



Income/Homeless outreach

Project Overview

In June 2006, working in partnership with the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, the Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division initiated a year-long pilot project to deliver outreach services to homeless individuals at eight core locations around the province.

The project goal was:

- » To reduce homelessness by assisting homeless individuals to access long-term solutions to address their state of homelessness including access to housing, a stable source of income, and other support services.

Project staff consisted of four full-time and four part-time outreach workers, and a project coordinator.

Primary activities included engaging homeless individuals and families and providing support with access to income assistance, finding and securing housing, and connecting to various health and social services.

The Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance was a key partner in this pilot project, developing protocols to ensure that all outreach clients were expediently connected to the income supports they are entitled to.

Outreach services were delivered by CMHA branches and local community agencies to over **900 people** from June 2006 to July 2007 in:

- » Kelowna
- » Kamloops (Kamloops & Merritt)
- » Simon Fraser (New Westminster and Maple Ridge)
- » North Shore (North and West Vancouver)
- » Sea-to-Sky (Squamish & Pemberton)
- » Port Alberni (Port Alberni, Parksville, Ucluelet, and Tofino)
- » Williams Lake
- » 100 Mile House

outcomes

Approximately **one third** of all clients were connected to income assistance over the course of the project; another **one third** were assisted in finding housing. By July 2007, **over 80%** of these individuals continued to receive income assistance and sustain their housing.

Background

Homelessness in BC

Homelessness is a growing issue throughout British Columbia and is becoming increasingly visible in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Factors contributing to homelessness are complex, including both structural and individual issues.

Longstanding structural issues like the ongoing impacts of colonization, federal government withdrawal from the public housing sector, and a lack of appropriate health and social services are currently being compounded by a provincial economic boom and rising real estate costs. These structural factors intersect with individual experiences of childhood instability, violence and abuse, addiction, mental illness and discrimination to produce a shocking reality of growing poverty and marginalization.

CMHA income/homeless advocacy

Access to adequate income is one of the necessary components of any strategy to address homelessness. The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) has a long history of advocating for equitable access to income supports for people with mental illness, a disproportionate number of whom are homeless. In the early to mid 1990's CMHA BC Division worked in coalition to ensure a number of changes to income assistance for people with disabilities including broader eligibility criteria for the disability designation. In 2002, despite CMHA's opposition to the review of individual's disability designation, CMHA BC worked with the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance to minimize the impact of this review on people with mental illness; eight CMHA branches provided front-line support to those whose designation were being reviewed.

» Key Project Lessons

Research & Evaluation

In addition to outreach services, the project had a strong focus on research and evaluation to learn more about best practice in the delivery of outreach services in 'less urban' contexts. A variety of research and evaluation activities were undertaken:

- » Key informant interviews with 92 individuals in 27 small communities throughout the province, such as Powell River, Port Hardy, Cranbrook, and Fort Nelson
- » Exploratory interviews with 21 outreach clients and landlords/property managers
- » External evaluation by CitySpaces Consulting Ltd.
- » Community Impact Survey completed by 60 staff members at relevant Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance offices, community agencies, and MLA constituency offices

For all reports, please see the Income/Homeless Outreach webpage under the Advocacy section at www.cmha.bc.ca.

did you know?

- » Average rent paid by outreach clients: \$479
- » Current Income Assistance shelter allowance: \$375
- » Percentage of the outreach client base who are Aboriginal people: 22%
- » Percentage of BC's total population who are Aboriginal people: 4.4% (2001 census)

Housing + Homelessness

1) Critical province-wide affordable housing shortage

- » Outreach workers and key informants reported that the lack of suitable affordable housing was the number one barrier to addressing homelessness. This was consistent from our largest outreach community, Kelowna (pop. 106,700), to our smallest, 100 Mile House (pop. 1,900).

"Lack of low-income housing is terrible here. Nowhere on the Coast can you get shelter in a one bedroom [for] anything under \$600/month."
~Sechelt informant

2) First Nations people are disproportionately homeless and experience homelessness differently.

- » Key informants in small BC communities estimated that approximately 50% of all absolutely homeless people—that is, people who are sleeping 'rough' or staying in emergency shelters—are First Nations people.
- » 22% of outreach client base were First Nations people.
- » Key Informants and outreach workers also identified that First Nations people, as well as youth and individuals on social assistance, were more likely to be discriminated against when they tried to access rental housing.

"Too many of my clients are Aboriginal people; high rates of poverty and homelessness in the Aboriginal community are results of a long history of colonization and its ongoing effects."

~Outreach worker

"Racism—landlords don't want to rent to Native people"

~Outreach worker

3) Formerly homeless people are finding housing in market units

- » 67% of outreach clients were housed in market housing—that is, in apartments, rooming houses, hotels or a room in a house. Supported housing, public and non-profit housing is full; only 4% of outreach clients were housed in these types of housing, with an additional 5% housed in emergency shelters.

4) Market landlords need housing support services

- » Landlords, outreach workers, and key informants identified that *both tenants and landlords* need supports to prevent evictions and break the cycle of homelessness. Providing mediation and liaison services can help tenants sustain their housing and ensure landlords will continue renting units to formerly homeless people.

"Resource person—what we need is a resource... someone you can phone at night or that morning and give them the report of what's happened that night. [Tenants] need to be attached to support workers."

~Landlord

5) Homelessness is not just an urban phenomenon

- » Key informants in 25 out of the 27 small BC communities contacted for our research reported a number of homeless individuals in their communities. (See www.cmha.bc.ca/advocacy/homelessness)
- » Homelessness in small communities has a markedly different face than urban homelessness, characterized most often by its invisibility. The majority of homeless individuals in our small outreach communities were 'relatively homeless'—that is, 'couch surfing' or living in substandard, overcrowded, or unsafe housing.

"In our area, people don't sleep in doorways or present as they traditionally do in the East side of Vancouver."

~Campbell River informant

6) Reputation matters

- » Individuals with histories of homelessness quickly ‘burn bridges’ in small communities and become ‘known’ to the few landlords or property managers in town. Reputations matter and create barriers to accessing housing.

“There are three or four families that are the worst in town; once you hear their name—don’t even think about it.”
~Landlord

Outreach Best Practice

1) Flexibility

- » Outreach workers, community impact survey respondents, and the external evaluation report noted that flexibility in outreach mandate, activities and availability allowed outreach workers to truly meet clients “where they’re at” and fill service gaps.

“Having the outreach worker for clients who don’t exactly fit within our mandate but clearly need support... is a real asset to our community”
~Community impact survey respondent

2) First Nations staff

- » External evaluation and key informants identified that employing First Nations staff facilitates better engagement with First Nations clients.
- » At the only outreach site with a First Nations outreach worker, 68% of the client base were First Nations people—more than triple the project average of 22%.

“Given the overrepresentation of homeless Aboriginal people, hiring staff with an Aboriginal background is a recommended approach.”
~External evaluation report

3) Building relationships & providing support to landlords

- » Relationship building with landlords was identified by outreach workers to be the most successful approach to securing accessible units for their clients.

“[I] maintain strong relationships with landlords. When I meet landlords, I make sure they’re clear who I am and what I can do for them; [I] encourage them to contact me.”
~Outreach worker

4) Follow-up support

- » Outreach workers and external evaluation highlighted the need to provide clients with ongoing support after they’ve been housed. Life skills support with budgeting, groceries, and home maintenance, as well as ensuring that clients are keeping appointments and staying ‘on track,’ is necessary to sustain housing.

“A large share of the clients will require ongoing support and engagement well after they secure their housing in order to prevent the cycle of homelessness.”
~External evaluation report

Income

1) Income Assistance (IA) shelter allowance limits housing options

- » Current IA shelter allowance rates do not provide individuals with many housing options; simply put, there is virtually no safe housing available at \$375.

“Rents are going up and MEIA shelter rate does not keep pace.”
~Powell River informant

2) Income assistance rent payment direct to landlords

- » Key informants and landlords identified that administering IA rent payment direct to landlords’ helps individuals with histories of homelessness sustain housing. Current Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance (MEIA) policy allows clients to remove rent payment direct to landlord designation.

“Anybody on [IA], rent should go direct to landlord. From now on, it has to be paid direct. You know, it can be very tempting when you get \$500 one day and it’s all you have to live on for the month.”
~Landlord

3) Homeless individuals benefit from support to access Income Assistance (IA)

- » Individuals with histories of homelessness have negative associations with most government offices and often need support navigating the IA application process
- » The Homeless Outreach Protocol—a protocol directing MEIA staff to expediently connect clients to IA—proved effective in quickly getting clients the income supports needed to secure housing.

“[I] support them through the intake process... being present is lots of support. Clients say [that] going to IA offices by themselves is scary [because] IA workers have a lot of power... clients are scared...[they’ve] had bad experiences.”
~Outreach worker

» Key Project Lessons

- » 93% of community impact survey respondents agreed that the outreach project had improved access to income assistance for homeless individuals.

4) Phone-based access to Income Assistance (IA) creates barriers

- » Outreach workers and community impact survey respondents highlighted that reliance on phone based access to Income Assistance creates barriers for homeless individuals attempting to connect to income supports.
- » At the only outreach site that relied on phone access to IA, the outreach worker connected 60% of her client base to Income Assistance, nearly double the 32% project average

“What has been effective is clients being able to access [the outreach worker], not an automated/telephone service. The individuals we support often cannot negotiate any service without direct assistance.”
~Community impact survey respondent

Health

1) High rates of mental health issues and addiction among the homeless population

- » External evaluation data illustrated that approximately 65% of outreach client base were reported to have a mental health issue and/or an addiction.
- » Key informants estimated that approximately 80% of all absolutely homeless individuals had a mental health issue and/or an addiction.
- » Depression and anxiety were the most commonly self-reported or observed mental health issues

(note that CMHA outreach workers and key informants were not all trained to do psychiatric assessment; as such, data is based on observable symptoms)

“Most [of my clients] have undiagnosed mental illnesses—some likely post-traumatic stress disorder, [from] often traumatic childhoods. Addictions [are] most likely”
~Outreach worker

2) Active addictions & housing instability are inextricably tied

- » The connection between active addictions and unstable housing cannot be overstated. Outreach workers reported little housing available for people that are active in addictions; landlords identified substance use as both the primary cause of eviction and rejection of potential tenants; informants noted that addiction is often the major barrier for people trying to access housing, and outreach clients consistently reported that addiction related issues led them to be homeless.

“Drugs—out of drugs, everything comes out.”
~Landlord

3) Insufficient detox & treatment services

- » Outreach workers and key informants consistently identified that insufficient detox and treatment services, along with insufficient services that support individuals to reintegrate back into the community post treatment, are some of the biggest barriers to addressing homelessness.

“No detox [in town]; no transportation to detox; long wait list for detox; long wait for treatment; have to be clean to stay in treatment.”
~Outreach worker

Next Steps

Based on the success of CMHA BC Division's pilot Income/Homeless Outreach project, BC Housing will continue to fund all CMHA outreach programs and a central coordination position, incorporating them into their already established Homeless Outreach Project. In addition, BC Housing is reviewing CMHA's evaluation database and seeing how it can be incorporated into a province wide data collection system for all BC Housing funded outreach projects.

For more information on BC Housing's Homeless Outreach Projects or to locate an outreach worker in your community, see the Homeless Outreach Projects webpage under the Housing Programs section at www.bchousing.org.

About CMHA

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is a charitable association which promotes the mental health of British Columbians through community-based programs, education and research services as well as encourages public involvement to strengthen mental health services, policy development and legislation.

CMHA BC has more than 50 years of service to British Columbians, is part of a network of 20 CMHA branches across BC and part of a national voluntary association that is Canada's oldest mental health charity. Learn more at www.cmha.bc.ca.