

**Project Case Study  
Cornerstone Community Association  
Oshawa, Ontario (Durham Region)**

**1. Introduction**

This case study of Cornerstone Emergency Shelter 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

Since 1967, Cornerstone Community Association Durham Inc. has provided a continuum of housing options, services and supports to men without housing 16 years of age and older. Over the years, staff have observed a change in the population served by the shelter, with an increasing number of homeless men with mental health conditions, addictions and disabilities accessing their services.

In addition to the emergency shelter in downtown Oshawa, Cornerstone maintains several residential facilities for homeless men in the region. Agency staff run a 10-bed community residential facility for individuals formerly incarcerated in federal correctional facilities that is open 24 hours a day and seven days a week. On average, clients are housed for a period of three to six months. Staff also supervises a 10-bed transitional program for their clients. Residents benefit

from medium term on-going support while they develop the basic skills to live independently. Three of the beds in this facility are set aside for individuals in addictions recovery programs.

Former emergency shelter residents can occupy rooms in one of three apartment units managed by the Cornerstone Community Association, each providing an increasing level of independence for residents. The first building has 18 units fully supported by shelter staff daily. The second building has 28 rent-to-income units. Residents living there can request assistance from on-call shelter staff. The third building — Northview Meadow Cooperative Homes and Cormark Station — provides 19 units, where residents are expected to achieve a greater degree of independent living.

The Cornerstone Community Association maintains on-going relationships with the Social Development Council of Ajax-Pickering, the Durham Housing Authority, Regional Police Service, Health Department and the Regional Social Services Department. Cornerstone also partners with a number of other community organizations in the region to support the homelessness initiative, including the Canadian Mental Health Association and the Colborne Community Services, which offer the services of their mental health support workers on a regular basis to the shelter's clients. Cornerstone staff relies on the Intercity Health Church Ministries for their clients' health care needs. Cornerstone sustains an active chaplaincy program with local church groups. They participate in court diversion programs and work with the John Howard Society. They have informal relationships with the YWCA Housing program, the local food bank and the Gate 3:16 Drop-in Centre.

Staff at Cornerstone has a unique partnership with its clients. Staff and clients were instrumental in setting up the "Homeless Maze" program, a Community Economic Development initiative managed by the clients themselves. During the homelessness community planning process held last year, the "Homeless Maze" group was invited to make a presentation about the barriers and difficulties experienced by the homeless in their attempts to navigate Ontario's social safety net.

### What the project involves

When the availability of federal SCPI funding was announced in the community, agency staff submitted an application for funds to renovate the lower floor of their emergency shelter and expand the facility to 40 beds from 30. Plans to increase beds at the shelter were strongly supported by the Working Together on Homeless Issues Group (WTHIG), given the rise in community demand for shelter services. WTHIG participated in the region's community planning process, and Cornerstone staff have been members since its inception in 1998.

Besides refuge, agency staff help homeless men to develop personalized plans to reorient their lives. Clients are encouraged to take advantage of services in the community and are assisted to resolve personal issues (such as addictions, mental health or physical health conditions), pursue their educational goals, participate in pre-employment or job-ready programs, or search for permanent housing.

### Objectives of the project

The objective is to increase the number of beds at the emergency shelter from 30 to 40 in order to respond to the rising demand for refuge in Durham Region, especially during the winter, and to improve the facilities to better serve clients.

### **3. Implementation to Date**

Renovations are well underway at the emergency shelter. The entrance has been moved to a more appropriate section of the structure and made accessible to persons with physical disabilities. The infirmary has been expanded to serve more individuals. The kitchen facilities have been upgraded and work is continuing to finish the renovations to the bed space on the lower floor to accommodate 10 more homeless individuals.

### **4. Outcomes to Date**

#### Preliminary observations

While it is premature to make any assessment of the impacts of the Cornerstone Community Association on the lives of its many clients in the longer term, it is possible to make the following preliminary observations:

- The Cornerstone emergency shelter now has room for 40 men, up from 30 before the SCPI – funded renovations.
- We were told that the local community used to complain about the fact that homeless men used to “hang out” in front of the Cornerstone building and that this sometimes resulted in disturbances at the front entrance. Cornerstone’s response in the reconfiguration was to move the main entrance into the building’s parking lot, so that the homeless men waiting to access the shelter wait in the parking lot and off the street; this has reportedly reduced the incidence of disturbances in the neighbourhood.
- Another problem was that under the old configuration the building was not accessible to homeless men who had problems managing stairs. The SCPI renovation included the installation of a ramp to allow persons in wheelchairs and those with mobility problems to access the building with greater ease.
- Prior to the renovation the building did not have a proper first aid station where a nurse or nurse practitioner could meet with clients to ascertain their medical problems and provide them with assistance. Cornerstone incorporated in its new design a clinic where the nurse can greet the homeless clients and provide them with medical care.

Client comments

In order to get a sense of the project's impact on clients, the researcher spent a day at Cornerstone Community Association having informal conversations with approximately nine 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.

Said one, "I came from Toronto. I stayed in shelters or slept outside. I shoplifted and ended up in jail for four months. I was molested by my uncle when I was young — homeless men won't admit to that (sexual molestation), but a lot of them have had similar fates. I've been here for a week. I like the shelter; I get all the help I need here. My plans are to hitchhike to Halifax soon."

Another reported that, "My landlord kicked me out because I didn't have enough money for my rent. I roamed the streets for a while, panhandled and hitchhiked to Oshawa. This is my fifth visit to the shelter; I've come back here more than once because they've taken good care of me in the past. I'm hoping to move into a room (in Oshawa) this week."

A third said, "I'm a Cree Status Indian and I've been here for a week now. I lived on the streets for a while where I had nothing better to do but smoke dope and get high; I'd like to go into rehab. When I asked people on the street where I could stay, they said to come here — I get everything I need here. I'm planning on hitchhiking to Halifax soon."

*Winter 2002*