

Homelessness Forum #1

Exposing the Myths of Homelessness

Self Help Centre Hamilton ON – January 21, 2002

On the evening of January 21, 2002 nearly 200 community members gathered at the Self Help Centre to learn more about the myths of homelessness. This forum featured a panel-style discussion by five diverse and interesting speakers: Sherry Lewis, Native Women's Centre; Brother Richard MacPhee, Good Shepherd Centre; Craig Foye, Hamilton Mountain Legal Services; Jim Ward, Jim Ward Associates; and Michael Shapcott, National Housing and Homelessness Network.

The following comments are the speaker's opinions and not necessarily that of their agency.

Sherry Lewis - Native Women's Centre

"We need to look at homelessness differently in the Aboriginal community because mainstream models are not effective."

- It is important to identify the historical context from which Aboriginal people come. By understanding issues of appropriation of land and the colonization of Indigenous peoples, we can understand the foundation to "intergenerational homelessness". We must consider that people may be "dealing with homelessness not only for themselves but every member of their family. Knowing that your parents, your grandparents and their great-grandparents may have also experienced homelessness to a very harsh degree" can be a very difficult experience.
- Mainstream agencies are not set up to address the unique issues that contribute to Aboriginal people facing homelessness. Immediate problems are identified without considering the experiences, feelings and memories behind the issue of homelessness.
- The "wrap around model" should be considered to address the Aboriginal experience of homelessness. The wrap around model identifies natural support systems that people have and trains people in these networks to be better supporters. This training is integral as "we're beginning to see the ripple effect in communities where years ago your natural support system would have been sufficient, but today, in these desperate times, those support systems...are very unstable".
- There must be money and resources handed down from the federal government to deal with issues of homelessness in the Aboriginal community. This money must be specifically targeted for this population.

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Psychiatry looked at the role of mental health issues in homelessness. It found that forty five percent (45%) of participants identified losing their jobs, not having enough income to pay rent and being evicted were the most common reasons given for becoming homeless. Domestic violence and domestic conflict were the second most common (26%). Mental illness factored into the reasoning for becoming homeless only 3.7% of the time.

- The government needs to take responsibility for the homelessness problem in Canada. There used to be a national housing program between 1973 and 1993. This program delivered "hundreds of thousands of units of affordable social housing" until the Mulroney government effectively ended it. Ontario used to have a provincial social housing program. "If Harris had not cancelled 17,000 units of social housing, and instead continued building at the same rate, with the original 17,000 units of housing plus an additional 52,000 units there would be close to 70,000 units of social housing at the end of this year. I'm not saying that with all of those units we'd have no homelessness crisis but I am saying that it would be a much smaller phenomenon. I doubt if we'd be meeting in this room tonight".
- There are solutions to the homelessness problem. Ontario has cut \$30 billion in 6 years in income and corporate taxes - that is one of the main reasons as to why social spending has been cut. The federal government has announced their biggest tax cut in the history of the country last year, a tax cut of \$10 billion, but they say they cannot afford social housing. There are solutions and the government must take ownership of them.
- What can communities do? We must communicate to our politicians that we are concerned, angry and demand action. Push for the creation of a special funding envelope to fund new programs and services. Say to the federal politicians, "until you bring in a fully funded national housing program we will not be silent". The government needs to allow the people who really understand the issue to develop services in a way that is community-appropriate.

Conclusion

Through their exploration around the myths of homelessness, the five panelists provided the audience with a vast amount of experiential knowledge. One theme that can be pulled from these speakers is that poverty is the root cause of homelessness. Without poverty people could afford housing. Many of the speakers worked to dispel the myth that individual personal issues caused a person to become homeless. They demonstrated that there were structural factors in society that breed conditions of poverty, ultimately causing homelessness. It is these structures that need our attention as we struggle to understand the issues and work toward solutions in terms of poverty and homelessness.

There was also the optimistic recognition that despite these structures which work to prevent people from obtaining housing, there are solutions. The panelists spoke about various approaches to identifying solutions, approaches in terms of cultural issues, and focusing on structural versus individual causes. The panelists reiterated a definite sense of hope that the homelessness crisis can be tackled and that this effort relies on the work and dedication of the people in the audience. Solutions do exist and now is the time for the community to mobilize in energetic and creative ways to realize those solutions.

Brother Richard McPhee - Good Shepherd Centres

"The face of homelessness in this community is very diverse and continues to grow every day."

- The face of homelessness is changing. It is a myth to think that single men predominantly make up the homeless population in Hamilton. In fact, families and youth are the fastest growing groups of people at risk of homelessness.
- There is a myth that all homeless people are unemployed and addicted to drugs or alcohol. In reality, twenty to forty percent (20-40%) of shelter residents do have jobs. In terms of addiction, "there are probably more people with substance abuse in your workplace than there are on the streets".
- The safety nets that have been set up in our society to prevent poverty and homelessness are not working. Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program and the minimum wage do not provide enough financial security to ensure housing. For example, Ontario Works will issue a cheque for \$520 to a single person, meanwhile the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment is over \$600.
- A place to call home is integral to a person's well being. When we give people an opportunity to have a place of their own, so much more can happen. People can reestablish a connection to the community, can have friends over, can feel safe at night and can make a cup of coffee when they want to.

Craig Foye - Hamilton Mountain Legal Services

"The myth is that individuals and families who experience homelessness in our community do so because of some fatal flaw within them, or because of some tragic mistake they have made. The reality is that poverty is the biggest issue."

- The reality exists that the poverty rate is rising; it was 17.4% in 1991 and rose to 21.9% in 1996 in Hamilton-Wentworth. The inability to afford housing puts people at great risk of becoming homeless. Solutions must focus, then, both on affordable housing and changing the reality of poverty in Hamilton.
- Looking at the shelter allowance provision by Ontario Works, it can be determined that no one can spend less than fifty percent (50%) of their income on rent. Single people on Ontario Works, in fact, may be required to spend up to 112% of their income for an average one bedroom apartment. Therefore, if a person is on Ontario Works they are almost certainly facing a serious housing crisis.
- According to the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the vacancy rate in Hamilton declined again this year from 1.7% to 1.3%. The Housing Help Centre found three hundred and nine (309) apartments listed for rent in the Hamilton Spectator in October 2001, this number is down dramatically from the early nineties when there were almost a thousand apartments for rent in Hamilton listed in the Hamilton Spectator.

- If a person spends a large portion of their income on rent and does not have a large base of affordable housing to look to, they could easily fall into rent arrears while trying to maintain basic survival. It only takes a small crisis, a crisis that a middle class person wouldn't even consider a crisis, to put them over the edge and potentially be evicted.
- Between August 17, 2000 and November 14, 2001 there were 4222 applications to evict made to the Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal. Of those eighty-five percent (85%) were for arrears of rent. The highest weekly accounts occur after Christmas, in January.

Jim Ward - Jim Ward Associates

"Homelessness is a very extreme manifestation of poverty, so to get rid of homelessness, of course the issue is getting rid of poverty."

- Most people in absolute homelessness have lived long-term lives of poverty. One of the most obvious causes of this poverty is a problem engaging with the labour market. Housing is one of "the most expensive consumer items in modern society" which makes it difficult for some people to access. Solutions must either increase the opportunity to earn money or reduce the cost of housing.
- People in Canada are not at the same risk of becoming homeless. The myth that everyone in Canada is one paycheque away from homelessness is not true. The chances of becoming homeless decrease as one travels up the socio-economic hierarchy in Canada. One can read about exceptional cases in which a former stockbroker becomes homeless, but that is by far the exception.
- Social service approaches to homelessness are not the most effective. The social service approach is "tragically inferior to the welfare state approach because what it means is that you've accepted that you'll have a number of people on the margins". There are three types of social service systems
 1. The *rescue approach*, which moves people from marginality into the system is the least dangerous.
 2. The *maintenance approach* "maintains the status quo and keeps the same number of people on the margins".
 3. The *growth approach* is the most destructive. There is "evidence to show that much of the social service industry exacerbates the problem".
- A strong welfare state and welfare system is the best way of contending with the issue of homelessness. In this system, it is recognized that "you as a citizen of Canada have some kind of right to a reasonable material quality of life. Until the state accepts this premise you will always have people at the margins".

Michael Shapcott - National Housing and Homelessness Network

"The good attendance tonight disproves the myth that nobody cares about homelessness. I do these presentations all over the place and always to packed rooms - people do care."

- There is a myth that people who are homeless are to blame for their situation, that they are "lazy, crazy or stupid". The Pathways Study was conducted in Toronto by the Clarke Institute of