

The Face of Rural Homelessness in Ottawa

**Prepared for
The City of Ottawa Community Capacity Building Team**

**Prepared by
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Introduction

Social Data Research Ltd. is pleased to present this report to Ottawa's Community Capacity Building Team for homelessness. The purpose of this exploratory overview study was to examine the face of rural homelessness in Ottawa by examining the extent to which homelessness is seen as an issue by agencies and ward offices serving the rural constituents of Ottawa. The research was conducted in August and September 2005.

Top line results

On the surface it would appear that homelessness is virtually non-existent or at best a hidden problem in rural Ottawa. However, after scratching the surface somewhat, the interviews reveal that while homelessness per se is not seen as a big problem, the lack of affordable and appropriate housing options and or access to support services is an issue that warrants attention. Seniors and youth were identified as those most at risk.

Approach

To gather the information used in this report, interviews were conducted with four councilors/staff of rural ward offices and 3 administration/intake staff in social agencies serving rural areas of Ottawa.¹ The following persons were interviewed:

- Rob Jellett, Councilor, Cumberland Ward
- Doug Thomson, Councilor, Osgoode Ward
- Janet Stavinga, Councilor, Goulbourn Ward
- Marlene Gramman, Assistant to the Councilor, West Carleton Ward Office At Kinburn Client Service Office
- Bonnie O'Brien, Administrator, Osgoode Non-Profit Housing Corp
- Vivianne Oger, Intake Worker, Orleans-Cumberland Community Resource Centre
- Jennifer Barr, Intake Worker, West Carleton Community Resource Centre

Rural catchment areas

Respondents were asked to describe their catchment areas to obtain a sense of the geographic boundaries encompassing their agency or ward. The ward geographic areas were described as follows:

- Cumberland Ward is rural and suburban since it abuts Orleans but the latter is only 10% of the land area, but 50% of the population.
- Osgoode has villages of Greely, Metcalfe, Kenmore, Osgoode, Vernon and Marionville.
- Goulbourn is rural apart from Richmond and Stittsville.

¹ There was no response from the Rideau ward office or the Nepean Community Resource Centre.

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- West Carleton extends past Fitzroy Harbour and Galetta to the edge of Arnprior

The Orleans-Cumberland Resource Centre provides services to residents in Vars, Sarsfield, Navan, Bearbrook, Orleans, Cumberland village, basically east of Place d'Orleans. The West Carleton Community Resource Centre covers West Carleton, Goulbourn, rural Kanata, and Carp.

Issues in the ward related to housing development

When asked to describe their rural catchment area, all but one respondent raised the issue upfront about a lack of serviced utilities - water and sewage – in the rural areas of their catchment. This is seen as the main deterrent to the development of appropriate housing in their districts. In Cumberland Ward, according to the respondent from this ward, the Orleans abutment is serviced with main water and sewage, and Notre Dame des Champs and Vars have main water but not sewage. There is only one multi-unit building in the ward and that is a 4 unit building in Navan. In Osgoode, the villages of Greely, Metcalfe, Kenmore, Osgoode, Vernon and Marionville do not have mains water or sewage. In Goulbourn, according to the respondent from this ward, most areas other than Richmond and Stitsville suffer from having poor utility services such as mains water. This, in the opinion of this respondent holds back development of appropriate housing stock - e.g. multiple dwellings need to have their own expensive water and sewer systems compared to urban areas. [The Munster subdivision is the subject of much sewer controversy at present].

Is homelessness a problem?

At the beginning of the interview, respondents were asked just how big a problem they considered homelessness to be in rural Ottawa – a pretty big problem, somewhat of a problem, a small problem, or no problem. Most respondents reported that in their opinion, homelessness was not a big problem in rural Ottawa although almost all could cite some cases. Several respondents reported up front that the issue was the lack of good quality affordable housing in rural areas.

In Cumberland, according to the Councilor for that ward, that there are some trailer parks and poverty does exist, however, the ward is largely an affluent one. If homelessness is a problem it is hidden, the Councilor opined. The intake worker interviewed from the Orleans-Cumberland Community Resource Centre felt that it is not so much an issue of homelessness but rather a housing issue. According to this respondent, a lack of affordable housing does exist in this part of rural Ottawa. Further, in this respondent's opinion, houses in Cumberland Village are badly maintained. There are problems such as tenants being evicted or tenants living in basement apartments and or in buildings that have absentee owners who are not taking care of their properties.

In Osgoode, the ward office reported that they had never heard about anyone being homeless in the ward. Osgoode has 2 seniors' apartment buildings totaling 24 units, which are divided into 4 units. Each unit has its own septic system. There are also subsidized apartments in three different locations for low-income residents. The administrator of the Osgoode Non-Profit Housing Corporation concurs that

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homelessness does not appear to be a big problem in this part of rural Ottawa. “In 14 years working here I have never heard of homelessness being a problem here”.

However, this respondent did admit that there are no emergency housing options in rural Ottawa. There have been cases in marital break-ups, where the family home is lost, and one or the other spouse is temporarily without permanent housing.

The Councilor for the Goulbourn ward felt that homelessness was somewhat of a problem in the ward, but that the problem was really affordability of housing and the availability of the right kind of housing. There are two Co-operative housing developments (targeting modest income people) in the ward but both have long waiting lists, according to the respondent.

In West Carleton, according to the respondent from the Councilor’s office, homeless is not a big problem but there have been families who have had to move to the city and live with family members because they lost their housing. The respondent from the West Carleton Community Resource Centre also reported getting calls from people who had lost their jobs in Hi-Tech and could no longer afford their homes. As well, their agency was aware of youth who had been “kicked out of their homes” with nowhere to go.

Examples of homelessness in rural Ottawa

Respondents were asked if in the last year they had any clients or constituents contact their office who were homeless or at risk for homelessness and to describe the circumstances. Six of seven respondents cite examples. The following illustrates the types and or numbers of calls received:

- Osgoode ward office – “usually it is because a lease is up or the rent is up and a family needs to find another place to rent”.
- Goulbourn ward – “There were less than 10 people who called us last year [it may have been 5] looking for a place to live.”
- West Carleton ward office – “have heard of some people losing their jobs and had to go on social assistance”.
- Osgoode Non Profit Housing Corporation – “people who have had marital breakdowns as well as seniors who need help have contacted us”.
- Orleans-Cumberland Community Resource Centre – “There was a homeless man trying to get work out in front of the Home Depot (in Cumberland) and he was sleeping in his car. Also heard of a family that was living out in their car. There is also an elderly woman living above a business in a village who has difficulty with the stairs up to her apartment. However, there is no subsidized housing in area for the seniors – they have to go to Vanier.”
- West-Carleton Community resource Centre – “people who lost their jobs and could no longer make their mortgage payments have contacted us – also youth kicked out of home.”

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Who are most at risk for homelessness in rural Ottawa?

Respondents were asked who in their constituency were most at risk for homelessness – youth, seniors, families, men, women etc. Most respondents felt seniors were most at risk, followed by youth. For seniors, there are many studies², including a local recent survey coordinated by Social Data Research Ltd. (2004 Successful Aging Ottawa Survey) that point towards a lack of support services in rural areas. As a result, seniors who can no longer look after their home find themselves with few options but to move to the City, away from friends and neighbours. There is virtually no supportive housing in rural Ottawa (a problem across the country) and only few low-rise affordable apartment buildings (none in south rural Ottawa, according to one respondent).

For youth, according to respondents, it's usually a case of family disagreements resulting in youth leaving home and moving from one friend's house to another. In some cases, they move to the City and access services such as the food bank and the Youth Services Bureau (YSB). It should be noted that eight of the 20 homeless clients interviewed for other components of this research (Aboriginal Homelessness and Continuum of Services for Homeless Single Men) grew up in rural areas in other parts of Ontario and elsewhere.

Services and gaps

When respondents were asked where they refer people at risk for homelessness living in rural Ottawa for help, the following services were listed:

- Youth are referred to the Youth Services Bureau and shelters in downtown Ottawa
- Cumberland Resource Centre has a Home Support Group for rural seniors (seniors helping each other) that offers volunteer drivers and other services for seniors
- Seniors and families looking for affordable housing are referred to the City's Housing Branch and the Social Housing Registry
- Councilors often use their own informal network to help out
- Councilor from Osgoode refers clients in need to Nepean Community Resource Centre or the Metcalfe Client Centre

Respondents were asked if there were enough services for homeless people and those at risk for homelessness in their catchment area or constituency. They were also asked where the gaps are, if any. There seems to be a consensus among the respondents that the main issue is lack of affordable and appropriate housing. The lack of main utility services is cited as the largest barrier to new development. Transportation (lack of public transportation) is also an issue, making it difficult for seniors and others to access services if they do not drive. As well, one respondent indicated that it "does not make sense" to be homeless in rural areas because of the long distances between houses. It

² See the literature review conducted for a recent study by Social Data Research Ltd. for Health Canada, "Inventory of Supportive Housing for Seniors in Canada", 2005 (to be released shortly, contact Catrina Hendrickx, Home and Continuing Care Unit, 954-8616)

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would be difficult to survive. The general feeling is that homeless people, if they do exist, migrate to the downtown areas of the city.

Respondents were asked if they had any final comments to make. Here in their own words are what some respondents had to say:

“I’m pleased that this survey is being undertaken by the City and it is city-wide.”

“I feel that I understand the problem of homelessness especially as I hear about it downtown, but in my rural area I feel that people tend to look after each other more and the official rezoning which allows apartments e.g., in basements of single family houses has helped in this area.”

“This is a societal problem and we need more awareness locally as most end up going downtown for help.”

“I feel that in the country it is the nature for people to own their own homes, and if there is loss of home they usually go stay with family.”

Conclusions

It would appear on the surface that the issue of homelessness in rural Ottawa is almost non-existent. Most councilors interviewed were either not aware that homelessness is an issue or genuinely held the opinion that it was not an issue in their ward. Social service providers and housing providers appear to hold a different view and concede that homelessness may be an issue in rural Ottawa, particularly for youth. While only isolated examples were cited, one cannot conclude that these cases do not represent a wider problem without a more systematic examination of the issue. The lack of affordable and appropriate housing in rural areas, particularly for seniors is well documented elsewhere and was raised once again here. Coupled with the results of the 2004 Successful Aging Survey, this issue deserves further attention.

This small exploratory study raises questions that need further study. For example, to what degree is homelessness a hidden problem in rural Ottawa? Are youth who leave home prematurely for one reason or another in the country migrating to downtown Ottawa and placing themselves at risk for homelessness or in fact living the street life in downtown Ottawa? A recent article “A House in the Country” in the Canadian mental Health Association’s Network Magazine (Spring/Summer 2005) suggests rural and urban homelessness is connected by the fact that over half of the people who end up homeless in big cities come from small towns or rural communities. The article goes on to say that for those in rural areas who find themselves without a place to call home, there are many unique challenges starting with a profound lack of resources at all levels. The author concludes; “Whatever limited services are available are spread out across a vast geography. Between Ottawa and Kingston, there is virtually nothing in the way of supports for homeless people”.³

³ Les Voakes, Executive Director of Town Youth Participation Strategies, Smith Falls, Ontario