

## **Expanding the Social Safety Net: Aboriginal Homelessness in the Durham Region**

The purpose of this position paper is to set forth a viable foundation upon which a solution to Aboriginal homelessness in the Durham Region can be built. "Expanding the Social Safety Net" refers to the recognition that homelessness solutions for Aboriginal people must be 'multi-dimensional.' To participate in this understanding one must accept the tenet that what has gone before, i.e. the typical bureaucratic response in partnership with institutionalised social agencies, has not worked. The current definition of the 'social safety net' must be broadened to include support activities that are centred more upon the traditional and culturally appropriate approach of the Aboriginal people as they themselves describe. This requires a more holistic view of the problem, the underlying causes and the subsequent solutions to Aboriginal homelessness.

While it is granted that much research has yet to be completed on the fact of homelessness, especially the fact of Aboriginal homelessness, some preliminary assumptions can be made based upon the historical relationship between Aboriginal people and the social policies upon which that relationship is based. These assumptions do not apply to all sections of the mainstream population and phrase the question of Aboriginal homelessness in a unique terms: institutionalised racism, residential schools, suppressed economic opportunities, reserves, "Urban Indian," wards of the state and so on. Addressing these terms and the resultant effects on Aboriginal people in a sensitive and respectful way is paramount to providing a workable, long-term solution to Aboriginal homelessness.

Since one does not often find the terminology, as noted above, applied in the language of current social policy for most urban centres it would follow that the Aboriginal community is excluded from having their unique needs recognised. In fact, where other agencies exist to service a particular segment of the general population (i.e. churches, ethnic community centres, women's shelters, government offices, etc.), none exists in the Durham Region for Aboriginal people. Until this disparity changes, addressing Aboriginal homelessness within the current situation is a moot exercise and waste of tax dollars.

Other factors come into play when the state of the Aboriginal community is observed. Where the mainstream population has benefited from the progressive material interests of Canadian society, Aboriginal people on the average have been excluded or marginalised economically, in part, through federal and provincial Aboriginal policy and legislation. The Aboriginal community in Durham Region is no different with respect to access to resources and community financial securities. Government programs and partnerships that are based upon a 'percentage contribution' from each partner put the Aboriginal community at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to participating in such schemes. It is felt that the 'percentage contribution' requirement for partnerships with the Aboriginal community should be waived until economic/resource parity is reached with the other segments and vested interests of the population within Durham Region.

Anecdotal observation notes that Aboriginal homelessness can be directly attributed to an Aboriginal person's disconnection from their community. The goal of any Aboriginal homelessness strategy should be constructed around programs and services that re-create the healthy effects that a positive community environment has upon the Aboriginal person. To ensure that the unique needs of the Aboriginal

homeless are recognised and treated appropriately, co-operation will be needed not only with the Aboriginal community, but between the various social agencies that exist in the Durham Region. This approach requires that the whole objective becomes more important than the diverse philosophies, politics and resources of its constituent parts.

Oshawa is the Seneca word for 'carrying place' and as such denotes not only a long history of Aboriginal presence here but a recognition of the movement of people through our Region that has continued through to this day. In any 'carrying place' it is traditional to leave something useful for those yet to come, whether that be provisions of food, water, tools or positive messages. It is our most positive hope that by participating in any schemes to address Aboriginal homelessness, we can restore this concept of 'necessary sharing' to our Region and thus be able to provide an environment where we all help with the 'carrying.'