

**A Community Action Forum**

**OPENING DOORS**

**A Call To Action On Homelessness In The Region Of Waterloo**

**Report of the Homelessness Forum of February 18-19, 2000**

**July 11, 2000**

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# A CALL TO ACTION ON HOMELESSNESS IN THE REGION OF WATERLOO "OPENING DOORS" FORUM REPORT

## INTRODUCTION

In June 1999, the Social Planning Councils of Kitchener-Waterloo, Cambridge and North Dumfries, and the Waterloo Region Wellington-Dufferin District Health Council released **Understanding Homelessness in Waterloo Region: A Backgrounder**. The Report was the culmination of over eight months of collaborative work guided by an advisory committee comprised of approximately 30 agency and community representatives. The Backgrounder provided a profile of homelessness including the number of individuals who experience homelessness in Waterloo Region and the underlying causes of homelessness. The Backgrounder proved to be a catalyst for action within the community.

Subsequent to the release of the Backgrounder, a number of interested members of the Housing Coalition (Appendix 1) formed an alliance with the intent of exploring ways to involve the community in identifying concrete solutions to homelessness. From this alliance, **Opening Doors: A Community Action Forum** was developed. The goal of the Forum was to harness the capacity and resources of the community to find local solutions for reducing and for preventing homelessness. Funding for the Forum was provided through grants from Human Resources Development Canada, the Region of Waterloo, Planning and Culture Department and the Independent Living Centre.

This Report represents a synthesis of ideas and discussions that took place at the Opening Doors Forum. In addition to providing a brief outline of the development and the structure of the Forum, the Report highlights solutions proposed during the Forum. It is the hope of the Working Group that this Report will form the basis for a plan of action to address the issues of homelessness in Waterloo Region.

## BACKGROUND

In developing the Opening Doors Forum, the Working Group felt that it was important that solutions for addressing homelessness be community driven and be focused on what could realistically be accomplished by the community. In order to achieve this goal, the Working Group established the following guiding principles:

- broad based community representation: service providers, government, business, politicians, homeless individuals, individuals at risk of homelessness, media (Appendix 2);
- common knowledge of homelessness;
- address underlying issues as well as symptoms of homelessness;
- solution focused, action oriented;
- recognition and respect for diversity of homelessness;
- support and expand upon successful initiatives;
- collective responsibility for homelessness.

Opening Doors took place on Friday evening February 18, 2000 and Saturday February 19, 2000. The Forum was successful in attracting a variety of sectors: service providers,

homeless/at risk of homelessness, government, private sector. Attendance on Friday evening (230) and Saturday (170) confirmed the community's interest in finding solutions to homelessness within the Region.

## HIGHLIGHTS

The Friday evening program was designed to provide an educational platform for the discussion that would take place on Saturday. An educational package (Appendix 3) containing background information on homelessness was available for all participants. Further orientation to the issues of homelessness were presented through a variety of venues: keynote speaker, interactive theatre, video, showcase.

John Sweeney, former provincial Minister of Housing, provincial Minister of Community and Social Services and currently a member of "Putting Housing Back on the Public Agenda", was the keynote speaker for the evening. The theme of Mr. Sweeney's address was "We Can't Leave Them Behind". Mr. Sweeney made the point that despite the tremendous economic gains that the country is experiencing, there are a group of people (friends, neighbours) who are being left behind. These are the innocent victims who through no fault of their own pay the price for economic prosperity.

Mr. Sweeney highlighted the fact that for people who rent accommodation, the average family income (\$32,000/year) has not increased over the past five years. By comparison, for people who own their homes the average family income (\$66,000/year) has increased by eight percent over the past five years. He indicated that although 30 percent of gross income is a commonly accepted maximum to pay for shelter:

- approximately 25 percent of renters across Ontario pay in excess of 50 percent of total family income for shelter;
- 45 percent of people who rent accommodation pay in excess of 30 percent of their income for shelter.

Mr. Sweeney indicated that the global economy has an impact upon homelessness. To underscore this point, Mr. Sweeney provided the following quote from the United Nations Chair of the Economic and Social Rights Committee. "Homelessness is a predictable result of private and public sector policies that exclude the poor from participating in the economic revolution while safety nets are slashed in the name of global competitiveness." Mr. Sweeney stated that Canada is the only member of G7 where senior levels of government have no housing policy.

In his speech, Mr. Sweeney made reference to the role the two senior levels of government currently play in social housing. There has been minimal new subsidized housing developed in Ontario over the past five years. In 1993, the federal government discontinued its involvement in financially supporting the construction of social housing. In 1996 the federal government announced its intention to download the responsibility for the administration of social housing to the provinces. In 1995, the provincial government stopped funding the construction of any new social housing. Two years later the province downloaded their financial responsibility for social housing to the municipal government level. Municipalities are the only level of government making an effort to deal with the issue of housing. However, municipalities do not have the financial resources to adequately address the issues.

Mr. Sweeney suggested some solutions to the issue of adequate, affordable housing:

1. the two senior levels of government must get together and return to building new social housing;
2. shelter allowance for use in private accommodation;
3. allow second apartments to be built in single family homes;
4. provide opportunities for low income people to build their own homes (e.g. Habitat for Humanity)
5. provide skill training for people who wish to re-enter the workforce.

In closing, Mr. Sweeney posed questions for everyone to ponder. "How much farther do we let it go before we say we are destroying the society in which we live? In what kind of society do we wish to live?"

A theatre troupe, Reality Check - Voices of the Youth, created through a Youth Services Canada grant administered by the YWCA of Kitchener-Waterloo, provided an interactive drama. The goal of the play was to create awareness and understanding of youth poverty within the Region. The performance involved 15 local youth who presented scenarios of poverty/homelessness based upon personal experience. An opportunity was provided for members of the audience to participate on stage in an attempt to resolve conflicts between characters.

The House of Friendship was part of a community partnership instrumental in producing a video that documented the stories of individuals who have experienced homelessness. This video was previewed on Friday evening. The audience was moved by the faces and voices representing the diversity and complexity of homelessness. The video was a reminder that each of us may at any time be vulnerable to being homeless.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout Friday evening and Saturday a showcase of community solutions that address poverty/homelessness was on display. Community agencies presented programs and services provided to assist people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. A total of 11 agencies (Appendix 4) participated in the showcase highlighting a variety of programs and resources within the community.

Building upon the information provided on Friday evening, the program for Saturday morning provided opportunities for participants to brainstorm ideas for solutions to address homelessness. In order to ensure broad representation from all sectors, participants were assigned to one of seven small discussion groups. During the morning sessions, each of the seven groups, with the assistance of a facilitator and a recorder, discussed the following questions:

1. How can we move people from the streets to emergency housing?
2. How can we move people from emergency to permanent housing?
3. How can we prevent people from becoming homeless?
4. How can we improve some of the shortcomings in the present system of social services that serves homeless people?
5. How can we raise awareness of the issue of homelessness and encourage people to take action?

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<sup>1</sup> Video may be purchased through the Kitchener Waterloo Social Planning Council or may be borrowed for viewing from the House of Friendship, Argus Residence for Young People, ROOF, YWCA.

The morning discussion groups produced a multitude of ideas that were consolidated into eight broad themes/solutions. In the afternoon, participants self selected the group discussing the solution of most interest to them. Facilitators and recorders assisted the groups through discussions of the following strategies:

1. redefining the role of municipal government in housing: current role of municipal government in light of downloading;
2. community mobilization: strategies, sectors to involve, benefits, projects, resources;
3. improving the shelter system: gaps, ways to improve;
4. collaboration among support services: characteristics, values, benefits, barriers, functions of a collaborative system;
5. education and awareness: obstacles, solutions;
6. lobbying senior levels (provincial, federal) of government: getting government back into social housing, strategies;
7. developing new affordable permanent housing: defining, resources required, obstacles, strategies;
8. mental health housing issues: reaching people; obstacles, proactive solutions/interventions, resources.

The information provided by participants in both the morning and the afternoon sessions forms the basis of the findings and the future directions of this report.

## **FINDINGS**

The material collected from the morning and afternoon workshop sessions demonstrated a high degree of consensus and it has been possible to group the information and ideas into six overriding themes:

1. creating new supply of affordable housing;
2. information, education and community awareness;
3. support services for special needs;
4. building capacity through community outreach;
5. meeting immediate needs;
6. inventories and co-ordination of services.

The following Directions have been drawn from the ideas presented at the workshop sessions. It should be noted that there were many comments and suggestions made that have not been included in this Forum Report because they proposed solutions outside the PP of the local community to implement. Matters such as income redistribution, taxation practices, major senior government policy shifts and changing the root causes of homelessness are ultimately needed to eliminate homelessness. Our role in these areas is to advocate for change, however, the primary message from the forum was to mobilize the community to undertake tangible programs, services, developments, processes, and inventories that will improve the homelessness situation in Waterloo Region.

In reading through the following themes it is important to remember that some of the directions overlap the six themes but are presented only once. All of the themes should be read as a package.

## **THEME 1 - CREATING NEW SUPPLY OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING**

Increasing the supply of affordable housing is key to eliminating homelessness in Waterloo Region. The Region is experiencing a severe shortage of affordable housing which makes it especially hard to locate shelter for those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It is acknowledged that the days of comprehensive senior government housing programs which covered all costs of construction and operations of new rental housing are not going to return in the near future. The solutions to address new supply therefore call for partnerships, philanthropy and the leveraging of financial support through joint venture incentives from all levels of government.

### **DIRECTIONS**

1. Research and prepare a report which illustrates the continuum of shelter needs ranging from beds in shelters, temporary housing, transitional housing, supportive, supported and permanent housing to better understand the gaps in the housing supply system and the movement of individuals and families through the shelter system.
2. Create a shelter facility where families can be temporarily housed as a family unit.
3. Develop a permanent shelter facility in Cambridge.
4. Create new affordable rental units by piggy backing the various incentives, grants and loans provided by all three levels of government.
5. Create a special property tax category for affordable rental housing to reduce the operating costs and consequently the rent for developments defined as "affordable rental." A definition, measurement and legal agreement binding a landlord to affordable rents will be needed to operationalize a special assessment category.
6. Work with the Region and local municipalities to amend their development charges by-laws to reduce development charges for developments containing affordable rental units.
7. Challenge the administrations of the local municipalities building and engineering staff to facilitate and collaborate with non-profit agencies to overcome the construction and design complications posed by the various code requirements as they relate to renovation and conversion.
8. Adjust the targets in operating agreements to permit conversion of larger units to smaller units, create more accessible units and increase the ratio of rent-geared to-income tenancies while still retaining the principle of a mix of household incomes among the residents.
9. Request local area municipalities and the Region of Waterloo to develop a "housing first" policy for municipally owned surplus lands and properties acquired through tax sales, public works projects or redundant, obsolete buildings.
10. Develop communal housing with shared expenses and peer support.

11. Extend the rent supplement program into non-profit and co-operative housing developments.
12. Access Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP) funding to convert non-residential space into residential space and renovate existing shelters and boarding houses.
13. Co-ordinate through Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) the potential to match construction skills training with the rehabilitation of older housing stock for multiple residential conversions.
14. Develop an investment pool for affordable lending for the development and construction of affordable housing.
15. Create a foundation for charitable giving towards affordable housing.
16. Research models from other communities which have been successful in creating new affordable housing units.
17. Develop an information package on housing incentives, grants, funding resources and broadcast the information via a web site.
18. Create an Affordable Housing Action Group to initiate and monitor the actions under the new supply theme.

## **THEME 2 - INFORMATION, EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY AWARENESS**

There are daily stories in the news about the desperate conditions faced by the homeless yet the issue suffers from media exhaustion and a sense that the problem is an outcome of uncontrollable events. The forum expressed a concern over makeshift, band aid solutions and the need for a persistent information campaign to demonstrate the relationship between housing and higher profiled government policy in areas such as health care, children's issues, the environment and education.

### **DIRECTIONS**

1. Develop an information campaign to raise public awareness around the scale of, cause and solutions to the homelessness crisis in Waterloo Region.
2. Endorse the 1% solution proposed by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities which proposes an increase of 1% over the current federal budget expenditures on housing.
3. Approach the United Way to consider housing and homelessness as a priority in their annual allocations exercise.
4. Sponsor a "service fair" where all agencies involved in assisting the homeless population could share information about their programs and services.
5. Approach the Boards of Education to develop an awareness program on homelessness for use in the school system.
6. Take opportunities to dialogue with interest groups where the message about homelessness will have an interested audience, i.e. churches, libraries, service clubs, the labour council.
7. Set up a forum with Regional Councillors, MPs and MPPs to present this Call to Action on Homelessness in Waterloo Region.
8. Create a housing foundation for charitable giving towards affordable housing.
9. Educate governments on the high degree of service required to adequately care for the homeless, the linkages between shelter providers and support services.

### **THEME 3 - SUPPORT SERVICES FOR SPECIAL NEEDS**

There are many personal situations that fall within the category of special need. Without listing all the many special need groups it can be generally concluded that many households and individuals require supports and interventions in addition to their shelter. The forum delegates identified several models worth investigating to link the necessary supports to the individual to secure more permanent, sustainable housing.

#### **DIRECTIONS**

1. Develop discharge protocols with institutional facilities to ensure individuals are not released into the community without support and shelter.
2. Explore the concept of interdenominational parish nursing.
3. Develop a team of housing advocates and develop Interventions for people with mental illness and addictions who are at risk of losing their housing due to arrears or behavioural issues.
4. Develop circles of supports, buddy systems, and volunteer mediators who can provide assistance to both residents and landlords where tenancy is threatened.
5. Support the option that shelter allowances be directed to the landlord in those circumstances where the tenant is at risk of losing their housing due to frequent late payment of rent or rental arrears.

## **THEME 4 - BUILDING CAPACITY THROUGH COMMUNITY OUTREACH**

A social infrastructure already exists in the community in terms of facilities, agencies, clubs, programs and services which could be harnessed to assist in reaching out to help those whose housing situation is complicated by lack of skills, education, social support, loneliness, isolation, illness, poor financial management, child care, mobility, language difficulties, literacy, etc. Several ideas born out of a community capacity building model were seen as a way to build upon the aid already in place.

### **DIRECTIONS**

1. Build on existing networks such as neighbourhood watch, schools, universities, churches, service clubs to help link those in need to existing services.
2. Seek out the homeless and either bring aid to them or bring them to aid.
3. Explore successful community mobilization strategies engaging volunteers such as life skills training, car pooling, child care, mother support, job search, community kitchens.
4. Seek major sponsors, benefactors to fund supports, shelters and services.
5. Use community centres as a one-stop shopping social services resource centre to link homeless to services.
6. Use community centres, schools, libraries as homework space and computer access for children living in crowded conditions.

## **THEME 5 - MEETING IMMEDIATE NEEDS**

Although it is understood that the heart of homelessness is the lack of affordable housing, there are many measures that could be taken immediately to reduce the suffering and hardship of the homeless and to advance the agenda for addressing the shortage of affordable housing. The strategy must call for interim actions as well as longer term solutions.

### **DIRECTIONS**

1. Provide locations where homeless people can safely store their possessions, clean their clothing and shower.
2. Create a rent bank that could address needs such as first and last month's rent and utility hookup costs for those who have the ability to pay monthly rent but have no savings to make the initial up front payments.
3. Create a fund to cover moving expenses.
4. Provide training to front line workers to make them aware of shelter services supports and to prepare them for handling difficult situations arising from substance abuse or mental illness.
5. Speak directly with the homeless to determine their needs and involve them in solutions planning.
6. Set up an emergency hot line to identify where there are available empty beds any night of the week.
7. Set up a 24 hour drop-in where support workers come to the clients.
8. Purchase and staff a mobile out-reach van to provide food, emergency care, safety, protection from the heat or cold and transportation to emergency services.
9. Advocate for core funding for emergency shelters not tied to Ontario Works or the current per diem formula.
10. Increase the current maximum shelter benefit allowable under Ontario Works and provide social assistance for housing at a rate equal to 85% of the median market rents represented in the local marketplace.

## **THEME 6 - INVENTORIES AND CO-ORDINATION OF SERVICES**

Better co-ordination within the current homelessness services system is needed. For users and providers, the system often seems fragmented and difficult to use. People must know where to go for help and service providers need to have information to make appropriate referrals. There is no comprehensive information system although there are several informal referral arrangements and access systems which include emergency shelter for the homeless population and a centralized waiting list for not-for profit rental housing. The establishment of a data base and information system would provide service planners and funders with accurate information on who is and who is not being served as well as identify service gaps across the system. The system would also connect with emergency services and assist the public with information on how to help someone in need.

### **DIRECTIONS**

1. Establish a 24-hour Homelessness Services Information System comprising a database on services and shelters with a telephone help line and Internet link with all support agencies.
2. Increase the role of the Region as the Consolidated Municipal Service Manager to co-ordinate homeless information services, administration of housing programs and funding.
3. Co-ordinate information about services and funding from the Ministries of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Health and Community and Social Services, HRDC, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and the area municipalities through the Region of Waterloo.
4. Develop an inventory of government owned land and buildings for affordable housing development or conversion.
5. Establish a central hostel bed registry to provide up to date information on the number of hostel beds available in the community.

## **NEXT STEPS**

The Directions identified by the forum participants describe what our community believes is the local strategy to address our homelessness issues. The next step is to transform the directions into a Plan for Action that will describe how the directions will be achieved. The Action Plan will identify who will take the lead to undertake the action, what resources will be required to accomplish the tasks, the time frame for completing the action, the anticipated results and the measurements of progress including successful completion.

The Action Plan will not be led by any one organization and it will need the commitment and buy-in from the community, the agencies called upon to work through solutions and the various levels of government. It is important to note that some work is already occurring on a number of the directions such as developing discharge protocols with institutional facilities and using community centres as "one stop shopping" social services resource centres.

The Community Homelessness Working Group will draft the Action Plan, see that it is adopted by the lead organizations, monitor how implementation proceeds and support changes where strategies do not appear to be achieving the desired results. Through this process, the work of the Homelessness Forum will stay alive, vital and remain in the public's eye as we strive to raise public awareness and draw political will towards demonstrative improvements.

## APPENDIX 1

### COMMUNITY HOMELESSNESS WORKING GROUP

Carine Nind	CIRCA Development
Steve Garrison	Cambridge Kiwanis Village
Trudy Beaulne	Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo
Lynn Calder	Independent Living Centre
Fred Bishop	Kitchener Housing
Anneliese Kraehling	Eby Village, House of Friendship
Charlie Moon	Eby Village, House of Friendship
Ron Flaming	House of Friendship
Debbie Schlichter	House of Friendship
Laurie Parks	Lutherwood Youth Employment Centre
Sue Turner	YWCA Kitchener-Waterloo
Peggy Becker	Lincoln Road, YWCA
Judith Carey	Cambridge Youth/John Howard Society
Ann Bowes	Human Resources Development Canada
Joanne Cary-Neath	Canadian Mental Health Association
Joan Jylanne	Region of Waterloo, Planning and Culture Department
Sybil Frenette	Region of Waterloo, Planning and Culture Department
Leslie Perry	Region of Waterloo, Social Services Department

**APPENDIX 2**

**COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION AT FORUM**

<b>SECTOR</b>	<b>NUMBER IN ATTENDANCE</b>
Service Providers	90
Homeless or at Risk of Being Homeless	26
Government	26
Private Sector	11
Undeclared	70

### **APPENDIX 3**

#### **CONTENT OF EDUCATIONAL PACKAGE<sup>2</sup>**

1. Background Information regarding Homelessness in Waterloo Region  
Understanding Homelessness in Waterloo Region June 1999  
Affordable Housing Town Hall Meeting April 1999  
Local Housing for People with Mental Illness January 2000
2. Executive Summary "Where's Home? A Picture of Housing Needs in Ontario"  
Produced by the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association and the  
Co-operative Housing Federation of Ontario
3. List of housing and funding programs and initiatives
4. Article from the K-W Record by John Sweeney "Shame on us"
5. List of Internet websites specific to homelessness

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<sup>2</sup> The above material may be obtained from the Kitchener Waterloo Social Planning Council.

## **APPENDIX 4**

### **PARTICIPANTS IN THE COMMUNITY AGENCY SHOWCASE**

Waterloo Regional Homes for Mental Health  
Welcome Home Initiative  
Waterloo Region Community Legal Services  
CIRCA Development  
YWCA of Kitchener Waterloo  
Achievement in Motion  
Canadian Mental Health Association  
Central Ontario Non-operative Housing Federation  
St. Monica House  
House of Friendship  
Planning and Culture Department, Region of Waterloo

## **MEDIA COVERAGE**

In organizing Opening Doors, the Working Group outlined specific goals to be achieved during the Forum. One of these goals was to begin to mobilize the community towards local solutions for homelessness. In the weeks preceding and following the Forum, print and broadcast media coverage contributed to this goal through raising community awareness of the complexity and diversity of homelessness in Waterloo Region.

## **EVALUATION**

Evaluations of the Friday evening program were positive and reflected a diversity of perspectives. The program proved to have "something for everyone" and generated a positive atmosphere that set the stage for Saturday's workshop focused on solutions. Evaluations from Saturday were positive and reflected increased knowledge and understanding of the complexity and diversity of homelessness. A significant number of participants (80 percent) indicated a willingness to continue their involvement in addressing homelessness in Waterloo Region.