

## **Community Case Study Barrie, Ontario**

### **1. Introduction**

This case study of Barrie is one of a series of case studies of communities participating in the federal government's National Homelessness Initiative (NHI). The case study first outlines community action related to homelessness prior to the federal government initiative. It then describes the planning and implementation structure the community put in place to respond to the NHI and lists projects undertaken to date. Finally, it notes some of the unique issues related to homelessness observed in the community and some of the lessons the community learned that could be useful to other communities responding to NHI or a similar federal initiative.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) is producing the case studies in order to contribute to the government's understanding of how NHI is working at the community level and the extent to which the objectives are being achieved at this mid-way stage of the three-year Initiative. Communities will thus have an overview of what is being done in their own community, and of what can be learned from the experiences in individual communities that may be applicable to others participating in the Initiative.

The case study is based on a review of Barrie's homelessness plan and other documents and reports relating to homelessness and a series of interviews with people representing the following groups (a complete list of the groups is attached to this report):

- local HRDC homelessness managers and staff
- provincial and municipal government officials in related program areas
- community planning steering committee and sub-committees
- community organizations active in service delivery for homeless persons & people at risk

Information from the community case studies done across Canada will be compiled with data on projects being funded and other information to give HRDC a national perspective on how the Initiative is working to date.

## **2. Homelessness Activities Prior to the Federal Government Initiative**

### Extent of overall activity, programs, facilities

The City of Barrie is the largest municipal body in the county of Simcoe in Ontario. This city is within commuting distance of downtown Toronto. As a smaller urban centre, it attracts individuals and families from as far as Toronto interested in the advantages of both urban and rural lifestyles. Simcoe County includes the cities of Barrie and Orillia as well as seven towns, and nine townships. The county is also home to urban Aboriginals and natives who live on three reserves, Beausoleil, Georgina Island and the Rama First Nation. Historically, Simcoe County has depended on a few charitable and/or non-profit organizations to provide social services and supports to its impoverished citizens. Agencies such as the Salvation Army and the David Busby Street Centre continue to respond to the needs of the poor and the homeless in the city of Barrie and the greater county. In addition, Youth Haven, a short-term shelter for homeless youth, has served this population since 1987.

### Community planning

Several years before the federal homelessness initiative, local service providers in the city of Barrie met informally to reflect on social issues in the county and to consult with each other on strategies to maintain their services in the face of cutbacks to social services spending. In 1998, a number of local social service agencies approached the United Way of Greater Simcoe County to create a committee to study the growing homelessness problem in the city and the county. Originally, the Simcoe County Alliance to End Homelessness (SCATEH) was made up of a number of local service providers in the city of Barrie. In time, the committee welcomed the participation of more than 70 representatives from other communities in Simcoe County, such as the city of Orillia and the towns of Collingwood, Midland and New Tecumseth.

### Involvement by federal, provincial and municipal governments

Before the NHI, the extent of the federal government's involvement in homelessness was limited to initiatives sustained by the CMHC's RRAP and shelter enhancement programs. In Barrie, CMHC agreed to support proposals submitted by the Salvation Army to renovate newly purchased facilities to expand shelter services for homeless men. In another case, CMHC agreed to fund the Elizabeth Fry Society's plan to expand its shelter services for homeless women settling in the county.

The province of Ontario's Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) supported a number of initiatives designed to deal with homelessness. The Ministry has maintained funding for six homeless program streams in the community. First, for several decades, MCSS has shared the costs of operating emergency shelters with all its municipalities. The funding arrangement is a shared model (80/20). MCSS also funds two Homelessness Response programs: the Provincial Homelessness Initiatives program, which began in 1998, and the Hostel Redirection program, started in April 1999. Funding is

also provided for the Supports to Daily Living program to assist homeless individuals with mental health issues and the Community Partners program that began in January 2000. The Ministry's Domiciliary hostel program, which funds private boarding homes for those at risk of homelessness, has also been provided for several decades. Provincial/municipal funding arrangements for this program were revised in 1998. Finally, the Ministry created the Off the Streets into Shelters program in January 2001 to assist agencies that offer services to hard-to-serve homeless persons. The city administers most of the funding for these programs.

The municipality did not provide any funding for homelessness initiatives in the city of Barrie other than the provision of per diems for shelter beds when the municipal authority was responsible for the delivery of social services. Since the late 1990s, responsibility for this has shifted from the city to the Simcoe County regional government.

More recently, the current mayor of Barrie created a Mayor's Task Force on affordable housing. That committee, made up of community leaders and members of the SCATEH, continues to search for creative ways to respond to homelessness.

### **3. How Barrie Has Responded to the Federal Government Initiative**

#### Initial work by HRDC

The City of Barrie was targeted as one of the communities eligible for 20 percent funding when the federal government decided to expand the homelessness initiative beyond the major urban centres. Local HRDC staff arranged with the community for the SCATEH to assume the role of community entity for the Initiative.

#### Community planning process

The community planning process was supported by a steering committee made up of members of the SCATEH. SCATEH members sought the expertise of the United Way to assume responsibility for the administration of the SCPI initiative. This allowed the SCATEH to concentrate on planning, funding and community development activities. The SCATEH and the United Way hired consultants to facilitate the process. In the spring of 2001, the committee resolved to gather information, initiate community consultations and increase public awareness about homelessness.

The first step was to inform stakeholders in Barrie and outlying areas about the NHI and invite them to information sessions. They communicated information about the Initiative throughout the county in order to reach as many individuals and agencies as possible. All but a few responded. The following organizations are represented in the community planning process.

#### *Overall Community Planning (Fall 2001)*

- 4 municipal groups

- 1 federal group
- 3 community groups
- 23 community agencies

*Project Steering Committee*

- 2 municipal groups
- 1 County group
- 1 community agency
- 18 community groups

*Community Advisory Committee (Selection committee)*

- 7 community representatives

*Strategic Planning Committee*

- 3 community groups
- 6 community agencies

Simcoe County communities outside the city were excluded from the funding envelope due to terms and conditions of the allocation to 20% communities. The City of Barrie alone was granted the funding. Although there were rumblings from larger communities outside the city about this decision, they were eventually satisfied with the strategy adopted by the SCATEH to invite them to participate in the community planning process that led to the “Coordinated Plan to Address Homelessness in Simcoe County.” The outside communities were also pleased with the plan to allot a bigger share of the provincial homelessness funding to their homelessness community projects.

During the planning, consultants held information sessions and town hall meetings with agencies and service providers in Orillia, Collingwood, Midland and New Tecumseth. They also had focus groups and interviews with homeless persons. Consultants and SCATEH members met with homeless individuals at the David Busby Street Centre and at the Out of the Cold program (funded and provided by local church groups during the winter months) as well. The media responded to the issue by reporting on community planning in the local newspapers. The Aboriginal community was also included in the process. Members of the Barrie Anishnabe Homelessness Coalition were invited to join the community planning process and accepted.

In addition, during the planning process, the consultants used community “murralling” as a communication strategy. Participants were encouraged to draw a collective picture of the homelessness situation in their particular communities and to share the graphic’s meaning during story-telling sessions in the greater community.

The selection committee relied on the identified gaps in the community plan to guide the selection of projects for funding. The committee’s task was eased by the fact that its members were able to rely on their previous experiences with the allocation of provincial funding for homelessness initiatives in the county. In this case, they simply adapted the process and paperwork used for the MCSS allocations to

the SCPI process. The project proposal process and the application forms provided details about the types of project submissions the SCATEH was interested in developing in the community. These were consistent with the gaps and priorities identified. The applications emphasized service delivery projects, rather than larger capital projects, given the amount of money available to the community.

The United Way provided a great deal of administrative support to the agencies that were awarded SCPI funding, freeing them from those tasks and permitting them to concentrate their energies on service delivery.

### Gaps and Priorities

Facilitators of the community planning process developed an inventory of the shelters, services and supports in the community that helped to identify the gaps and develop priorities for future action. Efforts were also made to identify gaps and develop priorities for the each of the distinct communities that participated in this exercise. Respondents were very satisfied with the exercise. It presented a very clear plan for supporting short-term and long-term action. It also encouraged everyone to buy in to the proposed solutions.

The planning group identified the following priorities specifically for Barrie:

1. encourage the development of affordable permanent housing
2. influence the development of transitional housing
3. increase shelter beds for homeless women and women at risk of homelessness
4. expand the provision of daily drop-in services for homeless women
5. provide information in the form of booklets to individuals with fixed incomes and disabilities with the objective of helping them move toward home ownership
6. create a mobile outreach unit
7. strengthen the SCATEH's capacity to respond to the needs of all the communities committed to addressing homelessness throughout the county

Members of the local Aboriginal community were invited to participate in a separate community planning process as well as the larger community planning process and did so. The Barrie Anishnabe Homelessness Coalition was advised of the SCPI and Urban Aboriginal Strategy homelessness funds that were available for Aboriginal initiatives, and the coalition took advantage of the funds to conduct their community planning. The group began by hiring consultants to conduct community consultations in 2000 and 2001. They then conducted an assets and gaps analysis and established the following four priorities:

- conduct a Homelessness needs assessment for the Aboriginal community
- develop a food bank for the Aboriginal community
- hire a contact/referral assistance person to assist Aboriginals with housing needs
- provide transitional/emergency housing to homeless Aboriginal persons

Subsequently, the Barrie Anishnabe Homelessness Coalition agreed to coordinate the distribution of funds to the five Aboriginal groups that could best respond to the priorities identified during the community planning process.

### Implementation to date

At the time of the case study, five projects had been approved:

<b>Projects Approved to Date</b>
<p>Simcoe County Alliance to End Homelessness An initiative to strengthen the SCATEH's capacity to support local and county efforts to address homelessness.</p>
<p>David Busby Street Centre A mobile outreach program supported by the Kiwanis Club, to make social supports more accessible to the homeless on the streets.</p>
<p>Elizabeth Fry Society in Barrie 1) A drop-in facility and support services for homeless women 2) A plan by the agency to provide much needed shelter beds to homeless women and those at risk of homelessness.</p>
<p>Step by Step Home Ownership program A plan to develop resource materials that will assist persons with disabilities and at risk of homelessness to evaluate their chances of acquiring permanent housing.</p>

Some SCPI funds have been targeted for additional transitional housing. At the present time, the steering committee continues to negotiate with potential partners to pursue this venture.

### Key observations

One of the hallmarks of the federal government's homelessness initiative is its flexibility to adapt to circumstances in individual communities. The community case studies highlight this aspect of the Initiative because participating communities all have unique ways of addressing homelessness according to their circumstances and preferred approaches, and all have different ways of adapting the NHI to their particular needs.

In the city of Barrie, researchers developing the case studies reported the following key observations about the way this community is responding to the federal homelessness initiative to date:

- Participants felt that the community planning process was a worthwhile experience. Many interviewees emphasized that the city of Barrie was well prepared for HRDC's invitation to participate in community planning given the SCATEH's involvement with the issue since 1998.

The interviewees characterized the process as very inclusive. For example, representatives from Collingwood, Midland and New Tecumseth described the interest demonstrated by local community groups, local politicians, the faith communities, the private sector and interested citizens in the issue.

- The development of two community plans, one to address homelessness in Barrie and another to deal with the issue in Simcoe County more broadly, has reportedly enriched the community planning process because it has brought the whole county into the planning process in a more meaningful way.
- When asked to assess the impact of the community planning process, community leaders were pleased with the fact that the SCATEH was able to secure funding for its coordinator and support staff. For the majority of the stakeholders in the county, SCATEH is a crucial element in the community's mission to sustain activities to deal with homelessness in the whole county for the long term.
- Individuals expressed concerns about the administration of the SCPI initiative that were consistent with those heard in other communities, relating to the challenging paperwork, the amount of time required to complete the work as well as the amount of resources needed to respond to program administration. Despite those concerns, many were quick to compliment the commitment and support provided by local HRDC staff during the process.
- The fact that the federal government targeted the SCPI monies to the city of Barrie provided the SCATEH with an opportunity to direct more provincial homelessness funds to communities outside the city, such as the city of Orillia and the towns of Collingwood, Midland and New Tecumseth. Service providers and community leaders have enthusiastically embraced the plan to support the activities of the SCATEH's Homelessness coordinator and her support staff to maintain the planning for homelessness into the future.
- The SCATEH, the United Way and HRDC are working actively with youth service providers, to develop projects and SCPI proposals that are in keeping with the overall community plan.
- Despite the contributions provided by the federal government through the SCPI initiative and provincial support for the issue, the community is unanimous in recommending that senior levels of government, and especially the federal government, continue to contribute financially to activities that address homelessness after 2003. The community also feels it needs to renew efforts to encourage the federal government to recognize the urgent need for permanent and affordable housing for homeless persons or those at risk of homelessness.
- As observed in other communities, sustainability remains an issue for Barrie's housing and homelessness agencies. Some organizations have been more successful at finding funds for activities planned after 2003. Most of these are capital funding projects. It will not be as easy for others to find monies to pay for service provision beyond the 2003 deadline. The consensus is that senior levels of government need to recognize the limits to the extent to which local and

municipal groups can secure the substantial amounts of monies needed to maintain activities specifically targeted to homeless and at risk individuals.

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