



Building Foundations that Last

2026 Community Report



Uplifting Stories from our Community

The People Behind the Work

A look back at 2025-2026 in photos



Building Foundations that Last

A Message from our Leaders



At Starling Community Services (formerly Lutherwood), we know that lasting change begins with a strong foundation. This year's theme, Building Foundations that Last, reflects what we see every day: when people have access to the right support at the right time, they can move forward with confidence, stability, and hope.

In the pages ahead, you will meet individuals and families whose journeys remind us why this work matters. You'll read about Kayla, who found safety and stability, and returned for support when life changed again. Jasmine, who once turned to us as a youth and now gives back to others. Jen, whose children found the understanding and tools they needed to thrive. And Debbie, who rebuilt her career and now helps open doors for others. Each story reflects the power of trust, consistency, and community.

These outcomes are only possible because of the people behind this work. To our dedicated staff, compassionate volunteers, generous donors, committed partners, and the many individuals and families who place their trust in us – thank you. Your support makes it possible to build that all important foundation that strengthens lives today and builds a more resilient community for the future.



Omar McLean
Chair, Board of Governors



John Colangeli, PhD
CEO, Starling Community Services



starlingcs.ca

Children's Mental Health Services

131,180

hours of service were delivered, supporting **1698** children and youth through our mental health programs.

3,525

connections to Front Door directed families to the right mental health supports.

632

hours of individualized care was provided to each child in our most intensive mental health programs.

Year One: Birchlands Changes Lives

Birchlands Step Up Step Down proudly marks the completion of its first successful year, demonstrating what is possible when compassionate care meets urgent community needs. Since opening in January 2025, Birchlands has grown from two to seven beds, supporting 25 youth so far with complex mental health needs through a unique Step Up Step Down model. Over three-quarters of participants completed the program, with low hospital readmission rates and strong positive reviews from youth and caregivers alike. By freeing up inpatient beds and preventing hospital admissions, Birchlands has strengthened the local mental health system and laid a solid foundation for long-term impact in our community.

Front Door Brand Refresh

As Front Door to Child & Youth Mental Health prepares to move into our new home at 67 King Street East in Kitchener, we have also undergone an exciting brand refresh. Front Door knows the importance of easy visibility and access to the youth we serve, so we have launched a new website complete with a new logo, video and Instagram page. All of this to better serve the community as your starting point for accessing children and youth mental health services and supports across Waterloo Region. Visit us at www.frontdoormentalhealth.com.

Barrier-Free Substance Use Support for Youth

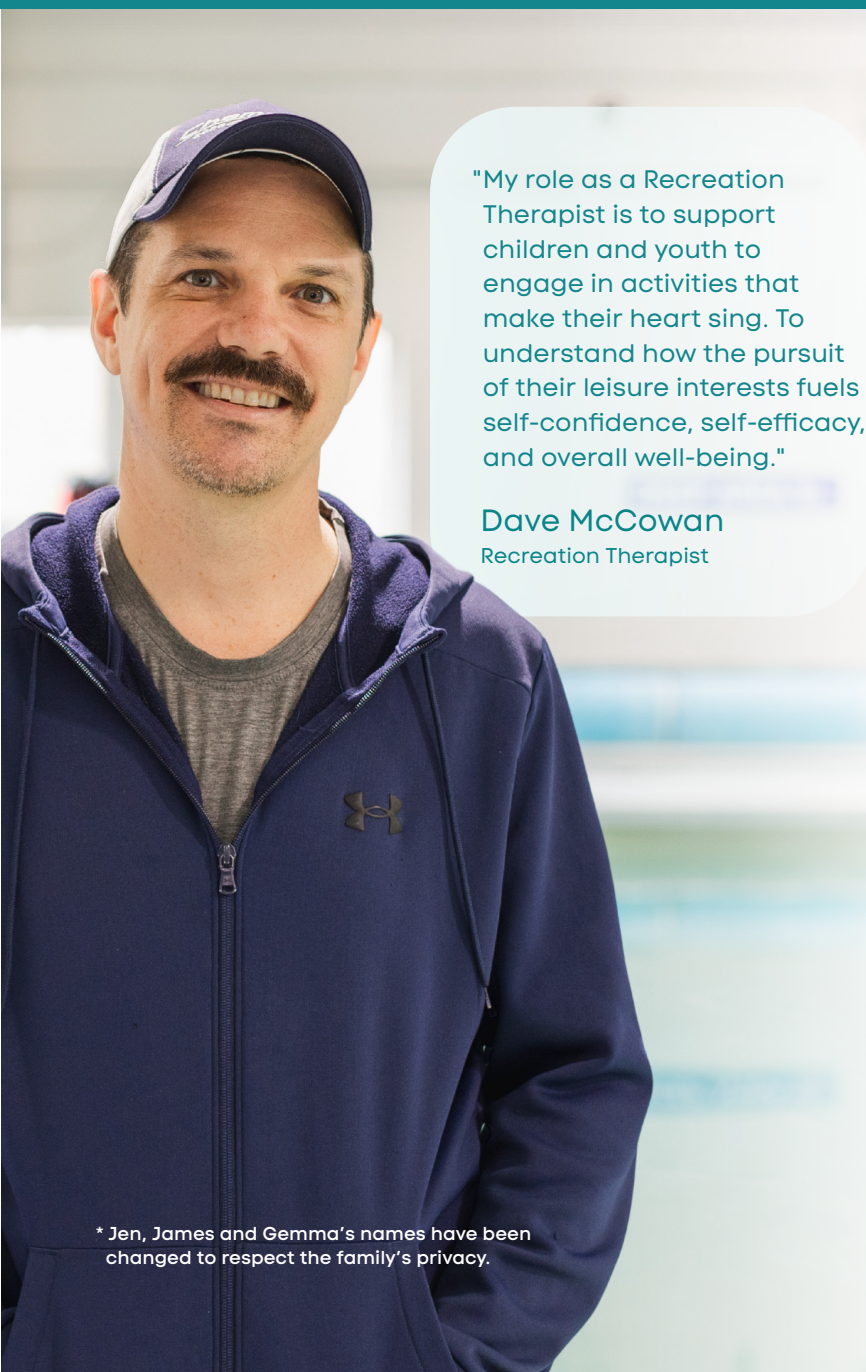
A year after launching, Starling's Substance Use services are helping more youth access the support they need, barrier-free. Starling now has dedicated substance use clinicians whose services are integrated across Safe Haven Youth Services, our Children's Mental Health Centre and our Community Mental Health Services so young people can connect in familiar, trusted spaces without having to navigate separate systems. This seamless approach helps break down the barriers to substance use support, build relationships first, and provide a continuum of care that supports young people throughout their journey toward wellbeing.



Brittany O'Beirn

Children's Mental Health Supervisor

"Being a Starling employee has been a life-altering experience. Being able to say with absolute certainty, 'you are making a difference in the lives of children, youth and their families' is something I will forever cherish. Thank you to all the staff that support our Children's Mental Health Programs. Your passion, commitment and dedication to the clients in our community is top tier and should be celebrated every day! Thank you for all that you do and never forget the difference that you make."



"My role as a Recreation Therapist is to support children and youth to engage in activities that make their heart sing. To understand how the pursuit of their leisure interests fuels self-confidence, self-efficacy, and overall well-being."

Dave McCowan
Recreation Therapist

Jen's Story: Finally Heard, Forever Changed

After years of feeling rejected when advocating for her children, Jen finally found somewhere that listened. "These programs at Starling Mental Health Services... they're so important. They're closing the gaps so children like mine don't fall through the cracks. Having a school like Starling gives kids built differently the opportunity to thrive."

Jen recognized signs of autism and behavioural issues in her son James from a young age. "But when I took James to our family doctor, they didn't seem concerned," she explained. "I knew this was not normal." The years to come brought more dismissals from James' doctors and teachers. Then, Jen called Here 24/7, which connected her with Starling.

By then, James finally had an official diagnosis that included autism and ADHD from a new, supportive pediatrician. At Starling's Day Treatment program, that support continued. "I never felt judged or like I couldn't ask for help, no matter what the issue was," Jen explained. "I am so blessed to everyone who was a part of our Starling story."

Jen especially appreciated our Recreational Therapy program, with Dave, our Recreation Therapist. "James was in sports before, but he would never participate. Once he and Dave started doing one-on-one sessions, we saw him flourish," she said emotionally. "Suddenly, he's playing basketball and football with other kids. And he wasn't just playing, he was learning how to play. How to become a team player. That was huge for him."

While Jen was seeing amazing growth in James, her older daughter, Gemma, was struggling in school with similar mental health diagnoses. "We felt so bad that we had missed it in her, because she was suffering quietly."

Luckily for their family though, Jen knew exactly where to turn. After James graduated from Starling, Gemma enrolled, and came out of her shell with a new passion for drumming in Music Therapy.

"I've been blown away at the progress made in such a short amount of time for both of my children," Jen concluded. "Those gaps I once saw have nearly vanished. We have so many tools in our toolbox now to say, 'we can do this,' and I thank Starling every day for that."

* Jen, James and Gemma's names have been changed to respect the family's privacy.

Employment Services

3,737

clients registered to receive assistance from Employment Services.

465

individuals attended hiring events, opening doors to new opportunities.

946

skill-building experiences helped job seekers grow with confidence.

897

financial supports provided to job seekers to help break down barriers to finding employment.

Opportunities for a Fair Chance

This year, Starling Employment Services partnered with the Solicitor General and local Probation and Parole offices to create a referral pathway for their clients to access our employment services more quickly and easily. Through personalized guidance, skill development, and strong employer partnerships, participants have gained confidence, secured sustainable employment, and strengthened their sense of purpose. As a result, one in three of these clients who faced substantial barriers to employment were able to find jobs with the assistance of our program.

Breaking Financial Barriers to Help Job Seekers

As the cost of living continues to rise, it becomes increasingly difficult for job seekers to afford necessary training, work equipment, clothing and other supports needed to begin a new job. This past year, the Employment Ontario (EmployNext) Program was able to assist 1,396 clients with new work clothing, bus passes, interpreter costs, job placements and other supports needed to set them up for successful employment.

Newcomer Career Support Program

Starling is working to meet the growing employment needs of newcomers by supporting their integration into the workforce and community. The increased demand for support is reflected in the Newcomer Career Support program reaching its annual goal for the number of clients served three months early. This program serves all newcomers, including internationally trained professionals and youth aged 15 to 30, creating pathways to meaningful employment and long-term economic stability. Participants build confidence, gain recognition of their skills, and pursue opportunities aligned with their experience and goals. The impact has a ripple effect beyond the individual. It strengthens families, reduces isolation, and fosters social and economic integration so newcomers can feel a stronger sense of belonging in their new community.



Fnan Micheal
Program Assistant

"As a refugee, coming to Canada was a dream and a new beginning. Like many newcomers, I faced difficulties finding employment. Through Starling, I received not only employment support from dedicated staff, but encouragement, direction, and a sense of belonging. This journey is more than a personal achievement. It is a full circle moment. As a Program Assistant, I now support youth and newcomers who are walking a path similar to mine, helping them build confidence and create new opportunities. My story is a reflection of what is possible with resilience, community support, and the opportunity to belong."

"She's not just a leader; she's the heartbeat of the company. She's the glue. She holds everything together and keeps our business running smoothly."



Adam

Owner of Apparel
Decorating Company

Debbie's Story: From Starting Over to Opening Doors

When the small family business Debbie had devoted eight years to suddenly closed its doors, she wasn't sure she would ever find another workplace that felt like home. Starting over felt overwhelming, but determined to move forward, Debbie reached out to Starling Employment Services. "It was scary," she recalls. "But from the moment I walked through the door, I felt nothing but support."

Her resume hadn't been touched in years; it was still saved on a compact disc. With the guidance of her Employment Advisor, Debbie brought it into the modern job market. Together, they refreshed her resume and navigated the new world of online job searching.

Soon after, Debbie interviewed with Adam, owner of Apparel Decorating Company. From the moment she walked in, she felt welcomed by the kindness and close-knit team. She joined as an Embroidery Machine Operator, grateful to have found a workplace that felt like home again.

As she settled, Debbie's strong work ethic, reliability, and eagerness to learn quickly began to shine. She took on new responsibilities, supported her teammates, and became someone the entire shop could count on. With each step forward, her confidence grew.

Ten years later, Debbie is now the smiling presence behind the front counter as the company's Operations Manager. She oversees daily operations while helping to shape the same positive, supportive culture that first drew her in. "She's not just a leader; she's the heartbeat of the company. She's the glue," Adam says. "She holds everything together and keeps our business running smoothly."

Today, Debbie's journey has come full circle. Now on the other side of the hiring table, she works with Adam to welcome new team members through Starling's Employment Services. Many of their current staff began their journeys the same way she did. For Debbie, it's about more than filling roles – it's about opening doors, just as one was opened for her.

Reflecting on her experience, Debbie hopes others will take that same first step. "Starling Employment Services isn't just there to help you find a job," she says. "They help you become the best version of yourself and give you the confidence to succeed."

Housing Services

12,665

calls and walk-ins were received by our Housing Resource Centres.

398

households received support to maintain their housing from our Home-Based Support Program.

1,292

households accessed rent fund loans or grants, enabling them to secure or maintain stable housing.

409

households were housed out of an experience of homelessness.

The First Step Toward Stability

Last year, 12,665 community members turned to our Housing Resource Centres for support during times of housing instability. These centres, located in Kitchener and Cambridge, play a critical role in preventing homelessness by providing supports to individuals and families seeking resources to maintain their housing or find a new place to call home. Our Housing Advisors work to address individual housing barriers, offer housing search support, and introduce resources to help people meet their housing needs.

Helping Families Find and Maintain Housing

Starling Housing Services' Families in Transition (FIT) program continues to go above and beyond to help prevent families in Waterloo Region from having an experience of homelessness. Thanks to our hardworking staff, this year, the FIT team diverted 343 families from a shelter stay and housed 79 families. The FIT team provides a vital service, connecting families to timely housing supports and services assisting Waterloo Region to maintain functional zero for chronically homeless families in our community.

"I am so grateful for the supports we received from Starling. My teen now has their own room and a safe environment. Instead of being completely consumed with staying safe and meeting our basic needs, I can finally look to the future and start rebuilding my life."

— Wendy, Client

"I reached out to Starling during a very difficult time. Our worker consistently went above and beyond for my son and I. We wouldn't be where we are today without their understanding and unwavering support. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

— Christine, Client

*Functional zero means a community has successfully lowered homelessness to a very small number, ideally zero, and has maintained that level for three consecutive months.



Tinashe Gonyora

Housing Stability Worker

"Since joining Starling, I have experienced meaningful growth while also bringing my unique African experience and background into our client-centered approach. My role in supporting individuals to secure and maintain housing has strengthened my skills in advocacy, crisis intervention and above all community engagement. The inclusive and supportive team culture at Starling is the best. The environment allows me to contribute authentically while making a positive and lasting impact in the community."



Kayla's Story: Knowing Exactly Where To Turn

Kayla is no stranger to Starling's Housing Services. Six years ago, they helped her get off the streets and into stable housing. "I was an alcoholic. I was on my deathbed. The fact that I made it out of that because of Starling is just amazing," she said gratefully.

The road to recovery and stable housing isn't just driven by Starling. Kayla was ready to commit to improving herself and her life. "My worker is an amazing person. When I first met her, I was not doing well, and I promised her that I would stay clean. I wanted to show her that she helped the right person."

Since then, Kayla has kept her promise. She still has regular check-ins with her worker, volunteers with people experiencing homelessness and struggling with addiction, and takes classes to improve life skills like cooking and swimming.

"Anytime I needed anything or had any questions, my worker was right there to answer them and point me in the right direction. Even if she was busy, whoever picked up the phone would help me or figure out where to get my answers."

But when her living situation became unsafe, Kayla worried she may relapse, but she knew exactly who to reach out to. "Starling got me into a safer living situation within the week," Kayla explained, full of emotion. "I will always have nothing but positive things to say about Starling. You guys really changed my life."

Now that she is in a safe environment again, Kayla has the time and mental health to start planning for her future.

"My dream is to open my own tattoo studio," she explained. "It's surreal, after I first got clean, I couldn't even write my own name. Now, I can free stencil my own tattoos. I never thought I would even be able to speak again, let alone write and draw."

Kayla is forever grateful for all the help she has received from Starling, but acknowledges that she also deserves credit. "As long as you show up, and show them you're trying, Starling will try. They won't give up on you as long as you don't give up on yourself."

Safe Haven Youth Services

Ensuring Youth Have a Safe Place

5,226

safe shelter nights were provided, offering stability and protection during times of crisis.

83%

occupancy of crisis and respite beds.

90%

occupancy of Life Launch Program.

Educational Pilot Program Extended

Alongside giving youth a safe place to stay and teaching them life skills, Safe Haven launched an educational support service pilot program this year. Bringing a Waterloo Region District School Board teacher to Safe Haven, the partnership has been a huge success and has been green lit to continue helping teens gain school credits or transition back to their community schools. Nearly twenty high school course credits have been obtained so far, with one student even graduating because of the program, complete with an onsite graduation ceremony. This unique program has proven to be an incredible support to youth facing educational barriers in Waterloo Region.

Improving Anti-Human Trafficking Best Practices

Starling's Anti-Human Trafficking Initiative to combat rising risks in Waterloo Region has been a success. Staff across all divisions received knowledge and prevention training, while Safe Haven Youth Services Manager, Lindsey White, has joined other community leaders in this area. Lindsey has conducted Starling trainings, is involved in external webinars and symposiums, and sits on the Waterloo Region Anti-Human Trafficking Committee. With this improved knowledge, Starling continues to deliver best practices to keep youth safe and prevent human trafficking, by providing youth with a safe place to stay and trusted staff to confide in.



Joan Alagala

Child & Youth Worker II

"I began working at Safe Haven Youth Services as a student in 2022. I enjoy my job because supporting children and youth is deeply rewarding. I get to assist youth in developing essential life skills, attending school and maintaining employment. The young people who access our services are among the most vulnerable members of society. Many come from complex backgrounds and face unique challenges that require specialized care and attention. This role allows me to meet their needs, make a meaningful difference in their lives, and contribute to their long-term well-being."

Strengthening Lives

Across Our Community

The People Powering Change

524 caring staff dedicated to strengthening lives in our community

122 volunteers & students who enhance our capacity to serve

S
22,586
people served in 2025

Reaching More Children, Youth and Families

The Future Home of FRONT (♥) DOOR

Starling Community Services is thrilled to share that we will be expanding our downtown Kitchener presence as part of our ongoing growth and commitment to serving the community.

Our new building, located at 67 King Street East, will become the future home for Front Door to Child & Youth Mental Health, our Community Mental Health Services, and the Starling Child and Family Foundation.

Situated at the corner of King Street East and Benton Street, we will be close to public transit and nearby parking, making it easier for clients, families, and community partners to access the children and youth mental health services we provide.

This investment reflects our commitment to strengthening our programs, being more accessible, and ensuring our spaces support the evolving needs of the community.

We are excited about this next chapter for Starling Community Services and appreciate the continued trust and support of the community we serve.



Because of You

Those Who Make our Work Possible

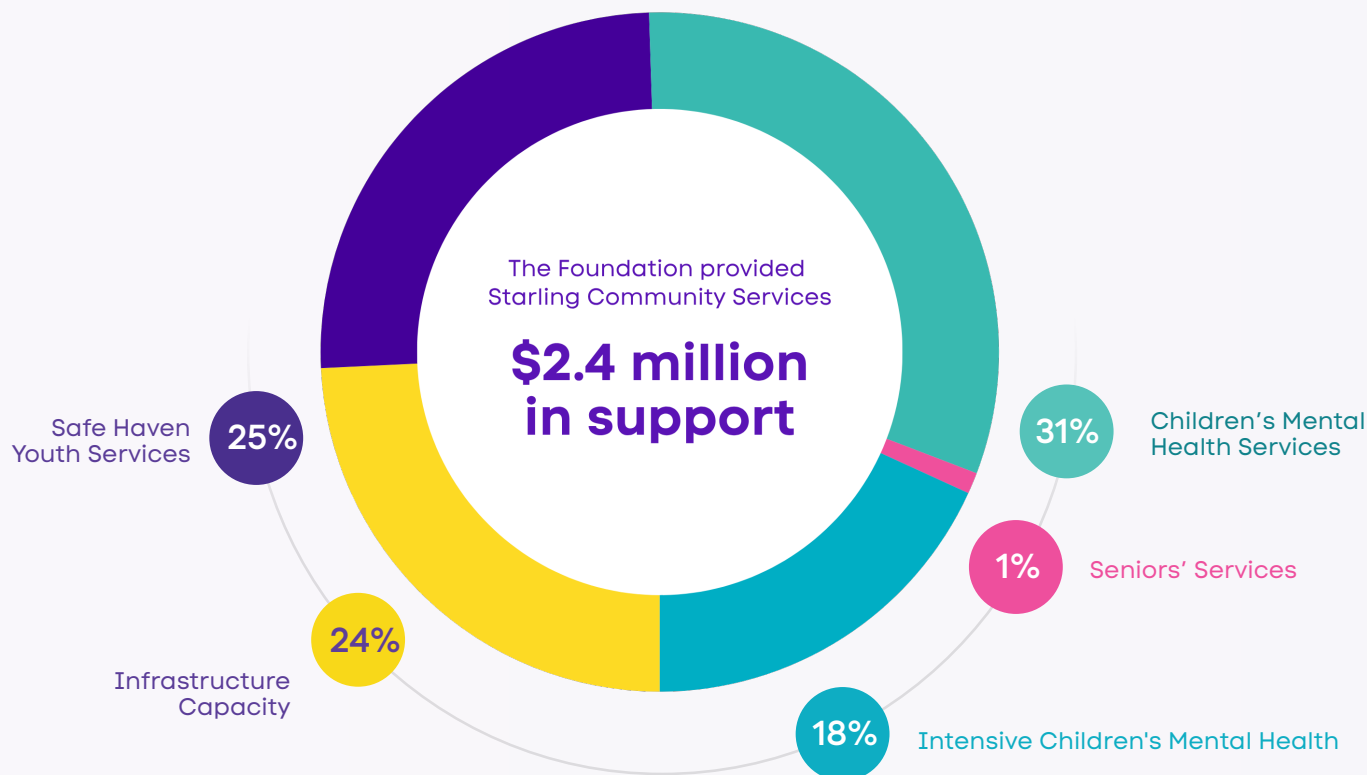
This year at Starling Child and Family Foundation, we witnessed moments that simply would not exist without our donors. Because of you, families found guidance and understanding, and young people discovered that someone truly believes in them. Thank you for standing with them, for championing brighter futures, and for making it possible for children to receive the mental health support they deserve.

1,091 generous
and caring donors

2,756 endearing
and thoughtful gifts

470 participants
attended Steps for Kids

\$77,283 in-kind
donations



**"I saw a need and I
knew I could help."**

Murray Haase, Donor

For more than forty years, Murray Haase has been a steadfast champion of children's mental wellness. A former board member and long-time donor, Murray has never wavered in his belief in the children we serve. Today, Murray remains one of our strongest and most dedicated supporters, consistently ranking among the top fundraisers at Steps for Kids. Well known for his generosity, Murray has volunteered his time and leadership across countless initiatives, helping to shape programs and opportunities that continue to change lives for the better.



Jasmine's Story: From Safe Haven to Giving Back

Today, Jasmine's life is full: a happy marriage, an 11-year-old daughter she adores, and a successful career as a licensed paralegal in a personal injury firm. But at 13, her future looked very different.

Difficult circumstances at home led Jasmine to Safe Haven Youth Shelter in downtown Kitchener. She still remembers pausing at the doors, scared and uncertain of what she would find inside or who she could trust.

Trust didn't come easily. But when she began to open up, she was met with genuine care and compassion. "For the first time in my life, they showed me that things could be different," she reflects. "They helped me see there was a better future out there for me."

That experience stayed with her. Today, she gives back to the youth who now walk through those same doors. Every Christmas Day, Jasmine, her husband, and their daughter deliver a full holiday meal along with a parcel of chocolate, cookies, and other treats. It's a tradition they've carried on since her daughter was born.

"Our annual Christmas donation to Safe Haven is one of the most meaningful parts of our holiday season," she says. "It's more than a donation, it's a way to share kindness, support youth, and honour a place that once gave me hope. I want my daughter to grow up understanding how even small acts can make a big difference."

One year, after dropping off their meal, a youth asked, "Did you actually buy all of this?" When they said yes, the youth paused and simply asked, "Why?" Jasmine understands that question. She remembers what it feels like to believe the world can be cold and lonely.

"Youth too often fall through the cracks, and that matters, because they are our future," she said. "I want them to know they're not forgotten; people believe in them and want them to succeed. That there is still joy, kindness, and hope in the world."

Each year, her family looks forward to this tradition. For Jasmine, it's proof that small acts, a meal, a treat, a moment of care, can create a sense of belonging. And sometimes, that hope can change a life forever.

Financials

Starling Community Services (2025-2026)

Revenue:

Ministry of Health, Children & Youth Mental Health	\$ 10,169,451
Ministry of Children, Community & Social Services	2,943,887
Ontario Health	1,058,904
Ministry of Labour, Training & Skills Development	666,736
Service Canada	352,597
Regional Municipality of Waterloo	14,573,996
Ministry of Health & Long-term Care	1,386,498
Serco	3,829,656
Ontario Intensive Treatment Pathway	293,213
Immigration, Refugees & Citizenship Canada	1,109,685
Seniors' Services	11,741,571
Starling Child & Family Foundation	2,431,413
Fee for Service	1,615,666
Amortization of Deferred Contributions	289,900
Realized Gain on Investments	5,218
Unrealized Gain on Investments	94,493
Miscellaneous	574,864

Total Revenue **\$ 53,137,748**

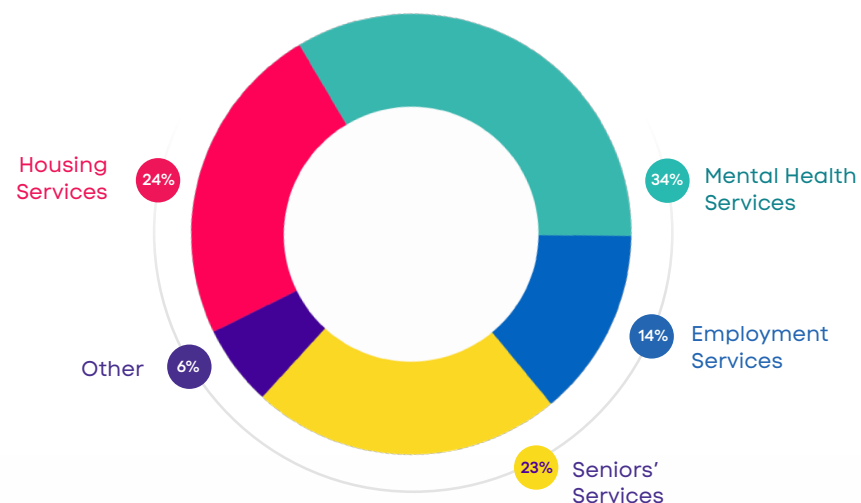
Expenses:

Salaries & Benefits	\$ 33,044,830
Cost of Goods/Services	781,236
Participant Costs	1,560,960
Travel	166,673
Staff Development	242,714
Building Occupancy	4,944,375
Purchased Services	8,609,244
Program Expenses	1,437,128
Professional Services	259,838
Advertising & Promotion	71,667
Office Expenses	1,224,151
Interest	22,756
Amortization of Capital Assets	470,578
Contribution Expense	401,947

Total Expenses **\$ 53,238,097**

Net Operating Results 2025/2026 **\$ (100,349)**

Spending by Program



Our Boards and Leadership

Starling Board of Governors

Omar McLean (Chair)
Principal, Wagner, Livock & Associates Financial Services Inc.,
Kitchener

Janine Barry
Head of Operations & Member Engagement, asrTrust

Lonnie Colter (Secretary)
Financial Services Executive (retired), Waterloo

Kevin Donovan
President, Donovan Insurance Brokers, Waterloo

Will Hunter (Vice-Chair)
Vice President, Broker, CBRE Limited, Kitchener

Jacinda Reitsma
Vice-President, Administration and Finance, University of Waterloo,
Waterloo

Richard Steinmann
Broker, RE/MAX Twin City Realty, Waterloo

Starling Child & Family Foundation, Board of Directors

Kevin Donovan (Chair)
President, Donovan Insurance Brokers, Waterloo

David Fitzpatrick
Insurance Executive (retired), Waterloo

Chris Hewitt
Vice President, Chief Marketing Officer, CXO, Sun Life Canada,
Waterloo

Omar McLean
Principal, Wagner, Livock & Associates Financial Services Inc.,
Kitchener

Trent Robinson
Businessperson (retired), Kitchener

Richard Steinmann (Vice-Chair)
Broker, RE/Max Twin City Realty, Waterloo

Scott Uffelman (Secretary-Treasurer)
President, Ontario Seed Co. Ltd., Waterloo

Senior Leadership

John Colangeli, Chief Executive Officer

Heather Fedy, Chief Administrative Officer

Greg Clark, Director of Finance

Andrea Dunn, Director, Human Resources

Lisa Gill, Director, Housing Services

Sherri McDermid, Director, Employment Services

Chris Sellers, Director, Communications, Development & IT

Alison Willetts, Director, Mental Health Services

Luther Village on the Park

Margo Blayney, Executive Director



Greg Clark,
Director of Finance

"Since joining Starling, I've been inspired by the dedication and compassion that drive this organization. Every day, I see teams committed to supporting the community with integrity and heart. I'm grateful to contribute to a mission-focused culture where people truly care about making a meaningful difference."



starlingcs.ca

Here When You Need Us

Home Office

Children's Mental Health Centre
Starling Child & Family Foundation
285 Benjamin Rd., Waterloo, N2J 3Z4
519-884-1470

FRONT DOOR

to Child & Youth Mental Health
519-749-2932

Employment Services

35 Dickson St., Cambridge, N1R 7A6
519-623-9380
165 King St. E., Kitchener, N2G 2K8
519-743-2460
89 Wyndham St. N., 3rd floor, N1H 4E9
519-822-4141

Housing Services

35 Dickson St., Cambridge, N1R 7A6
519-622-1670
41 Weber St. W., Kitchener, N2H 3Z1
519-749-2450

Safe Haven Youth Services

41 Weber St. W., Kitchener, N2H 3Z1
519-749-1450

Luther Village on the Park

139 Father David Bauer Dr., Waterloo, N2L 6L1
519-783-3710



Starling Community Services (an operating name for Lutherwood) provides children's mental health, employment, and housing services in Waterloo Region and Wellington County.



StarlingMentalHealth
StarlingEmployment
StarlingHousing
FrontDoorCMH



@StarlingCanada
@FrontDoorMentalHealth



StarlingCS



admin@starlingcs.ca

Our Vision

Communities where everyone experiences mental wellness, opportunities for employment, a place to call home, and a sense of belonging.

Our Mission

We deliver community services to strengthen lives.

Our Values

Respect for All
Compassion
Working Together
Making a Difference
Growth



starlingcs.ca