

Project Case Study David Busby Street Centre, Barrie, Ontario

1. Introduction

This case study of the David Busby Street Centre is one of a series of case studies of projects funded at least in part through the federal government's National Homelessness Initiative (NHI).

The case study first describes the project including: conditions prior to implementation, what the project involves and its objectives. It then describes project implementation to date. Finally, it notes outcomes to date, including comments from clients where available.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) is producing these case studies in order to contribute to the government's understanding of how NHI is working in individual communities at the project level, to gauge the extent to which the objectives are being achieved at this mid-way stage of the three-year Initiative, and to determine what can be learned from the experiences of particular projects that may be applicable to others participating in the Initiative.

The case study is based on a review of the initial proposal for the project and other available documents describing the project and its objectives and how it fits into the community's plans to address homelessness, and on a series of interviews with people representing the following groups:

- managers and staff of the project
- clients of the project
- community organizations working in areas related to this project that might share clientele with the project or whose service to people who are homeless might be influenced by this project

2. Description of the Project

Conditions prior to project implementation

Created in 1993, the David Busby Street Centre operates a drop-in program, a street outreach program and a family shelter program for homeless individuals of all ages. The Centre is located in the church hall of Trinity Anglican Church in downtown Barrie. It is open daily, Monday to Friday, and provides nursing care, shower facilities, clothing, use of telephone and fax machine and mailing address, and other basic necessities. The Centre also offers a medical clinic on-site twice a week, a twice-monthly on-site legal advice clinic as well as a number of other support services. The family shelter program maintains the services of a family resource worker who assesses the requests of homeless families for shelter and connects them with appropriate resources in the community.

As the Centre expanded its services, staff observed that a significant proportion of its clients were either having difficulties accessing community services or, by choice, remained marginalized from the community. The Centre's staff responded by volunteering to travel throughout the city in their personal vehicles to reach out to this group. As the popularity of this service grew, staff expressed the need for a better-equipped vehicle to offer outreach services.

What the project involves

The need for a mobile outreach unit was identified as one of the priorities in the Barrie Community Plan to address homelessness. In the spring of 2001, the staff of the Centre approached the Kiwanis Club, a long-time supporter, which agreed to purchase a van to better serve the outreach program. The Centre then submitted a proposal for funds under the NHI's main funding program, the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI) to pay for salaries of the outreach staff and for supplies.

Objectives of the project

The main objective of the outreach project is to provide on-going support to homeless men and women who prefer to live on the street, in the form of consumables, clothing and supplies as well as other assistance. The intention is to develop trusting relationships with this population in the hope of helping them to eventually become better connected with the health, education, employment and social services in the community.

3. Implementation to Date

The mobile unit has been providing services since March 2001. The van circulates in the downtown Barrie area five nights a week, making stops at designated spots. Homeless persons are often already waiting for the mobile unit's arrival. They usually request food and beverages and snacks to consume later. On average, more than 50 homeless individuals use the services every weekday. They sometimes ask for clothing, especially during the cold winter months. They often request other items and advice or a referral for specific types of assistance. The mobile unit also maintains a needle-exchange program.

A street outreach worker, volunteers and at times a nurse practitioner staff the mobile unit. Many of those served by the mobile unit are individuals who don't usually frequent the social services agencies in the community and choose not to use the drop-in centre and/or the city's homeless shelters. A great number of those served have complex social problems, including addictions to alcohol and drugs and mental health issues.

The Centre works in partnership with other organizations in the city to carry on its operations. For instance, the Centre's staff relies on the shelters maintained by the local Salvation Army and the Elizabeth Fry Society to house the homeless men and women the mobile unit comes in contact with during its travels. The Centre also works with the Barrie Out of the Cold program that functions seven nights a week during the winter months.

The Centre also depends on the assistance of a number of local government and non-government health and social services to serve its clients. A small sample of the Centre's partners includes the Royal Victoria Hospital, Simcoe Legal Services, the Barrie Community Health Centre, the Canadian Mental Health Association, the AIDS Committee of Simcoe County, and the Women and Children's Shelter. The Centre also obtains provisions from the Community Food Foundation of Barrie and counts on the generosity of the community for volunteer services and donations.

Statistics on the numbers served since the project started indicate that the demand continues to grow from month to month. The agency's staff believes that the demand will continue to increase. The funding required to maintain the mobile unit is secure as long as the Kiwanis Club continues to contribute to the program. As for the salaries of staff and the supplies, being paid with SCPI funds, the agency believes that it will be able to rely on its sponsor, the Anglican Church and fund-raising activities for its future financial needs.

4. Outcomes to Date

Preliminary observations

While it is premature to make any assessment of the impacts of the David Busby Street Centre's outreach unit on the lives of its many clients in the longer term, it is possible to make the following preliminary observations:

- Since March 2001, the mobile unit has succeeded in responding to the needs of all its clients. Staff have been able to cope with the demand for assistance despite the rising demand for services.
- Feedback from the community about the mobile outreach unit continues to be positive. All of the representatives of agencies interviewed during the case study were very supportive of the mobile unit's efforts.

Client comments

In order to get a sense of the project's impact on clients, the researcher spent an evening with the Centre's mobile unit having informal conversations with clients. The researcher asked clients what changes, if any, they have experienced as a result of the inception of the project or of additional services made possible by NHI funding. The responses are, by their nature, the subjective comments of those individuals willing to respond.

One man said, "I couldn't afford to stay in a rooming house, so I stayed in the Out of the Cold shelter. I have a steady job, but the wages are low. The mobile van is convenient and the staff is helpful. I hope to move back to Alberta to be with my family soon."

Another man responded, "I have been staying outside, so I use the mobile van. I got Hep C from a dirty needle. I didn't get any kind of compensation for that. I fell off the wagon; I drink because I'm sick. I'm going to stay here until I can get my life in order."

A third described his situation as follows: "I stayed at the Out of the Cold program during the winter. I work when I can find it. It sucks to be homeless. I feel abandoned. The government needs to see how we live out here. Welcome to Hazard County."

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