders, and residents to address complex issues that no single group can solve alone—such as housing, mental health, safety, and addiction. Rather than just reacting to problems after they occur, this plan focuses on prevention and building stronger systems of support.

The CSWB Plan covers all of Elgin County, including St. Thomas, Aylmer, and surrounding municipalities. It was developed with input from over 150 community members and organizations during 2020 and 2021, using local data and feedback to set shared priorities. Now, four years later, we are reviewing the plan to celebrate progress, reflect on challenges, and plan for the future.

Legislative Background

Under the Community Safety and Policing Act, 2019, Ontario municipalities must develop and maintain a Community Safety and Well-Being (CSWB) Plan. These plans aim to address key social issues affecting safety, health, and well-being through collaboration across sectors like housing, mental health, education, policing, and social services.

As required by Ontario Regulation 414/23, municipalities must:

- Publish their CSWB Plan online within 30 days of adoption.
- Review and, if necessary, revise the plan every four years.

For plans adopted before July 1, 2021, the first review must be completed before July 1, 2025. This review provides an opportunity to reflect on achievements, address challenges, and refresh the plan to meet emerging needs.

Provincial Framework

Ontario's provincial framework for CSWB planning highlights four key strategies for keeping communities safe and healthy:

1. **Social Development** – Addressing root causes of problems like poverty and inequality by bringing people and services together.
2. **Prevention** – Identifying and reducing risks early to prevent problems from escalating into crises.

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3. **Risk Intervention** – Quickly addressing immediate risks to prevent harm.
4. **Incident Response** – Responding to emergencies and urgent situations (e.g., police or emergency services).

The goal is to focus more on social development and prevention, reducing the need for emergency interventions.

Local Focus Areas (2021–2024)

The Aylmer-Elgin-St. Thomas CSWB Plan focuses on five key areas, chosen through data analysis and community feedback:

1. **Education and Skills Development**

Many people in the region lack a high school diploma or the training needed for local jobs. The plan supports lifelong learning, job readiness, digital literacy, and alternative learning paths to help people of all ages gain skills for life and work.

2. **Housing Security**

Many residents struggle to find or maintain safe, affordable housing, particularly in rural areas. This part of the plan focuses on increasing affordable housing options, reducing homelessness, and improving support for those in housing crisis.

3. **Mental Health and Well-Being**

Access to mental health services is limited, especially for those in crisis or experiencing homelessness. The plan aims to expand access to mental health supports, reduce wait times, raise awareness, and promote community wellness.

4. **Public Safety**

While crime is generally low, residents desire a greater sense of safety, especially in downtown areas. The plan includes actions to improve traffic safety, prevent property crime, support youth, and build partnerships to address social issues before they lead to crime.

5. **Substance Use and Addiction**

Substance use, including opioid overdoses, is a growing concern, particularly in St. Thomas. The plan supports a four-pillar approach: prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and justice, aiming to improve services, coordination, and public awareness while reducing harm.

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Summary of Integration Table Activities (2021–2024)

The CSWB Integration Table has been instrumental in bringing together local government leaders, service providers, and community organizations to keep the Aylmer-Elgin-St. Thomas CSWB Plan on track. The Table met regularly to share updates, coordinate efforts, and respond to emerging issues.

Each meeting featured roundtable updates from five key Action Tables:

- Education and Skills Development
- Housing Security
- Mental Health and Well-Being
- Public Safety
- Substance Use and Addiction

The Integration Table provided a forum for open dialogue, collaboration, and accountability.

Evaluation of Key Achievements

1. **Coordination Across Sectors**

The Integration Table successfully created stronger links between local government, non-profits, police, health services, and housing providers, reducing duplication of efforts and supporting joint projects.

2. **Housing Progress**

Significant progress was made in housing:

- Indwell supportive housing projects moved forward, resulting in about 100 new social housing units
- The community achieved functional zero for veteran homelessness.
- About 18–20 households are placed into housing each month.

3. **Mental Health and Public Safety Collaboration**

The Mobile Outreach and Support Team (MOST) in St. Thomas and the Mobile Crisis Response Team (MCRT) in Elgin County and Aylmer expanded their services, partnering police with mental health clinicians to respond to people in crisis.

- St. Thomas Police added a new Community Resource Officer Unit.
- CMHA Thames Valley Addiction and Mental Health Services (TVAMHS) launched new withdrawal management and youth addiction services.

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- These efforts contributed to a significant drop in local crime severity from 2021 to 2024:
 - 13.57% reduction in the Crime Severity Index in St. Thomas
 - 16.18% reduction in Aylmer
 - 20.08% reduction in Elgin County

4. Substance Use Strategy

The Drug and Alcohol Strategy Steering Committee merged with the Elgin Mental Health and Addictions Network. Their work focuses on prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and justice. Elgin and Oxford Counties are also working together to bring in the Planet Youth model, which helps prevent substance use among youth.

Why the Five CSWB Priority Areas Still Matter

1. Education and Skills Development

The City of St. Thomas and the County of Elgin's economy is undergoing a major transformation, driven by growth in advanced manufacturing and the arrival of new industries tied to the electric vehicle (EV) supply chain. Between 2021 and 2025, manufacturing jobs in Elgin grew by 9.6%, outpacing both Ontario and Canada, which saw 5.2% growth (Lightcast, Q1 2025; *Lightcast Analyst PDF Export – Manufacturing: Elgin (in Ontario)*, 2025).

One of the most significant developments is the construction of a Volkswagen EV battery plant in St. Thomas, led by PowerCo, a Volkswagen subsidiary. The plant is expected to create 3,000 direct jobs and thousands more within the supply chain and related to the increase service demand to meet the needs of the projected population growth.

While the community continues to struggle to meet the demand for healthcare and childcare professions, PowerCo and its suppliers will bring entirely new types of jobs to the region, including roles in battery technology, automation, and clean energy manufacturing—positions that require new skill sets, specialized training, and technical education. While these jobs offer strong wages—e.g., \$69,126/year in motor vehicle parts manufacturing and \$70,671/year in basic chemical manufacturing—local employers are already struggling to fill roles due to a shortage of candidates with the necessary credentials, technical skills, or certifications (Lightcast, Q1 2025; *Regional Comparison by Industry*, 2025).

To avoid leaving residents behind as these opportunities grow, the CSWB Plan highlights the need to:

- Collaborate with employers and educators to align training with industry demands
- Support the skilled trades and apprenticeship system

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- Expand digital literacy and other job readiness programs
- Address barriers impacting labour market outcomes of youth, immigrants, and other groups

By focusing on education and skills development, we can ensure that Elgin’s workforce is prepared for the future and that local residents are positioned to benefit from these transformative investments.

2. **Housing Security**

The Elgin Census Division—which includes both Elgin County and the City of St. Thomas—is experiencing rapid and significant growth, driven in part by major developments such as the Volkswagen EV battery plant. This growth is placing increased pressure on the local housing system and making housing security more urgent than ever. The region’s population is projected to reach 141,600 by 2051.

Within this overall growth, the City of St. Thomas is expected to grow from 44,000 residents in 2021 to 79,500 by 2051, with the number of households increasing by more than 15,000 to a total of 33,400. Elgin County municipalities are also anticipating higher housing demand. By 2051, an estimated 9,230 new housing units will be needed across the County, with the most significant increases in Central Elgin, Malahide, and Aylmer.

We are already seeing signs of strain in the housing system. Without continued focus and proactive planning, these issues may worsen as growth accelerates.

Key Data on Housing Security:

- Over 1,100 households are currently on the centralized waitlist for social housing in Elgin-St. Thomas—double the number from previous years.
- Approximately 130 people are experiencing homelessness in the region at any given time, with the number fluctuating as people are housed and new cases emerge.
- Affordable rental housing remains limited, and many residents are paying more than they can afford.

Stable housing is essential for maintaining health, employment, and community connection. As our population grows, ensuring an adequate supply of housing will be essential to community well-being.

3. **Mental Health and Well-Being**

Local services continue to face high demand, long wait times, and increasing complexity of need. Programs like MOST and Withdrawal Management are critical but stretched. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted increased stress, anxiety, and isolation.

Timely, compassionate mental health care remains a pressing need.

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4. **Public Safety**

In 2024, St. Thomas Police reported 23,214 incidents—up from 22,173 in 2020. Community safety programs, like the Community Resource Officer Unit, play an important role, but safety concerns in downtown areas continue to affect quality of life for residents and businesses.

5. **Substance Use and Addiction**

The community continues to face significant issues related to substance use, including overdoses and health complications. The Elgin Community Drug and Alcohol Strategy is moving into action, but gaps in services remain. People with lived experience continue to face significant challenges in accessing care and support.

Areas for Growth

Despite progress, there are areas for improvement:

1. **Shift Toward Social Development and Prevention**

Most efforts have focused on responding to immediate needs. While these interventions are critical, lasting change requires a broader approach. We must also focus on addressing the root causes of issues like housing security and substance use and addiction.

To move forward effectively, we need to revisit the root causes of the CSWB priority areas. This includes gaining a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of what is driving these issues in our community. By identifying the underlying factors, we can ensure that we are targeting the right problems and developing action plans that address the core issues.

One such factor is access to primary care. While it will not be established as a separate CSWB priority area, the role of primary care will be recognized as a key influence on population health and well-being. The Elgin Ontario Health Team (OHT) is working to integrate health and social care to better support residents. Stronger alignment between the CSWB Plan and OHT efforts will support upstream approaches, encourage joint planning and advocacy, and create opportunities for collaboration across sectors.

A shift toward social development and prevention will help create a stronger foundation for long-term community well-being, reduce pressure on emergency services, and support sustainable change across Elgin County and St. Thomas.

2. **Reimagining Action Tables**

Action Tables, which were meant to drive planning and implementation, have lost momentum. A new model may be needed to better engage partners and sustain involvement.

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3. **Deepening Community Engagement**

We are planning a CSWB Forum in Fall 2025—a day to bring together municipal councils, service providers, and residents to:

- Learn more about what community organizations do.
- Understand the most pressing local needs.
- Discuss how we can work together differently to make change.

4. **Strengthening Education and Skills Development**

With new job opportunities coming to the region, we need to focus on:

- Investing in accessible education and job training.
- Creating pathways to employment for youth, newcomers, and people facing barriers.

5. **Reframing Through a Poverty Lens**

Poverty is linked to all five focus areas. Addressing income inequality through solutions like living wages, rent supplements, fairer social assistance, and promoting a circular food economy can reduce poverty and improve well-being. For example, data from recent food security research shows how deeply poverty affects housing, mental health, education, and food access.

- 1 in 5 households in our region are food insecure.
- Food insecurity is tied to poor mental and physical health, and higher service costs.

There is also a strong connection between poverty and lack of access to primary care. People experiencing greater levels of material deprivation and income insecurity are more likely to be unattached to a regular primary care provider. This lack of access can compound challenges in other areas such as mental health, chronic illness, and housing stability. Recognizing these links reinforces the need for upstream interventions that address poverty as a root cause of many community safety and well-being issues.

6. **Better Support for Seniors**

As the population ages, more seniors in our communities are facing challenges related to isolation, mental health, fixed incomes, housing, and transportation. These issues often intersect with other CSWB priorities.

Supporting the health and mental health of seniors is essential to improving their quality of life and overall well-being. Improved access to team-based, coordinated care can help address both the physical and social needs of older adults and reduce pressures on emergency services and caregivers.

7. **Measuring Progress and Reporting Back**

We need better tools to track outcomes, report on progress, and involve the community. Through storytelling and regular updates, we can help keep everyone informed and engaged.

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Conclusion

The first four years of the Aylmer-Elgin-St. Thomas Community Safety and Well-Being Plan have laid a strong foundation for collaboration and progress across the region. While important strides have been made—especially in housing, mental health response, and cross-sector partnerships—this review shows there is still much work to do.

As we move forward, we must shift our focus upstream—addressing root causes like poverty, building stronger systems of support, and preparing our workforce for the opportunities ahead. Renewing the CSWB Plan is not just a legislative requirement—it is a chance to re-engage our community, refresh our approach, and recommit to building a safer, healthier, and more connected region for everyone.

This next phase will require new energy, bold thinking, and stronger partnerships. Restructuring parts of our approach will help us better understand and promote community safety and well-being. Together, we can ensure the plan continues to reflect the evolving needs of our community and delivers meaningful, lasting impact.

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Appendix A: Public Safety Update – St. Thomas Police Service

1. Increase Road Safety

- Motor vehicle collisions in St. Thomas increased by **88%** in 2024, with **2 fatalities** recorded.
- In response, the **STPS Traffic Management Unit (TMU)** increased staffing to **three full-time officers**.
- STPS continues to collaborate with **OPP and Aylmer Police Service** on joint enforcement efforts.
- Enhanced traffic stops and warnings reflect a **proactive approach** to improving driver and pedestrian safety.

2. Educate the Public on Road Safety Enforcement

- STPS continues to implement **community policing strategies** that align traffic enforcement projects with community concerns.

3. Decrease Impaired Driving

- In 2024, impaired driving offenses involving alcohol decreased by **6.3%**, and offenses involving both alcohol and drugs decreased by **8.1%**.
- STPS increased **RIDE checkpoints by 108%**, **roadside alcohol screenings by 84%**, and **drug field sobriety testing by 20%**.
- These efforts have contributed to measurable reductions in impaired driving.

4. Promote Wellness and Safety in Downtown St. Thomas

- A noticeable reduction in downtown disorder has been observed, attributed to collaboration with **STESS, The Inn, and CMHA**.
- The **Community Resource Unit (CRU)** continues to operate from the **STPS Satellite Office at 584-B Talbot Street**, with staffing to increase from 6 to **8 Special Constables in 2025**.
- Emphasis remains on addressing **social and health-related issues**, allowing uniformed officers to focus on core policing duties.

5. Reduce Victimization from Property Crime

- In St. Thomas (2023–2024):
 - **Non-violent Crime Severity Index** decreased by **20.09%**
 - **Break and Enters**: ↓ **52.7%**

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- **Theft/Possession of Stolen Property:** ↓ 12%
- **Arson:** ↓ 39%
- **Mischief:** ↓ 23%
- **Cyber frauds** are increasing. STPS is actively developing resources to address evolving digital crime trends.

6. Encourage Youth Engagement

- Following a 55% increase in police responses to schools over three years (20% involving violence), **TVDSB and LDCSB** have reinstated police officers in schools.
 - STPS is working with school boards to finalize policy and will announce a **liaison officer role in Fall 2025**.
- New programs launched in 2024 include:
 - **“First Responders 4 Kids”** – evening engagement at JTCC gym.
 - **SADER Youth Engagement Program**, which promotes internet safety, critical thinking, and positive extracurricular engagement.
 - **VIP Program** and **Boredom Busters** events continue to promote youth development and positive relationships with police.

7. Cultivate Community Relationships

- STPS actively engages with local leaders, businesses, and organizations to strengthen community resilience and align public safety strategies.

8. Increase Street Outreach Presence

- The **Community Mobilization Unit**, launched in 2024, includes one officer dedicated to crime prevention and CSWB collaboration.
- The **CRU** (Special Constables), **MOST team (with CMHA)**, and a new **STPS-STECH partnership project** (to be announced Spring 2025) are strengthening justice-health connections.

9. Strengthen Victim Assistance through Integrated Response

- STPS has expanded its **Criminal Investigations focus** on **Intimate Partner and Gender-Based Violence**.
- Commitment to responding to violence against women, hate crimes, and mental health-related incidents continues through **ongoing staff training** and innovation.

10. Increase Awareness of Human Trafficking

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- STPS has received **\$1.9 million in provincial funding (2019–2025)** to support:
 - Public education and police training
 - Awareness campaigns
 - Specialized multi-agency projects
 - Investigator salary supports
- STPS has significantly expanded capacity to address **all forms of human trafficking**.
- Funding will conclude **March 31, 2025**.

11. Advance Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

- The **Community Inclusion Council**, created in 2023, now includes **eight community members** from diverse backgrounds.
- The Council advises the Chief of Police on community safety and inclusion.
- STPS also participates in the **St. Thomas-Elgin Local Immigration Partnership** group.

Ongoing Challenges in Public Safety and Policing

- **Social and health-related issues**, though not core policing functions, require ongoing police involvement and coordinated community support.
- **Recruitment challenges** persist as the population of St. Thomas and surrounding areas continues to grow.
- **Training and equipment costs** associated with compliance under the **Community Safety and Policing Act (CSPA)** are significant.
- **Sustainable funding** through grants and local investment is essential to maintain current service levels.
- **Police mental health resiliency** support and resources are critical for long-term staff well-being and service effectiveness.

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Appendix B: Public Safety Update – Aylmer Police Service

The Aylmer Police Service (APS) has actively supported the Aylmer-Elgin-St. Thomas Community Safety and Well-Being Plan through operational activities, partnerships, and a commitment to proactive policing. The following summary outlines how APS initiatives have contributed to the four local CSWB goals:

Goal 1: Increase Traffic Safety

- **RIDE Program Enforcement:** In 2024, APS conducted 166 RIDE checks.
- **Impaired Driving Enforcement:** APS laid 32 charges and arrested 28 individuals for impaired driving in 2024.
- **Collaborative Enforcement:** APS continues to partner with Elgin OPP and the St. Thomas Police Service on joint enforcement initiatives, including traffic safety operations.

Goal 2: Enhance People's Wellness and Sense of Well-Being

- **Visible Police Presence in Public Spaces:** Officers completed 643 hours of beat patrol and 44 hours of bicycle patrol to increase visibility and enhance the perception of safety in Aylmer's downtown and public areas.
- **Crime Reduction:** Aylmer experienced a 20.8% decrease in its Crime Severity Index between 2022 and 2024, indicating progress in overall community safety and well-being.
- **Community Engagement:** In 2024, officers participated in various community events and maintained a visible presence to build trust and strengthen the sense of community safety.

Goal 3: Encourage Youth to Actively Participate in Building a Healthier Community

Work to Date:

- **School Visits and Educational Presentations:** APS engaged with youth through school-based outreach, including classroom visits and lectures, to support early education on safety and responsible decision-making.
- **Relationship Building:** Through community service activities and presence at local events, APS has maintained a connection with youth and families.

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Goal 4: Cultivate Partnerships to Create Resilient and Safe Communities

Work to Date:

- **Mobile Crisis Response Team (MCRT):** APS participates in the regional MCRT program alongside Elgin OPP and mental health clinicians to respond to calls involving individuals in crisis. This initiative strengthens cross-sector collaboration and supports diversion from the justice system.
 - **Community Safety and Well-Being Integration Table:** APS is an active participant in the Aylmer-Elgin-St. Thomas CSWB Integration Table, contributing to coordinated efforts across sectors to address complex social challenges and support shared community safety goals.
 - **Partnership Approach:** APS works with local organizations and community groups to address the root causes of problems and promote long-term well-being.
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Ongoing Commitment

The Aylmer Police Service remains committed to advancing the goals of the Community Safety and Well-Being Plan through continued enforcement, prevention, and collaborative initiatives. APS will:

- Continue supporting mental health response through MCRT.
- Maintain proactive road safety and impaired driving enforcement.
- Expand community and youth engagement efforts.
- Strengthen partnerships with local agencies to address the root causes of social issues.

Aylmer Police Service is a dedicated partner in building a safer, healthier, and more connected community for all residents.