

Report of the Roundtable on Homelessness in Regina

November 19 & 20, 2008



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Thank you all!

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Purpose of the Regina Roundtable on Homelessness

On November 19 and 20, 2008 a Roundtable on Homelessness in Regina was held in the Ron Mitchell Room of the Regina Public School Board. Over ninety individuals from fifty organizations participated in the roundtable including: Regina community-based organizations, business service clubs, municipal government and school board, regional health authority, provincial, and federal government departments and universities in Regina. The central purpose of the roundtable was to uncover whether methods of communication for inter-agency collaboration were needed. Put another way: is it advantageous to develop a network of collaboration that could address the plight of the homeless, those vulnerable to becoming homeless and the diminishing access to affordable and alternative housing in Regina?

Organization of the Roundtable

The day and half forum focused on a set of five collaborative themes: sharing our stories; community leadership; our strengths; moving forward and working together (the latter two themes were combined to accommodate ending the sessions on time). A facilitator who shared a story about his or her experience introduced each theme. Then participants discussed each theme led by a table facilitator with a set of guided questions. Finally, another facilitator debriefed each theme as the table groups reported back to the plenary. In this way there was a broad level of recognition for the diversity of expertise in Regina addressing homelessness, those vulnerable to becoming homeless and/or the need for affordable housing alternatives.

Admittedly, the voices and stories of the homeless and the vulnerable were absent. A challenge for our community is to find ways for those effected to be included that empower their participation, their voice and decision making in personally meaningful and safe forums.

A number of methods were employed to collect the voices and opinions of the participants: flipchart paper was used by each table and then reported on by a presenter; microphones captured the public discussion, were taped and were subsequently transcribed; and lastly, facilitators at each table took some notes. All of these methods were then reviewed for common themes. This report is the summary of the identified themes.

Setting the Stage

The first day began with an opening prayer from Elder Blair Pelletier who works with people from Red Ribbon Place. Hirsch Greenberg, one of the researchers, Faculty of Arts, spoke to the potential benefits of inter-agency and inter-professional collaboration. He suggested that collaboration is about more than just meeting and exchanging ideas; it is also about asking ourselves how we can collectively own the process and the outcomes. Mr. Greenberg challenged the participants to reflect on how we can take collective responsibility, how we can make collective contributions and how we as a community can collaborate to reach success.

Marc Spooner, Faculty of Education, shared his video entitled *Talking with the experts: the homeless and at-risk-to-be homeless themselves*. The video shared stories of those who were homeless or were vulnerable of becoming homeless. Their stories related to five avenues for action addressing the needs of youth, the need for life skills, access to nutrition and food banks, the need for transportation, and acknowledgment. The video is available in a pod cast at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvTZ3kk1AAw>

Theme I: Sharing Our Stories

Blueprint for collaboration

Lisa Workman of the Four Directions Community Health Center expanded further on an important aspect of collaboration, out-reach, by encouraging participants to share a story with others at their table about an individual or family who has experienced homelessness and the roles of professionals and service systems where collaboration might have been of benefit. She introduced this theme by sharing a personal story from when she worked at Chili

for Children. The story was about a woman whom she helped find permanent, stable housing. She drove and accompanied the woman to appointments and helped her fill out all of the forms and complete all of the activities necessary to get her social assistance payments, rent an apartment, and take care of other housing needs. She tells this story to illustrate how complex the system has become for individuals to access services in a meaningful way. Without the strong support of out-reach professionals, such as the role Ms. Workman took on, it was unlikely that the woman would have the confidence, resources, or knowledge to negotiate the system. Ms. Workman considers this experience to be illustrative of what is possible if the right services are in place and there is support to access them.

In sharing her story, Ms. Workman encouraged participants to look at successes and how we can be more adaptive and less technical. Five questions guided the tables' discussion. The following is a summary of those discussions: 1. *What is your role in working with the homeless?*

2. What are some of the challenges and successes you have had? 3. What are some of the assumptions others make about the homeless? 4. Can the issues be reframed in alternative ways?

5. What are some of the solutions?

A common response to question number one was that agency roles are multi-faceted: advocacy, mediation, coordination, facilitation, communication, education and information. A common objective among agencies is to break down the myths about the homeless. Frequent assumptions about the homeless that must be dispelled are that the homeless are lazy, addicts, uneducated, unemployed, unskilled and sometimes even assumed to be homeless by choice. These stereotypes have made it extremely difficult for low-income individuals or families to rent housing because some landlords might assume that those receiving welfare will be poor tenants. Negative, inaccurate stereotypes about the homeless are one of many challenges in addressing homelessness.

With the recent boom in the Saskatchewan economy there seem to be more challenges than ever before. The high cost of housing is forcing many individuals and families to spend over fifty percent of their income on housing. At-risk persons have no choice but to pay the rent because there is nowhere else to go. For those who cannot keep up with the rising rent costs, there are many individuals and families, particularly youth, who are couch surfing and sleeping in overcrowded houses and shelters.

Shelters are often at capacity and with the winter months arriving housing is a necessity for survival. Open times for sheltering services are often limited leaving many individuals without shelter during the day. Plainly, there needs to be a focus not just on emergency night shelters but also on affordable living conditions.

In Regina, homelessness is often hidden. Part of the challenge in addressing homelessness is that the public does not see homeless people and conclude that it is not a serious issue.

Participants discussed the shortage of government responses to homelessness and its absence from the political agenda. It was recognized, however, that there is a need to more accurately provide evidence of the severity of the problem of the homeless and the near homeless. Based on the percentage of homeless to non-homeless populations in other communities, Regina's homeless population may be in the range of 4,000 individuals, including families and children. (Homelessness would be broadly defined to include those living in unhealthy and substandard conditions). In the near future with the help of agencies using the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS), Regina can develop a community report that will accurately assess the realities of homelessness in the city.

Many of the achievements in responding to homelessness that participants recognized correspond to available funding from each level of government. Programs succeed where there are collaborative processes. Experience of the participants in working with homeless individuals and families suggest that more emphasis needs to be placed on increasing emergency shelter space, increased capacity of community based organizations, addiction services, life skills programs, transportation and education. Further, wages and social assistance allowances must recognize and reflect current living costs.

Participants also discussed the need for stronger landlord/tenant laws and enforcement to ensure housing is safe and sanitary.

As many of the tables agreed, *housing comes first and then treatment*, seemed to be an emerging theme. It is thought that once a person is in a safe home, then it becomes easier for people to engage with support services. Above all, it is essential that the perception of homelessness being a personal choice be dispelled so that funding

needs can be dispersed in a favourable light. Homelessness must be reframed in a manner that has the support of governments, communities and agencies.

From an interagency perspective it is recognized that homelessness needs to be addressed early, when individuals and families first seek assistance from organizations. Simply referring individuals and families from agency to agency – blind referrals – appears to be an unsuccessful response. Thus some discussion occurred, proposing a need for a central assessment and referral centre that could act as a one-stop shop for people wanting to access services. In addition, it would provide one-to-one service and advocacy at the intake level to ensure that individuals are accessing the services that they need. Other suggestions include having a 24-hour drop in center for youth, a shelter where the youth can go and receive support from one location without fear of being apprehended. Finally, participants at the Roundtable established the need for a pocket size resource guide available free of charge to the public. The guide would include all the human service providers in the city indicating hours of operation, contact information, a map of the city, client requirements and agencies' mandates. In addition, an electronic version of the guide should be made accessible on the Internet.

In wrapping up the day, two short stories were reflected upon by Hirsch Greenberg. The first story illustrated the need for more public awareness: Hirsch had received disapproval from some friends when he was seen giving a homeless woman some money - 'she would only spend it on drugs' he was told. The second story was told to Hirsch by an Elder, who suggested that to address social issues we need to ensure that we are addressing the causes and not the symptoms of the problem. Lack of affordable housing is a problem, whereas, the symptom is individual and family homelessness. And his conclusion is that if you really want to deal with the problem we need to take stock as a community and reflect how we can do better rather than blame individuals or families. There needs to be a paradigm shift in addressing homelessness and the near homeless. The day ended with a challenge to begin reflecting less on the symptoms and more on the root causes.

Theme 2: Designing the Building

Day two began with a presentation from Kyla Chadwick, a student research assistant at the University of Regina, Department of Justice Studies. Kyla has been conducting research on homelessness programming in the United States, Canada and Australia for the last couple of months. She presented one model that she was researching from the United States; it is called the Continuum of Care model (CoC). The main premise of the model is to get all homeless service providers within the community to work together to create an action plan "in order to receive funding from the U.S department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for local initiatives" (this article was included in the participant kits.). Funding is allocated among the community service providers based on the needs identified in the action plan.

There are four fundamental components to the CoC model: intake & referral to services; emergency shelters; more support services & transitional housing; permanent *supportive* housing or independent housing. Based on the four components, the model involves moving the homeless from initial contact through to living as independently as possible, making certain there are no gaps to fall through.

Kyla stated that this model can help build collaboration by uniting all of the service providers to apply for funding in partnership – as a collaborative enterprise. She connected the goals of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) and the principles of the continuum of care model, suggesting that there is considerable overlap.

Kyla concluded by asking participants to consider what possibilities a continuum of care model presents for Saskatchewan's communities, for programming and how could the HPS support the implementation of such a model?

Following Kyla Chadwick, Jeff Christiansen from Regina Palliative Care Incorporated, Greystone Bereavement Center presented two models (Stacey Matrix and Infinity web) to help participants understand how collaboration works. Jeff was the former Director of Regina's Regional Intersectoral Committee.

A useful tool to navigate appropriate collaborative options is the Stacey Matrix. The model is illustrated by drawing two lines, one line represents the degree of certainty (horizontal axis) and the other line represents the level of agreement (vertical axis). The Stacey Matrix suggests that every issue can be plotted somewhere along these two axes. Depending on the severity of the issue, different steps are required to provide for the best outcomes. Methods such as collaboration, research, learning, and building consensus and relationships are useful in bringing the issue down the axis in both directions.

The second model, the infinity web, shows how communities go through natural cycles of renewal, building stability, maturity, and creative destruction. Jeff suggests that sometimes communities need to go through a process of creative destruction to allow new structures to emerge. He refers to this phase of the cycle as choosing. Communities need to make choices about which programs, ideas and services will remain and which will be left behind. Once the system begins to mature we need to consider what we have learned from the choices made and how to creatively continue to generate healthy responses. Jeff concludes by suggesting that the infinity web can help us to ask the right questions at the right time about what we need to do next.

Community Leadership

Theme two was designed to explore the ways we can strengthen our capacity to collaborate and identify ways to communicate more effectively and to better serve the community. Working with local experts, tables discussed problem-solving methods and the tools required to make a difference in the community. The following questions served to guide the discussion: *1. How can we move toward fairly representing the diverse population of the homeless? 2. How can we include diverse points of view (CBO's, government, funders, business, and the homeless)? 3. How can we ensure an equal opportunity for all to participate (CBO's, government, funders, business, and the homeless)?*

Participants suggested that to fairly represent the diverse population of the homeless, there must be a consensus on a Regina definition of homelessness. Once there is such a consensus, data must be collected and shared, reporting on the demographics of homelessness: focusing on age, gender, health, ethnicity, location and education.

Moving forward must include the homeless in the decision making process. For future meetings, one table suggested that every participant at a Roundtable invite someone he or she knows who is homeless. In addition, it would be useful to include people who have been homeless and are now doing well. Combining the voices of the homeless with that of social agencies will ensure the long-term needs of the homeless are met while simultaneously increasing government commitments to eliminating homelessness in the community of Regina.

Regina has hundreds of organizations, including community-based organizations and businesses that serve the social and economic needs of the community. In addition, there are three levels of government, other funding sources and the homeless whose roles differ in advocating and promoting change. To include various perspectives it was suggested that

CBO's, governments, funders, businesses, and the homeless need to improve communication: more frequently and efficiently. Perhaps, having an association that meets annually or semi-annually could enhance such communication. The purpose of the meetings would be to pull everyone together to discuss successes, challenges and most importantly, as a community of concern and interest, come up with a manageable strategic plan. This plan would have some specific dates and tasks, and individuals and organizations to ensure everyone has an opportunity to participate. In such a diverse group it is necessary that all voices be heard. In some instances it may be useful for people to step outside of their everyday roles and work with others in their daily roles. It is important to embrace differences. Other suggestions to improve individual participation and collective responsibility include using a common assessment tool (e.g. HIFIS) and using a common language (i.e. language accessible to policymakers, professionals, academics, and homeless persons alike).

Theme 3: Ensuring It's Up to Code

Calvin Racette from the Regina Public School Board and Carrie Bourassa from the First Nations University of Canada set the stage for theme number three: Our strengths.

Calvin spoke about his experiences working with the Regina Public Board for the last twenty-five years. He explained his connection to the homeless as mainly student focused. He has dealt with numerous students who have difficulty meeting adequate housing, food, and other basic necessities. An overwhelming amount of work passes over Calvin's desk in regards to Aboriginal education. He speaks of society's continued failure to engage in a meaningful discussion around marginalization in Métis and Aboriginal communities.

Calvin tells a story of a new Deputy Minister appointed from the provincial government some 25-years ago. Part of his job description was to make periodic contact with northern communities to research community development. Eventually he picked a community and flew up to the community only to have nobody there to meet him. The ministerial aid contacted the community representative for an explanation and found out that the community had a crisis that required their attention and meeting with a government official wasn't the priority. The story illustrates that sometimes there is too much talking and not enough on social action.

Carrie Bourassa's story was sharing with the group some research she has conducted on Aboriginal communities. Her research revealed that Aboriginal peoples make up a disproportionate part of the homeless population. She speaks about the barriers created by the bureaucratic structures and how these barriers impede on work that needs to be accomplished. Carrie suggests that if the barriers in the structure cannot be addressed then maybe new structures are required. As a team we need to build new communication structures and as a team we need to understand and respect one another and the work that we do co.

Our Strengths

Questions posed in theme three are designed for each table to exchange ideas openly and honestly; reframing issues, seeking solutions and searching for common ground. This section asks participants to look at we can do collaboratively. *1. How can we build communication structures that enable real representations of stakeholders (the homeless, funders, service providers, and business)? Are there diverse funding strategies that are required? 2. How can we maintain strong relationships while maintaining our independence? 3. How can we attain funding and develop new ways of working among those that wants to and need to?*

Building communication structures was again identified under this theme. Once again the purpose of the meetings would be to discuss challenges, successes and solutions. By meeting regularly stakeholders will have the opportunity to interact and exchange information. Since it is unlikely to have everyone attend all the meetings, it was suggested we utilize alternative forms of communication such as the internet (e.g. email, chat rooms), information bulletins and research links. Regardless of the means of communication, information presented must be translated into a common language. As professionals, we need to be able to communicate back to the community. Maybe there needs to be individuals identified from various constituencies to unite government, business and community discussions and plans. Being able to effectively and consistently communicate will not only generate movement but will also sustain momentum among stakeholders.

Indisputably, creative funding strategies were identified as necessary. In terms of funding, a question was posed on how can we continue to work collaboratively while maintaining independence? The answer suggested was to reframe areas of responsibilities in a way that encourages personal commitments and shared goals. For example, in terms of funding strategies, instead of organizations independently applying for financial support why not have multiple-partners going forward to make a collaborative request. In this way we can attain funding and develop new ways of working together. Collectively we can bring businesses and political representatives onside to create funding partnerships.

Theme 4 & 5: Site Inspection

In lieu of the time that remained toward the end of day two, the last two modules were combined into one session. Lana Phillips from the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation introduced theme number four: *Moving Forward* and Rob Deglau, the Community Coordinator for the North Central Community Association (NCCA) introduced the last theme: *Working Together*.

Lana began her remarks by emphasizing how important it is that we meet as a group periodically to discuss homelessness. She senses a lot of energy comes out of these meetings and a lot of commitment. Her session focuses on the importance of individual and collective commitments. She encouraged participants to really think about how they can commit to building collaboration. She offered an example of one way that she is going to move forward. Lana plans on raising the topic of homelessness anytime she has the opportunity to speak to senior managers, colleagues, friends and/or family.

Rob spoke about some successful examples of collaboration that NCCA has been involved in. NCCA has partnered with other CBOs, the business community and the University of Regina, Faculty of Arts to develop projects that have been successful and are a benefit to all of those that are involved. He emphasized the need to look at what projects are successful (whether housing or services) and create similar projects to build on those promising practices.

Moving Forward & Working Together

Combining themes four and five into one section fits appropriately as both themes assess, explore and establish community momentum to eliminate homelessness.

Questions to lead off this theme were: 1. How can we meet together and recognize our common aspirations and identity as service providers for the homeless? 2. How can we influence policy? 3. How can we prevent community tensions and work on a common ground? 4. How can collectively influence/ decide upon funding and resource allocations? 5. How do we listen to each other and the homeless? 6. How do we collaborate to empower?

Early in the discussion it was suggested that question three be re-phrased to how can we accept community tensions and work on a common ground? When making this change, responses to questions one and three become interconnected. We can accept community tensions by recognizing common aspirations and identities as service providers for the homeless. Instead of worrying about how to prevent community tensions, let's just expect them. If we expect and embrace tension we become more equipped to deal with conflict. People have different interests, and only through resolving conflicts can we really find out where everyone's coming from.

When aiming to influence policy the best strategy is to seek as much support as possible. Nominating a spokes person, a professional advocate, who can speak on behalf of the community entity at a business level, would be most effective. Having an action plan developed that illustrates errors in certain policies and offers alternatives to improving policies would be most appealing. If the policy makers reject the proposal the first time around the only thing left to do is gather more people and implement more pressure. Collectively influencing budgets and resource allocations requires several of the same steps as influencing policy.

One of the biggest challenges when working collaboratively is being able to listen to each other and the homeless. One suggestion to improve listening skills includes making things make sense to everyone. Depending on the clientele you are working with, provision should be made for effective communication strategies. In some instances you may be required to "step into someone else's moccasins" to understand his or her point of view. In other instances you may be required to hear stories, tell stories and share experiences. Storytelling is such a key aspect to humans in general. In response to the last question posed in theme four, we can collaboratively empower each other by actively listening and sharing stories.

Given the discussion and feedback, theme five asks participants what they recommend should be the next steps?

Hirsch Greenberg was nominated to call a meeting with the goal of creating an emergency winter 2009 plan. This meeting would include government agencies, businesses, community based organizations, educators and the homeless. Sprouting from the emergency winter 2009 meeting would emerge a virtual committee. There are lots of interagency groups that are already meeting, however, the information discussed at these meetings is not reaching the community. There should be a representative from each of the committees that exist to form the separate committees. Every representative would be responsible for sharing his or her information, taking notes, and engaging in discussion. Then the representative would be required to communicate the information back to his or her inter-agency group. Extending invitations to the media would aid in getting the community up-to-date with the strategies developed to eliminate homelessness and could also possibly help with future funding.

Continuing discussions and maintaining contact in between meetings should be accessible through electronic means of communication. Online, there would be a place to talk about and share information around women's issues, youth, families, First Nations, etc. Included online there should be an electronic resource guide for people that are homeless and for agencies that are dealing with individuals who are looking for services. For example, instead of making thirty phone calls to find housing there would be a repository for identifying vacancies. Each agency would place information about their vacancies. Included online would be a communal email list of

everyone involved in eliminating homelessness. A profile of everyone would be attached to emails so we have an idea of who everyone is and what they do.

Summary

Rebecca Schiff, the community coordinator of HIFIS summarized the key points discussed in all the sessions over the day and a half.

One recurring theme is the idea that we need to develop a common language for communication. We need a language that we can all understand whether we are working at the community or business level. There needs to be common language that we can use as a tool for advocacy and for policy change.

Another idea that gained some agency was that Regina needs an updated service guide or resource guide. The guide would be available to community based organizations, businesses, government agencies, schools, and the community.

Another frequent suggestion was: we need to focus more on consumer-centered practices. The concepts of assertive community outreach, follow-up services, and wrap-around services were emphasized to make sure that no one falls through the gaps.

In the last two themes, the need to establish formal lines of communication and ensure all voices are being heard was addressed. This includes engaging homeless people in a way that is both empowering and respectful to them. Including homeless people in meetings will inform us of how we can ensure the best possible services are made available.

Finally, we need to build community capacity and resilient communities. In relation to community development, collaboratively we need to develop a strategic plan to deal with emergency situations when they arise. Hirsch Greenberg agreed to organize such a meeting.

Conclusion

Hirsch closed the Roundtable with this thought: while individuals and families may be accountable for their journey, we are collectively responsible for what happens in this community, in particular, the systemic issues and the service delivery homeless problems.