



REPORT TO: Co-Chairs and Members of Public Health and Social Services Committee

SUBJECT: Understanding Homelessness in Niagara – An Investigation of the Dynamics of Youth Homelessness

RECOMMENDATION

That this Committee recommend to Regional Council that this report be received for information.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Community Services is the local service system manager for homelessness prevention and intervention services for the Niagara region. This role includes coordination and accountability for local, provincial and federal funding and program priorities.
- The Niagara Homelessness Community Plan (2006) set the local focus for investments and interventions. Stakeholders identified and reached consensus on the following five imperatives: coordination of services; continuum of services; capacity building; prevention focus; advocacy; and financial resources.
- Within the plan, a key foundational principle was to develop an understanding of client needs and ensure that services are reflective of identified need.
- Community Services worked with Start Me Up Niagara and Dr. Stephanie Baker Collins to build on local knowledge regarding the dynamics of homelessness.
- The report entitled “Sofas, Shelters and Strangers” captures important learning about the causes and impacts of homelessness for youth in Niagara and provides eight recommendations which will inform local practice and future investments.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

PURPOSE

This report has been prepared to inform Regional Council of the locally produced report, “Sofas, Shelters and Strangers” which details the dynamics of youth homelessness experiences in Niagara.

BACKGROUND

Community Services is the service system manager for homelessness prevention and interventions for the Niagara region. The system of supports includes emergency hostels, prevention, outreach and transitional housing services funded by local, provincial and federal government. A detailed list of providers and programs is attached as *Appendix A*.

In 2006, Community Services worked with local stakeholders to develop the Niagara Homelessness Community Plan¹. The plan is organized into five sections which reflect the strategic imperatives identified during the consultation process:

- Coordination of services;
- Continuum of services;
- Capacity building;
- Prevention focus;
- Politics of homelessness; and
- Financial investment.

Stakeholders strongly and consistently voiced that planning and service delivery be guided by an understanding of client needs in order to ensure that services are reflective of identified need. However, knowledge about the causes and impacts of homelessness in Niagara is limited. Furthermore, people who experience homelessness are not a homogenous group. Building responsive services and supports is challenged by these gaps in knowledge. However, stakeholders are working toward eliminating this gap.

In Niagara, work has been underway to better understand the dynamics of youth homelessness. In 2006, local Fort Erie stakeholders agreed that homelessness amongst the youth population was an issue. However, rather than assuming that a shelter would respond to this need, it was decided that more information could help to determine if a youth shelter in Fort Erie was sustainable. Two researchers from Brock University were engaged by the Town of Fort Erie. Their report recommended that an integrated task force or committee be created to address the issue of youth without secure housing. The Youth without Secure Housing (YWSH) Advisory Committee was established and included youth, local service providers and Community Services.

¹ COM 48-2006 updated from COM 15-2006 Consolidated Homelessness Prevention Program

At the same time, the St. Catharines Chapter of the Canadian Federation of University Women raised the issue of youth homelessness within their organization, and met with every Member of Parliament and Member of Provincial Parliament in Niagara. They also brought together a group of concerned stakeholders to address the issue of youth and homelessness. After the first meeting of this committee, the decision was made to focus on transitional, supported housing as a response to youth who are homeless in Niagara.

Community Services has been involved in the discussions in Fort Erie and St. Catharines and has encouraged the committees to look beyond their communities to respond to youth who are homelessness across the region. In 2008, the two committees merged in order to take more of a regional approach to the issue of youth homelessness. In Niagara, the continuum of homelessness prevention and intervention services provides some focus on youth who are homeless. These are:

| Intervention | Agency | Population Served |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Hostels | Hannah House | Young Mothers and Children |
| | Nightlight Youth Shelter | Single Youth |
| | The RAFT | Single Youth |
| Prevention | The RAFT | Youth Reconnect - Youth Without Secure Housing |
| Supported Transitional Housing | YWCA Niagara Region | Youth Transitional Housing |

These are important supports for youth who are currently homeless however more information would facilitate the organization of the system to effectively prevent future incidents of homelessness for both youth and adults. With this in mind, Community Services worked with Start Me Up Niagara and Dr. Stephanie Baker Collins of McMaster University to look at the local causes and impacts of homelessness for youth.

REPORT

From February 2009 to February 2010, Dr. Baker Collins undertook a study to better understand the dynamics of homelessness in Niagara. Specifically, the goals of the study were:

- To find out more about the nature of youth homelessness in Niagara, particularly its causes and impacts;
- To explore the connection between becoming homeless at a young age and later adult chronic homelessness. The possibility that homeless youth may become chronically homeless adults makes youth homelessness a special concern;
- To examine youth homelessness across Niagara's diverse geographic mix of small urban, small town and rural areas and determine whether and how youth homelessness looks different depending on geographic location; and
- To use the increased knowledge of the causes and impacts of youth homelessness to develop responses that better meet the needs of homeless youth.

This project was not intended to count the number of youth who are homeless in Niagara, but rather intended to explore the causes and impacts of youth homelessness including the impacts that may contribute to homelessness for adults.

Key Findings

- The families of origin for the youth in the study reflect a range of income levels, with 42% of youth describing their financial situation while growing up as average, 21% as above average and 37% as below average. The majority of parents were working full time, though their levels of education are below the average for the Niagara region.
- The immediate cause of homelessness for 55% of the youth was conflict, abuse, and/or substance abuse on the part of parents. For 25% of the youth the immediate cause was conflict over youth behaviour, for 20% conflict with roommates or landlords and two became homeless after difficulty adjusting to a family move.
- Prior to becoming homeless, most youth experienced significant childhood stress in the form of parental conflict and divorce, experiencing/witnessing abuse, and parental substance abuse. Youth experienced multiple childhood stressors while growing up with the average number being five.
- The adult population first became homeless on average at age 16.
- The cause of the first homelessness episode for the adult population was abuse, conflict and substance abuse on the part of parents for 40%, abandonment or death of a caregiver for 20%, a combination of an abusive home followed by conflict over youth behaviour for 20% and conflict over youth behaviour for 10%. Fewer of the adults were homeless as a result of their own behaviour than is true for the youth.
- The level of childhood stress experienced by the adults was significantly higher than for the youth, especially in the areas of parental conflict, parental substance abuse, and childhood abuse. The rate of childhood sexual abuse is much higher for the adult population than for the youth. In addition, two additional stressors of abandonment and death of a family member were found among the adult population.

Recommendations

The report's findings highlight the need for orchestration between the systems of support for youth like education, shelters, and social assistance. Working across these systems, local stakeholders could focus on the report's recommendations which are:

- To support school performance at the same time as addressing stable housing;
- To provide opportunities for healing from abuse and family conflict;
- To provide youth with adult mentors who can act as their emotional, social and developmental guide;
- To provide transitional supports for youth leaving shelters;
- To provide appropriate supports to overcome addictions and substance abuse;

- To provide youth in West Niagara with access to emergency shelter services; and
- To partner with the education system to ensure that youth who are homeless are aware of supports available to them and that these supports are accessible to them.

The findings and recommendations of this report present a key opportunity for local stakeholders to effectively and intentionally work together to alter the status quo in order to produce significant shifts in the current trajectory for youth who are homeless in Niagara. This work is also an important piece of local knowledge that informs updating Community Services Homelessness Community Plan as outlined in COM 41-2010.

Submitted by:

Approved by:

Brian Hutchings
Commissioner, Community Services

Mike Trojan
Chief Administrative Officer

This report was prepared by Sarah Pennisi, Director, Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities.

Appendix A

List of providers and programs

Appendix A

Providers and Programs

| Service Area | Agency | Project(s) |
|--------------------------------|---|--|
| Outreach | Community Care of St. Catharines and Thorold | Niagara Homelessness Initiative Outreach |
| Hostels | Casa El Norte | Newcomers – Singles and Families |
| | Hannah House | Young Mothers and Children |
| | HOPE House | Single Male and Female – Two family units |
| | Matthew House | Newcomers – Singles and Families |
| | Nightlight Youth Shelter | Single Youth |
| | The RAFT | Single Youth |
| | Salvation Army | Booth Centre – Single males |
| | Southridge Emergency Shelter | Single Males and Females |
| | YWCA Niagara Region | Women and Children |
| | YWCA Niagara Region | Women and Children |
| Prevention | Community Care of St. Catharines & Thorold | Housing Help - Niagara Emergency Energy Fund (NEEF) |
| | Community Care of West Niagara | Niagara Emergency Energy Fund (NEEF) |
| | Grimsby Benevolent Fund | Niagara Emergency Energy Fund (NEEF) |
| | The HOPE Centre | Community Coach - Niagara Emergency Energy Fund (NEEF) |
| | Open Doors Concepts | Housing Supports |
| | Port Cares | Housing Loss Prevention |
| | | Niagara Emergency Energy Fund (NEEF) |
| | Project Share | Homelessness Prevention Project - Niagara Emergency Energy Fund (NEEF) |
| | The RAFT | Youth Reconnect - Youth Without Secure Housing |
| | Salvation Army | Niagara Emergency Energy Fund (NEEF) - Water Emergency Relief Fund |
| | Start Me Up Niagara | Housing Preservation |
| | West Lincoln Community Care | Niagara Emergency Energy Fund (NEEF) |
| Supported Transitional Housing | Bethlehem Projects | Supported Housing & Outreach Services |
| | Canadian Mental Health Association – Niagara Branch | Manchester House |
| | Grimsby Affordable Housing Partnership | Housing Support and Resource |
| | Port Cares | Moving Forward |
| | YWCA Niagara Region | Offsite Transitional Housing |
| | YWCA Niagara Region | Youth Transitional Housing |