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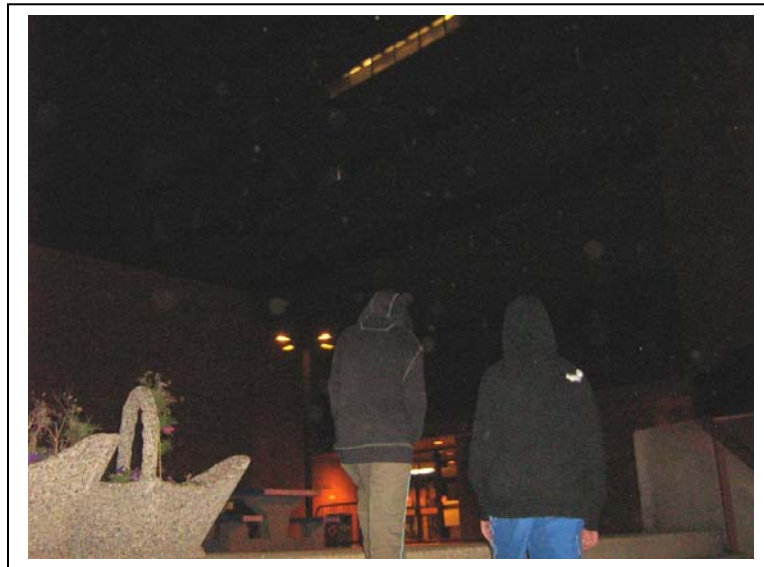
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Fort McMurray Youth Housing Needs Report



This report was prepared under the direction of the Youth Shelter
Sub-Committee at the request of the
Homelessness Initiatives Steering Committee

August 2007

COMMUNITY PLAN ON HOMELESSNESS

The Youth Shelter Sub Committee is pleased to present this report on the housing needs of homeless youth in the Fort McMurray region. The study was requested by the Homeless Initiatives Steering Committee (HISC) as part of ongoing activities to address identified gaps in services and supports for homeless individuals and families and those at risk of homelessness. HISC was established in 2000 to oversee the development and implementation of the Community Plan on Homelessness and Affordable Housing.

The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo is the “Community Based Organization” (CBO) responsible for coordinating the implementation of the National Homelessness Partnership Strategy via the Community Plan in the region. The Municipality as the CBO receives funding from the federal government supplemented with provincial funding to address local priorities with respect to homelessness facilities and support services in cooperation with community stakeholders. The Community Plan includes a priority to address youth homelessness by providing appropriate shelter and support services. To assess and better clarify how to address youth homelessness a youth shelter sub committee was created to survey local youth housing needs and to research current literature on youth homelessness.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Youth Shelter Sub Committee wish to thank the many individuals and organizations whose contributions made this project possible and successful. In particular we wish to acknowledge Subcommittee members who dedicated a great deal of time and resources to this initiative. They include:

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- Family and Community Support Services (Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo)
- Nistawoyou Friendship Centre
- Northeast Alberta Child & Family Services Authority
- McRay's Grillhouse
- Recreation Arts and Leisure (Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo)
- Royal Canadian Mounted Police
- St. Aidan's House Society

We also wish to thank both Public and Catholic school boards and participating schools including Ecole Father Beaugard School, Ecole St. Paul School, Father J.A. Turcotte School, Father Patrick Mercredi Community High School, Good Shepherd School, St. Anne School, St. Gabriel School, St. Martha School, Sister Mary Phillips School, Beacon Hill School, Centre Boreal, Beacon Hill, Composite High School, Dr. K.A. Clark School, Ecole Dickensfield School, Greely Road School, Second Chance School, Thickwood Heights School, Timberlea School, Westview School and Westwood Community High School. We also thank participating business owners who permitted surveys to be conducted in front of their premises including Flavors Convenience Store on Franklin Avenue, Mac's Food Store on the corner of Franklin Avenue and King Street, the Provincial Building Bus Stop and the Dugout Coffeehouse & Youth Centre. We also recognize and appreciate the efforts of AADAC, Probation and YMCA Youth Connections staff who administered surveys to youth in their offices on the day of the count. We also thank MACOY who reviewed and pre-tested the survey questions. Most importantly we thank the many youth respondents themselves, who gave freely of their time and shared valuable information and insights. Additional copies of this report may be obtained from the Community Plan on Homelessness Coordinator who may be reached at 9909 Franklin Avenue, 3rd Floor, Fort McMurray, Alberta, T9H 2K4, or by telephone at 780-743-7948.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth experiencing homelessness were identified as a priority target group in the development of the Wood Buffalo Community Plan on Homelessness and Affordable Housing in 2004. A youth shelter/safe house and drop in center was identified as a need during consultations with stakeholders held in 2005 with respect to determining the needs of the community's homeless populations. Housing needs counts conducted in 2003, 2004 and 2006 also identified homeless children and youth as dependents of homeless adults but did not identify their ages, gender or circumstance. Further investigation was required to identify the true scope and nature of youth homelessness in the urban center of Fort McMurray.

In January, 2007 a Youth Shelter Sub-committee was struck to enumerate youth experiencing homelessness in the Fort McMurray region and to determine appropriate shelter and support services required to effectively address their needs. The Committee, composed of youth housing and support service providers, local and provincial government, the RCMP as well as advocates for youth, developed a survey to assess the circumstances experienced by youth when they leave home. In particular, the survey was developed to answer questions related to the numbers and ages of Fort McMurray youth experiencing homelessness, causes of youth leaving home, where youth stay when they are homeless, their employment and school attendance status and their involvement in criminal or unsafe behaviour. Survey findings were validated with community youth stakeholders to ensure their accuracy. A review of current literature on youth homelessness, shelter and support services was included in the study to provide insight into factors that contribute to youth homelessness, the impact and cost of youth homelessness and promising approaches to alleviate youth homelessness.

The youth shelter survey findings coupled with a review of current relevant literature on youth homelessness, youth shelter and of current programs and services, provides an understanding of the diverse issues correlated to youth homelessness and of the short and long term supports required to improve youth housing circumstances. More specifically, the research addresses the following questions:

1. Does the number and nature of youth homelessness and accompanying support issues warrant the development of youth shelter in Fort McMurray?
2. Considering the results of this literature review on youth shelter and youth homelessness what are effective interventions for responding to the needs of homeless youth?

DEFINITION

The definition of youth homelessness used in the study is youth who have been abandoned by the guardians responsible for their care or who have left their homes without notice or guardian consent and who have no permanent place of residence. This includes youth who are absolutely without shelter and are living on the street, or taking shelter in makeshift housing structures, under bridges, in cars, tents, etc. It also includes youth living temporarily with friends, couch surfing from one house to the next and therefore without reliable, permanent, appropriate housing or housing stability.

METHOD

On May 15th, 2007 a point-in time survey was administered to Fort McMurray youth between the ages of 12 and 17 in junior and high school classrooms and at street locations where youth are known to congregate. It was administered via volunteers to youth at four downtown street locations; the Dugout Coffeehouse and Youth Centre at Borealis Park, Flavors Convenience Store on Franklin Avenue, the Provincial Building Bus Stop on Franklin and Main and Mac's Food Store at the corner of Franklin and King Street. Surveys were collected from the offices of the local Alberta Drug and Alcohol Commission (AADAC), Probation and YMCA Youth Connections on the day of the count as well. A total of 2,204 surveys were completed. The survey was pre-tested with youth and reviewed by representatives from the Catholic and Public school boards as well as Homeless Initiative Steering Committee members before it was administered. Survey non responses were not included in percentages.

A review of current literature on youth homelessness and shelter and support services was undertaken in July 2007 and included material from government, academic, business and grassroots literature. The review focused on material published after 1998 and on youth aged 12 – 24 as this is the age most often cited in the research.

LITERATURE REVIEW FINDINGS

The literature indicates that the most promising approaches to addressing youth homelessness include strategies that provide youth with immediate shelter with the ultimate long term goal of moving youth toward housing security and self sufficiency (Community Development Halton, 2007). The literature indicates that once a homeless person's life has been stabilized through the provision of shelter, they are in a situation where they can now address the complex issues that caused their homelessness to begin with (Laird, 2007; Victoria Cool Aid Society, 2007).

A study of the literature documents the role of shelter in stabilizing individual life and setting the foundation for participation in community economic and social development (Hay, 2005). It highlights the complexity of circumstances (both personal and systemic) that cause youth to be without safe, affordable, adequate shelter and suggests a range of targeted services to address the multiple challenges – economic, education, social, health– that homeless youth face (Raising the Roof, 2001; YSIN, 2007). Further, the literature indicates that short and long term strategies are needed to stabilize youth lives and address barriers in securing and maintaining permanent, appropriate housing (Community Development Halton, 2007; Raising the Roof, 2001). Finally, transitional and affordable housing supply is seen as critical to successful transitioning of youth into housing stability and independence (Community Development Halton, 2007; HRM, 2005).

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN FORT MCMURRAY: KEY SURVEY FINDINGS

Sixty five (65) youth aged 11-17 self identified as homeless by indicating they were living away from home without shelter, or living in unsafe or temporary housing in Fort McMurray on May 15th, 2007 the day of the count.

- Males accounted for 61% of the youth homeless population.
- More than 1/3 of Fort McMurray's homeless youth had lived in care previous in a group home, foster home, treatment or assessment center

Findings about school attendance and current employment status indicate that on the day of the count over 65% of homeless youth reported they were attending school. One youth was attending school and working full time. Other responses include;

- Working full time (9%)
- Working part time (25%)
- Unemployed (20%)

Issues that focused on the family accounted for the bulk of causes of homelessness as identified by Fort McMurray youth. Over half of all youth identified family conflict as a cause of their homelessness and 48% identified family breakdown including family violence, physical and/or sexual assault. Parents or guardians, drug or alcohol use (44%) and/or the youth's personal drug or alcohol use (42%) combined was the second most commonly cited cause of youth homelessness. One youth indicated they were homeless by choice. Other causes include;

- Mental health problems (26%)
- Lack of skills, education or experience to obtain employment (22%)
- Housing discrimination (20%)
- Housing affordability (19%)

The report also found that 39 youth or 61% of homeless youth respondents experienced high risk behaviour while homeless as indicated below:

- Criminal behaviour (79%)
- Panhandling activity (56%)
- Providing "favors" for a place to stay (56%)

CONCLUSION

The survey results indicate that Fort McMurray has a vulnerable youth homeless population experiencing a variety of issues that trigger or intensify their homelessness. The findings of homeless status were most prevalent among 14-17 year olds and highlight a correlation between youth homelessness and family conflict. Findings reflect that youth from care are over-represented in the local youth homeless population and illustrate that homeless youth are placing themselves in unsafe and/or undesirable and even criminal situations when they choose or are required to leave home. Youth are in need of supports to address family conflict and family breakdown and also to address youth addictions and cope with guardian addictions. There currently are no addiction facilities in Fort McMurray for youth.

Promising practices in youth shelter provision highlight a number of key elements seen as effective methods of shelter provision and models of supports for homeless youth including:

- Meet youth's basic and immediate needs for safe, affordable shelter (ideally permanent)
- Provide youth with access to programs and services to address personal causes of homelessness and accompanying issues
- Permit youth to stay for extended periods
- Include transitional housing and supports to assist youth moving toward housing security and self-sufficiency

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Youth Shelter Sub-Committee recommends that policies, programs and services seeking to prevent and address youth homelessness in Fort McMurray be directed toward:

Short term

- Providing for youths basic and immediate needs for safe, affordable shelter (ideally permanent) with the goal of stabilizing their housing situation so that they are in a position to receive other needed supports to help them move toward housing security and self sufficiency.
- Providing a range of programs and services specifically targeted to address the individual risk factors/circumstance that led to their homelessness. Supports such as family counseling, mediation and conflict resolution services must be targeted to homeless youth and easily accessible to them to help re-connect them to their families and stabilize the family home. Programs to address youth and /or family substance abuse problems should also accompany supports provided as together they account for the second most common cause of local youth homelessness as reported by youth. In particular local youth stakeholders who reviewed the survey findings indicated that there are currently no addiction programs for local youth and that this is a service that is absolutely required for teens in the Fort McMurray region.
- Provide outreach services as a part of housing supports to connect both visible and hidden homeless populations of youth to needed supports and to support youth transitioning from care or from housing instability toward housing security by helping them to address barriers impeding their housing success.

Long term

- Preventing homelessness by engaging all levels of government and youth in addressing policies and programs related to affordable housing supply, poverty, low income, education and other systemic causes of homelessness.

INTRODUCTION

Youth homelessness is becoming a disturbingly common trend across Canadian cities with youth aged 16-24 accounting for 1/3 of Canada's homeless population. (Hay, 2005) Youth under the age of 24 represent the fastest growing portion of the homeless population and are among other emerging segments to be identified as the "new homeless" (Laird, 2007). Canada's new homeless, a term coined by housing researchers and advocates refer to the large numbers of women and children, youth, seniors, new immigrants and working families currently profiled in Canada's homeless population on an intermittent or chronic basis (Laird, 2007; Hulchanski, 2002).

The definition of youth homelessness used in the study is youth who have been abandoned by the guardians responsible for their care or who have left their homes without notice or guardian consent and who have no permanent place of residence. This includes youth who are absolutely without shelter and are living on the street, or taking shelter in makeshift housing structures, under bridges, in cars, tents etc. It also includes youth living temporarily with friends, couch surfing from one house to the next and therefore without reliable, permanent, appropriate housing or housing stability.

The issue of youth homelessness has consistently been identified as a priority concern in the development and updating of Community Plans on Homelessness and Affordable Housing. Youth experiencing homelessness were identified as a priority target population in consultations held in 2004 and the need for a youth shelter/ safe house in Fort McMurray was identified in 2005. Pregnant and parenting teenagers (who in the past were able to access the services of Angel Manor) were also identified as a target population experiencing homelessness in 2005. At the writing of this report, Angel Manor - home for pregnant and parenting teens- was closed indefinitely for renovations.

At the request of the Homelessness Initiatives Steering Committee, a survey of Fort McMurray's youth and a review of literature on youth homelessness was undertaken to determine the full scope of need of homeless youth and to determine the best response(s) to address identified gaps in services and supports for youth in the Fort McMurray region. The Homelessness Initiatives Steering Committee was established in 2000 to oversee the implementation of the Community Plan on Homelessness and Affordable Housing.

The purpose of this study was to enumerate youth in Fort McMurray experiencing homelessness, to assess the circumstances they experience when they leave home and to identify effective practices for responding to youth homelessness at the local level. In particular, the survey was developed to answer questions related to the numbers and ages of youth experiencing homelessness, causes of youth leaving home, where youth stay when they are homeless, their employment and school attendance status and their involvement in criminal or unsafe behaviour. A review of current literature on youth homelessness and shelter and support services was included in the study to provide insight into factors that contribute to youth homelessness, the impact and cost of youth homelessness and to identify promising approaches to alleviate youth homelessness.

This study is necessary to generate data related to the numbers of homeless youth in Fort McMurray and the services and supports they require - information of particular benefit to those providing programs and services to youth and to homeless populations.

There currently are no existing facilities in the region to accommodate the needs of homeless youth specifically and services are not tailored to address particular circumstance and needs such as substance abuse problems. The study also included a review of literature on promising practices to address youth homelessness to serve as a guide in the planning and development of local prevention and intervention strategies.

The youth shelter survey findings coupled with a review of current relevant literature on youth homelessness, youth emergency shelters and of current programs and services addresses the following questions:

1. Does the number and nature of youth homelessness, and accompanying support issues warrant the development of a youth shelter in Fort McMurray?
2. Considering the results of the literature review on youth shelter and youth homelessness what are effective interventions for responding to the needs of homeless youth?

LITERATURE REVIEW

TRENDS IN HOMELESSNESS

Canada's new homeless includes women and children, youth, seniors, new immigrants working families and other non-stereotypical populations who are homeless on an intermittent or chronic basis (Laird, 2007). Studies show that trumping the mental health problems and addictions issues that used to characterize Canada's homeless population are economic issues (mainly poverty and lack of affordable housing) that have left many low and middle income families in dire housing straits (Laird 2007; TD Bank Financial Group, 2003). Some homeless researchers include youth when defining "new homeless" suggesting that youth are one of several emerging segments of the population along with two parent families that surprisingly are experiencing trends in homelessness (Laird, 2007; Hulchanski, 2002).

More middle class families are experiencing housing insecurity issues that for some can result in homelessness. As more households are experiencing housing insecurity more people are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. In November 2006, Statistics Canada released a report stating that 1 in 5 Canadian households (1.7 million households) reported spending more than 30% of their pre-tax income on housing (Luffman, 2006). Spending more than 30% leaves a household stretching their household resources and places them in an at risk or core housing need status (CMHC, 2001). CMHC describe core need as households unable to access affordable (less than 30% of gross income), suitable (in terms of size and composition) and adequate (not requiring repairs) housing. When housing is not affordable households are often forced to live in overcrowded conditions, to live in unsuitable or inadequate conditions or on the street or else to use funds designated for other necessities to pay for housing thereby contributing to other negative factors such as ill health and food insecurity (Marsh, 1999).

The increasing broadening and entrenching of homelessness and its precursor poverty, in Canada is blamed on government cutbacks in social and affordable housing and social service funding over the last decade and a half. Researchers point out that severe government budget cut backs on social and affordable housing programs, social services and income benefits at a time of changing job market technologies has resulted in a broader segment of Canadian households finding themselves in core housing need (Laird, 2007).

Homelessness comes at a heavy price for individuals and society. Housing is well recognized as a determinant of health and quality of life (Hay, 2005). Several studies have demonstrated that homeless people experience an increased incidence of several health conditions and ailments (Bryant, 2002; Hwang 2001). They have shown that homeless people demonstrate high mortality, substance abuse, sexually transmitted disease, mental health and viral disease rates underscoring the fact that homelessness is linked to increased demands on health and social systems also (Gaetz et al, 1999; Hwang, 2001). Homelessness exasperates or intensifies other issues like family violence, unemployment, poor health, addiction or mental illness resulting in greater stress for the homeless individual and increased cost to public health, social service and justice systems (Laird, 2007). One study of Vancouver homelessness found people without

safe, affordable, appropriate housing had a greater frequency and duration of use of hospital emergency rooms, emergency shelters, correctional institutes etc (Gaetz et al, 1999). Recent studies have also demonstrated an exponential public cost associated with homeless people's over-dependence on crisis services and such as emergency shelter, addictions services, mental health services, employment counseling etc (Laird, 2007; TD Bank Financial Group 2003). The cost of homelessness in Canada is estimated between 4 – 5 billion per year for sheltering and providing health care services, addiction services etc to homeless (Laird, 2007).

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS: WHAT THE LITERATURE TELLS US

Research illustrates that homeless youth are not one homogenous group. Homeless youth come from a variety of different backgrounds and circumstances that include histories of unemployment, family violence, lack of affordable housing, low income, foster care, mental health problems, substance abuse and others (CMHC, 2001). Homeless youth and children are impacted by the same factors as their families such as poverty, family violence, job loss and low wages, but youth face the additional challenges that their inexperience and dependence on adults creates. Like adults they can move in and out of a homeless state. Youth are more vulnerable to homelessness than their homeless adult counterparts. They lack experience, education, employment skills, adequate income and sophistication. A recent Alberta Children's Services report highlights barriers to stable housing such as those experienced by pregnant and parenting teens as well as youth with disabilities. Barriers are related to accessing shelters that are not wheelchair accessible for instance (Alberta Children's Services, 2007). Nationally and provincially, the major causes of youth homelessness as identified by youth are family related. The Alberta Children's Services report found that causes of youth using emergency shelters focused on conflict over "rules" at home at 32% and addiction problems (youth and others in the home at 20.6% (Alberta Children's Services, 2007). This evidence points to the need to re-connect youth with their families where possible and appropriate through the provision of supports such as conflict resolution and mediation. The link between youth homelessness and delinquency has also been demonstrated in several research studies that point to activities such as panhandling, sex trading, selling drugs and committing burglaries (Canada Housing and Renewal Association, 2002). The Alberta Children's Services report also found that homeless youth; engaged in criminal activity (27.9), experienced some form of exploitation (18.5%) and were involved in prostitution (9.5%). A Toronto study found that 3 out of 4 homeless street youth were involved in delinquent activity described as stealing, burglary and incarceration and that this was linked to a lack of stable shelter and length of time on the street. (Canada Housing and Renewal Association, 2002) A national study found that homeless youth are five times more likely to experience assault and theft and are ten times more likely to be victims of robbery and sexual assault than their housed youth counterparts (Gaetz, 2004) Males account for a greater portion of homeless youth in most Canadian communities although populations of young females are growing (CMHC, 2001). The Alberta report also found that males accounted for the majority of the youth homeless population (Alberta Children's Services, 2007). National youth homeless profiles point to an over-representation of youth from care environments in emergency shelters and in youth homeless counts across Canadian cities (CMHC, 2001). Gaps in child welfare and protection services for youth 16 and older is a contributing factor in many regions. When many youth leave the system they often live on the streets (YSIN, 2007). For instance, a 2005 Halifax study found that 50% of homeless

youth reported previous involvement with the child welfare system (HRM, 2005). A 2007 report conducted by the Alberta Children's Services Ministry found that the largest percentage of youth using emergency shelters at 20% come from foster care or group care circumstance (Alberta Children's Services, 2007). Other studies of Canadian homeless youth have shown high rates of up to 40% of previous involvement with child welfare systems (Clarke and Cooper, 2000; Gaetz et al, 1999).

RESPONDING TO HOMELESSNESS: WHAT THE LITERATURE TELLS US

The literature illustrates that shelter is the first step toward recovery from homelessness. Shelter meets a basic human need for safety and protection and provides individuals the stability they require to adequately contribute to, and not impede, the social and economic development of their communities (Laird 2007, TD Bank Economics, 2003). Housing is a cornerstone of society and essential for individual participation in social and economic life and moreover for societal growth and well being. Along with stability it provides a basis for developing connections with the broader community through neighborhood, employment and educational networks (Hay, 2005). Without adequate, safe and appropriate shelter, youth and other homeless individuals are excluded and marginalized from mainstream life and subject to a great many risks that accompany or are intensified by homelessness such as violence, poor health, hunger, addictions, unemployment, mental health problems and others (Bryant, 2002; Hay, 2005).

Just as there is no one cause or consequence of youth homelessness, there is also no one specific approach to addressing youth homelessness. Emergency shelters have been the traditional response in many Canadian communities to respond to youth homelessness but new research favors long term approaches that address root causes of homelessness and focus on providing youth with permanent housing accompanied by supports to move them to self-sufficiency (HRM, 2005).

Youth shelters act as a "first stop" for many youth, and provide essential services that provide a temporary place to stay and access to critical supports to address pressing concerns related to food security, getting help for addictions, accessing income supports, reconnecting with family etc. (Alberta Children's Services, 2007). A recent report conducted by the Alberta Department of Children's Services indicates that shelters in the province are providing services to youth to address complex issues that include outreach services, employment and addictions counseling, cultural, educational and recreational programming and programs to address abuse and neglect experienced by youth, before they left home (Alberta Children's Services, 2007). A recent Toronto study shows that Toronto youth shelter systems over the last twenty years have expanded to include the provision of services that fall far outside the scope of basic food, safety and shelter provision to homeless (YSIN, 2007). Toronto youth shelters like those in Alberta, provide services to youth to deal with a host of issues that accompany or intensify homelessness such as a lack of education or skills for employment, a lack of affordable housing, low income, a lack of household management skills, substance abuse issues etc indicating that youth homeless needs go well beyond that of food and shelter (YSIN, 2007)

Although youth shelters over the last decade have evolved to provide more than essential crisis services, the research is clear that the complexity of issues that youth

homeless are encountering require more than temporary, emergency solutions but require that underlying “root” causes of homelessness be addressed (HRM, 2005). The high costs associated with providing expensive emergency services to address issues that are intensified or accompany homelessness lends strength to the argument a prevention approach to addressing homelessness is far more cost effective than reactive emergency responses. A British Columbia report conducted in 2001 highlighted the cost of homelessness finding that an emergency shelter with high levels of support costs approximately \$60-\$85 a day compared to \$20-\$25 a day for a supportive hotel or \$21-\$38 a day for a self contained apartment with some support (British Columbia Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security, 2001). Further, the report found that the combined cost of shelter and support services for a single person ranged from \$30,000 - \$40,000 on average per year while the costs of services and housing for “housed” individuals was \$22,000 - \$28,000 per year (British Columbia Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security, 2001). Provincially, the cost of a shelter bed for youth per night ranges from \$65.75 - \$184.40 with provincial average being \$106.72 (Alberta Children’s Services, 2007).

The increasing complexity of issues confronting homeless youth, the high costs associated with providing emergency services and the increasing breadth of services provided by shelters are evidence enough that emergency shelters cannot cope with the full spectrum of need of homeless youth. The literature indicates that emergency housing though an important part of the continuum of housing supports is not sufficient in and of itself to address housing security issues that impede youth housing stability and independence (Community Development Halton, 2007). The National Homelessness Partnership Strategy also encourages communities to go beyond just meeting emergency needs to consider transitional and long term solutions to support more secure and permanent living situations for homeless individuals and families and makes reference to the Housing First approach to ending homelessness that advocates for permanent housing for all homeless irregardless of existing addictions, mental health issues or lack of income. This approach is founded on the belief that youth and other homeless individuals should be provided with immediate permanent housing to stabilize their lives before they receive the important interventions or support services they need to address the factors that prompted their homelessness in the first place (Victoria Cool Aid Society, 2007). This approach differs from the emergency or transitional housing approach to sheltering homeless in that it eliminates barriers to safe secure housing and allows homeless individuals to address the causes of homelessness such as poverty and a lack of affordable housing as well as personal issues that homeless are experiencing such as addictions, mental health problems, family violence etc from the security of a home. According to one British Columbia research study, a housing first approach would translate into that government saving \$12,000 a year for each homeless person (Victoria Cool Aid Society, 2007).

Other research has identified the need for long term transitional housing or housing with a three year time limit as a priority need for homeless youth and as one of a range of options that should be available to youth (Clarke and Cooper, 2000) Some researchers argue that ending homelessness and reducing taxpayer costs is as simple as providing decent, adequate and supportive housing to eliminate the need for costly crisis services that are provided to homeless through health, social, justice (Laird, 2007; TD Bank Economics, 2003). This approach focuses on preventing use of other costly government programs and services such as health care, criminal justice, and social services by

providing more affordable and supportive housing to help individuals secure or maintain existing housing (Victoria Cool Aid Society, 2007).

Effective youth housing programs also encompass an outreach and/or drop in service to housing programs that are provided based on the individual needs of youth and include assistance with finding housing, in accessing individual and family services, counseling services and employment and job training programs (Community Development Halton , 2007). Outreach is seen as critical in ensuring that both visible and hidden homeless youth are connected with appropriate supports necessary to ensure housing stability.

Key themes and activities found effective for successful housing of homeless youth with respect to facilities and supports include those that;

- Meet youth's basic and immediate needs for safe, affordable shelter (ideally permanent or supportive transitional)
- Provide outreach services to connect youth to needed supports
- Ensure availability and access to programs and services to address personal causes of homelessness and accompanying issues that are barriers to successful housing
- Permit youth to stay for extended periods
- Focus on assisting youth to move to housing permanency and self-sufficiency

The following programs and services represent promising practices in youth shelter provision in Canada and provide long term supportive settings to stabilize youth and support them in addressing housing, employment, addiction and family issues. These facilities and support programs combine supportive transitional housing with employment training for instance and have been recognized for their success rates in helping youth transition toward independent living.

Eva's Phoenix – Toronto, Ontario

Operate 50 units of transitional housing for homeless and at risk youth aged 16-29 with the goal of providing youth with housing security and programs and services including employment training, life skills, employment counseling etc. that assist youth as they move toward self-sufficiency. The transitional program is 1 year in duration.

Abbott House – Peterborough, Ontario

A transitional housing facility that accepts referrals from youth aged 16-24 in its emergency shelter. Programs focused on addressing barriers to housing security and related issues to assist youth with moving towards housing stability and self sufficiency.

First Steps in Housing Project – Saint John, New Brunswick

A supportive transitional housing facility for pregnant teens and infants that provides services to assist youth as they move toward housing stability and self sufficiency.

Vancity Place for Youth – Vancouver, British Columbia

A 10 unit affordable housing facility that provides services to assist youth as they move toward housing stability and self- sufficiency. Services include counseling, employment and skills training and education. Rental rates for affordable housing units correspond to government allowances for youth.

Auberge Communautaire du Sud-Ouest – Montreal, Quebec

A long -term housing facility that provides services to assist youth as they move toward housing stability and self sufficiency. Services help to address barriers to housing security and related issues and help stop cycle of youth dependence on crisis shelter.

Phoenix House – Crisis Center – Halifax Regional Municipality

An emergency youth facility where youth can upgrade their education, receive counseling, health services, life skills, household management etc. while they stay at center for approximately one year. The crisis center houses 10 youth at a time.

Phoenix House - Supervised Apartment Program

A long term stay facility composed of 3 homes in the community each housing 3 youth and a staff member. Youth from the Phoenix Crisis Center are referred when they are ready to move toward housing security and self sufficiency. This period is seen as a critical transition period where youth require permanency in housing.

Vancouver Kool Aid Society “Pandora’s Project”

A transitional facility for youth aged 18-20 composed of 8 small self contained units. Youth receive services to improve their ability to live independently and manage a household. They receive not only crisis homeless services but services to assist transition to independent living such as education, counseling services and other programs geared to keep youth safe while they access supports to transition to housing independence.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to enumerate youth in Fort McMurray experiencing homelessness, to assess the circumstances they experience when they leave home and to identify effective practices for responding to youth homelessness at the local level. In particular the survey was developed to answer questions related to the numbers and ages of youth experiencing homelessness, causes of youth leaving home, where youth stay when they are homeless, their employment and school attendance status and their involvement in criminal or unsafe behaviour. A review of current literature on youth homelessness and shelter and support services was included in the study to provide insight into factors that contribute to youth homelessness, the impact and cost of youth homelessness and to identify promising approaches to alleviate youth homelessness. The youth shelter survey findings coupled with a review of current relevant literature on youth homelessness, youth emergency shelters and of current programs and services addresses the following questions:

1. Does the number and nature of youth homelessness, and accompanying support issues warrant the development of youth shelter in Fort McMurray?
2. Considering the results of the literature research on youth shelter and youth homelessness what are effective interventions for responding to the needs of homeless youth?

The survey was designed through the collaboration of Family and Community Support Services, Child and Family Services Authority, the Nistawoyou Friendship Centre, St. Aidan's House Society and a local youth advocate. The committee discussed the data they wanted to collect and identified the age group and locations that the survey would target. A point in time survey was conducted to count the youth homeless population on one particular day. The point in time survey provides a "snapshot" picture of youth homelessness.

This one page survey was designed to ask questions related to the numbers and ages of Fort McMurray youth experiencing homelessness, causes of youth leaving home, where youth stay when they are homeless, their employment and school attendance status and their involvement in criminal or unsafe behaviour. Details of each question in the survey can be found in the appendix of this document. The survey questionnaire was pre-tested with youth between the ages of 15 and 17 years of age via MACOY, the Mayor's Advisory Council on Youth, to determine strengths and weaknesses of the survey concerning question format, wording and order. The youth made a number of thoughtful suggestions to improve the anonymity of the responses, the number of questions asked and to improve question clarity. The survey questionnaire was also reviewed by representatives of both Public and Catholic school boards who approved the use of the survey in all junior and high schools in Fort McMurray. A French language version of the survey was developed for use in French speaking classrooms.

On May 15th, 2007 the point-in time survey was administered to Fort McMurray youth between the ages of 12 and 17 in junior and high school classrooms and at street locations where youth are known to congregate. It was also administered via volunteers to youth at four downtown street locations; the Dugout Coffeehouse and Youth Centre

at Borealis Park, Flavors convenience store on Franklin Avenue, the Provincial Building Bus Stop on Franklin and Main and Mac's Food Store at the corner of Franklin and King Street. Surveys were collected from the offices of the local Alberta Drug and Alcohol Commission (AADAC), probation and YMCA Youth Connections on the day of the count as well. In total 2204 paper surveys were completed and returned. The survey data was entered into the Canadian Outcomes Research Institute database and results tabulated by frequency and percentages.

Limitations related to point in time surveys are related to the fact that the survey only captures individuals experiencing homelessness on that particular day. Additionally the survey captured youth responses and required that youth self report their homeless status. The limitations of the survey method arise due to the fact that some youth who clearly fit the definition of homeless do not necessarily consider themselves to be homeless and therefore do not report their status as homeless. Such was the case in a Calgary study that found that two out of five youth who were staying in emergency shelters, parks or who were squatting did not view (and therefore did not report) themselves as homeless (Clarke and Cooper, 2000).

Homeless youth can be difficult to identify, locate and count due to the hidden or unfixed nature of their housing status. The literature indicates that invisibility is a survival mechanism for many youth and that their numbers are probably underestimated. Youth are a highly mobile transient group who often make efforts to avoid the detection of parents, protective guardians, the police and other adults responsible for their care. Some homeless youth do not attend school where they can connect with supports or services making it difficult for them to access the resources they need to achieve housing stability. Therefore it is possible that the number of youth homeless is greater than the 65 who were identified on the day of the count.

To ensure the Fort McMurray youth shelter results were reliable, survey findings were validated with those who work with youth including school officials, government workers and other youth stakeholders. Validation of survey findings was accomplished by distributing a summary of the survey findings to key youth stakeholders requesting they respond to the survey research findings and add their perspectives. Their comments and feedback confirm the accuracy of the numbers and circumstance reported by youth.

A review of current Canadian literature on youth homelessness and shelter and support services was undertaken in July 2007 and included material from government, academic, business and grassroots literature. The review focused on material published after 2000 and on youth aged 12 – 24 as this is the age most often cited in the research. A review of current Canadian literature on youth homelessness and youth shelter provides an understanding of the issue of homelessness, highlights the unique circumstance and needs of homeless youth and points to promising short and long term strategies to combat youth homelessness. This report includes literature related to the role of shelter in individual and societal development, of trends in homelessness (especially youth homelessness) in Canada, of causes of youth homelessness, of costs or impact of homelessness.

STUDY FINDINGS

FORT MCMURRAY SURVEY FINDINGS

The youth shelter survey was conducted with 2204 youth on May 15th, 2007 in Fort McMurray. A total of 65 youth aged 11-17 reported they were living away from home without shelter, or living in unsafe or temporary housing. These youth meet the definition of homeless. The survey results however do not suggest that 65 youth are living on the streets, rather that 65 youth at the time of the count did not have safe, permanent, adequate and appropriate places to live. Youth like their adult homeless counterparts can move in and out of a homeless state and they can experience episodic homelessness triggered by family conflict, poverty, pregnancy, lack of education, lack of affordable housing or other circumstances. The numbers of youth actually experiencing homelessness over a given period likely fluctuates depending on when and where the counts are undertaken (period of low rental vacancy rates and high rental rates, period of high population growth, in populations of concentrated poverty etc.)

The breakdown for each age included one 11 year old, five 12 year olds, seven 13 year olds, sixteen 14 year olds, fourteen 15 year olds, nine 16 year olds and thirteen 17 year olds. Males accounted for 61% of the youth self reporting. The survey permitted youth to select more than one response to questions.

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND EMPLOYMENT STATUS

When asked about school attendance and current employment status, forty-two of the homeless or 65% of youth respondents indicated they were attending school. One youth reported they were attending school and working full time. Thirteen youth were working part time while attending school. Six youth were working full time and sixteen youth were working part time. Thirteen youth indicated they were unemployed and 5 youth were both unemployed and not attending school.

YOUTH AND CARE SYSTEM

Twenty four, or more than 1/3 of Fort McMurray's homeless youth, had lived in youth foster care, a group home, a treatment center or an assessment center at some point prior to their homeless state. Fourteen of the 24 youth had stayed in a treatment center, 11 in a foster home, 7 stayed in a group home and 7 had stayed in an assessment center previously.

YOUTH CRIME/EXPLOITATION

The report also found that 39 youth or 61% of homeless youth respondents experienced high risk encounters while homeless. Of those youth respondents 79% reported experiencing criminal behaviour and substance abuse while homeless, 22 or 56% reported panhandling activity and 22 reported providing favors for a place to stay. Other experiences reported in small scale by youth while homeless include physical violence, drug trafficking, sex trading and in one instance, sexual assault.

CAUSES OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Issues that focused on the family accounted for the bulk of causes of homelessness as identified by Fort McMurray youth. Over half of all youth identified family conflict as a cause of their homelessness and 47% identified family breakdown including family violence, physical and/or sexual assault. Parents or guardians, drug or alcohol use (44 %) and/or the youth's personal drug or alcohol use (42%) combined was the second most commonly cited cause of youth homelessness. Fourteen youth or approximately 25% cited mental health problems as a cause, 24% cited finances and 22% identified lack of skills, education or experience to obtain employment. Twenty percent of youth identified housing discrimination and 18% cited affordable housing. More than one cause or factor could be identified by youth as contributing to their housing status.

WHERE YOUTH STAY WHEN THEY LEAVE HOME

The majority of youth, 29 in total or 47% reported that they stay with friends when they are away from home. Eighteen youth or 29% reported staying in a park, eleven or 17% stayed in a car six stayed with relatives and six stayed in shelters in other communities. The survey permitted youth to select more than one response. In small numbers, youth also identified local outdoor locations where they stay when they leave home that will not be divulged in the report.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A study of the literature documents the role of shelter in stabilizing individual life and community life and in setting the foundation for participation in community, economic and social development. It highlights the complexity of circumstances (both personal and systemic) that cause youth to be without safe, affordable, adequate shelter and suggests a range of targeted services to address the multiple challenges – economic, education, social, health– that homeless youth face. Further the literature indicates that both short and long term strategies are needed to stabilize youth lives and address barriers in securing and maintaining permanent, appropriate housing and points to the significance of providing youth with immediate housing and moving youth toward housing independence. Finally, transitional and affordable housing programs and supports such as assistance accessing local affordable housing programs, income supports, landlord and tenant mediation services, household management and budgeting programs, and others are seen as critical to successful transitioning of youth into housing stability and independence.

The youth shelter survey findings and the findings from the literature review indicate that Fort McMurray has a vulnerable homeless youth population experiencing a variety of issues that trigger or intensify their homelessness and place them at risk for other factors. McMurray homeless youth have identified causes of their homelessness as family issue related and also related to substance use by youth and/or their parents or guardians. The findings also highlight a correlation between homelessness and youth involvement in crime, panhandling and exploitation, identify that youth from care are over represented in the youth homeless population and show that some homeless youth are finding shelter in unsafe, unsuitable and inadequate places such as in parks, cars, tents and under bridges.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The number and nature of youth homelessness, and accompanying support issues warrants the development of a youth shelter in Fort McMurray. The findings highlight key themes related to local youth homeless needs including;

1. The need for youth to be immediately housed whether through supportive transitional or more ideally permanent housing approaches to ensure youth achieve security, stability and the sense of stability they require to move forward. Fort McMurray youth indicated they stay with friends most often but also in parks and in cars, clearly pointing to the vulnerability and instability of these housing circumstances to say nothing of safety and health concerns confronting local youth. These youth need to be quickly housed.
2. The need for supports to prevent and address underlying causes of youth homelessness such as family conflict, substance abuse and mental health problems and a lack of affordable housing. The findings highlight the heightened vulnerability of homeless youth who are living in unsafe or temporary shelter or on the street and point to their involvement with crime and the justice system and activities that put them at risk that accompany their homelessness.

3. The need for housing and supports targeted to youth transitioning from care who make up 1/3 of Fort McMurray's homeless youth population.
4. The need to provide outreach services to connect both visible and hidden homeless populations of youth to needed supports and to support youth transitioning from care or from housing instability toward housing security . A model such as the Fort McMurray based Supportive Transitional Housing Team that delivers wrap around system of services in a collaborative coordinated way to homeless individuals should be considered.

It was noted in the provincial report that our region (Northeast Region 9) is one of only three regions across the province that does not have a youth shelter. The other regions are region 7 and region 10. For youth needing placement the report indicates that local Children's Services staff members assist them with finding temporary shelter with friends or extended family. Foster care also is used occasionally. There are currently no existing emergency shelter beds for youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Youth Shelter Sub-Committee recommends that policies, programs and services seeking to prevent and address youth homelessness in Fort McMurray be directed toward:

Short term

- Providing immediate shelter (ideally permanent) to homeless youth with the goal of stabilizing their housing situation so that they are in a position to receive other needed supports to help them move toward housing security and self sufficiency.
- Providing a range of programs and services specifically targeted to address the individual risk factors/circumstance that led to their homelessness. Supports such as family counseling, mediation and conflict resolution services must be targeted to homeless youth and easily accessible to them to help re-connect them to their families and stabilize the family home. Programs to address youth and /or family substance abuse problems should also accompany supports provided as together they account for the second most common cause of local youth homelessness as reported by youth. In particular local youth stakeholders who reviewed the survey findings indicated that there are currently no addiction programs for local youth and that this is a service that is absolutely required for teens in the Fort McMurray region.
- Provide outreach services as a part of a housing component to connect both visible and hidden homeless populations of youth to needed supports and to support youth transitioning from care or from housing instability toward housing security by helping them to address barriers impeding their housing success.

Long term

- Preventing homelessness by engaging all levels of government and youth in addressing policies and programs related to affordable housing supply, poverty, low income, education and other systemic causes of homelessness

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Fort McMurray Youth Shelter Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. If you have previously completed this survey, please do not continue.

1. Age _____ Gender _____

2. Have you (or a young person you know) ever chosen or been asked to leave home for at least one night? **Yes** **No** (please circle one)

3. Where have you stayed when you have left home:
 - With friends
 - With relatives
 - In a park
 - In a car
 - In a shelter in another community
 - Other _____

4. Are you currently living away from home without shelter, or living in unsafe or temporary housing? **Yes** **No** (please circle one)

5. What is the major cause (s) of your homelessness?
 - Family breakdown (family violence, physical or sexual abuse)
 - Parents/guardians drug or alcohol use
 - Personal drug or alcohol use
 - Family conflict (unable to get along)
 - Mental health issues
 - Lack of affordable housing
 - Housing discrimination (age, gender, race)
 - Lack of skills, education, or experience to obtain employment
 - Financial resources
 - Not applicable
 - Other, please specify _____

6. What are you doing now? (circle all that apply)
 - Attending school
 - Working full time
 - Working part time
 - Unemployed
 - Other, please specify _____

7. Have you previously lived in a:
 - Foster home
 - Group home
 - Youth assessment centre
 - Youth treatment centre
 - Youth correctional centre
 - Not applicable

8. Have you experienced **any** of the following while homeless?
 - Panhandling
 - Criminal behaviour (shoplifting, substance abuse etc.)
 - Providing "favours" for a place to stay
 - Other, please specify _____
 - Not applicable

Comments:

_____ (Please use back of sheet)