

Community Case Study Durham Region, Ontario

1. Introduction

This case study of Durham Region 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 Durham Region'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

Durham Region, created in 1974, is made up of eight municipalities: the City of Oshawa, the towns of Ajax, Pickering and Whitby, the municipality of Clarington and the townships of Scugog, Uxbridge and Brock in the north.

For several decades, one of the region's largest employers has been General Motors of Canada. Many individuals and families settled in Durham Region to take advantage of employment opportunities in this and other related industries. More recently, major changes in the region's economy have led to a rise in the numbers of individuals and families forced to depend on the many non-profit organizations and religious groups that have provided shelter, food and social services to this population over the past two to four decades. The increased demand is straining the capacity of these agencies.

Prior to the NHI, agencies such as the Cornerstone Community Association, YWCA Housing and Denise House provided shelter beds to homeless, men, women and their families. The Ark, and its predecessor the Durham Outlook for Needy, offered temporary refuge to youth. The Canadian Mental Health Association secured housing for persons with mental health conditions. Gate 3:16, a drop-in centre for the homeless, has served the community during the past 11 years. These services are located in Oshawa, which has been the major source of services for the homeless for some time.

More recently, other parts of the region have responded to the issue as well. In Whitby, Colborne Community Services has provided crisis beds to persons with mental health issues. The Muslim Welfare Home has housed single-parent and two-parent families in Whitby, and Bethesda House in Clarington has offered emergency shelter to abused women and their children. The Ajax-Pickering Housing Help Centre and, more recently, the John Howard Society and its partners from the North Durham Homelessness Outreach Team, have assisted the homeless with their search for shelter and/or permanent housing.

Community planning

Starting in the early 1990s, the management and staff of local service providers responded to the pressures "to try do more with less" by coming together to search for strategies to deal with their shrinking resources. The executive directors of some agencies created the Working Together on Homelessness Issues Group (WTHIG) in 1995. In 1998, concerned social services officials formed the Durham Advisory Committee on Homelessness (DACH).

Involvement by federal, provincial and municipal governments

The development of these working groups (WTHIG and DACH) encouraged several information and data gathering activities on homelessness and poverty in the region. For example, a member of the Durham Region Health Department conducted focus groups and interviews with homeless persons in Oshawa in 1997. The research culminated in the: "Report on the Homeless Study Conducted within the City of Oshawa, Summer 1997." This was followed by an event sponsored by the local HRDC office, which produced a "Think Tank Report on Homelessness and Employment in Durham Region" in 1999. The following year, HRDC helped to fund "The Community Wellness Study of Durham Region," researched and prepared by the Social Development Council of Ajax-Pickering. Each of these reports and other smaller studies offer a broad overview of poverty and homelessness in this part of Ontario.

Prior to the NHI, local HRDC staff participated in several employment-related initiatives in Durham region. For example, HRDC supported the activities of agencies such as the Skills Marketing and Recruitment Team (SMART). This agency offers employment preparation services and skills development opportunities to women experiencing poverty and/or violence in their everyday lives. With HRDC support, this agency expanded its services to Ajax-Pickering and Bowmanville.

The province has also contributed directly to addressing homelessness in Durham Region. The Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) has maintained funding through six homelessness program streams in the community. MCSS has for years shared the costs of operating emergency shelters, and run its Domiciliary Hostels Program, which funds private boarding homes for those at risk of homelessness. Per diem rates for both types of dwellings were increased in December 2000. MCSS also funds three Homelessness Response programs: the Hostel Redirection Fund (since April, 1999), the Provincial Homelessness Initiatives Program (since November 1998) and the Community Partners Program (since January 2000). Funding is also provided for the Support for Daily Living program to assist homeless individuals with mental health issues (since January 2000). Finally, the Ministry created the Off the Streets into Shelters Fund (January 2001) to assist agencies that offer services to hard-to-serve homeless people. The Region administers most of the funding from these programs.

Provincial funding was a major reason for the formation of DACH. Members of this committee consulted regularly with Regional Council on the spending of provincial dollars and some regional dollars for homelessness projects. Amongst its spending priorities, DACH recommended PHIF and regional funds for Our Place, a much needed drop-in centre for the homeless in downtown Oshawa and for the John Howard Society's and the Social Development Council of Ajax-Pickering's housing initiatives. DACH also recommended the distribution of PHIF monies to services like the North Durham Homelessness Outreach Team. In addition, the Province's Ministry of Health has worked closely with the Canadian Mental Health Association to secure housing for homeless persons, and those at risk of homelessness, with mental health conditions.

Like other local government entities in Ontario, Durham Region has provided affordable housing to individuals with low-incomes for several years. In 1996, there were just over 7,000 social housing units and the number has not increased significantly since then. The Housing Access Centre had a waiting list of over 5,000 households and a vacancy rate of 1.7 percent in 2001.

3. How Durham Region Has Responded to the Federal Government Initiative

Initial work by HRDC

Durham Region was one of the 20 percent communities targeted for SCPI funding as a result of extensive consultations by Minister Bradshaw across the country. Initially, HRDC had limited funding to the City of Oshawa but lobbying by the community, stakeholders and local politicians encouraged HRDC to make the funding available to the whole region rather than just Oshawa, and this was agreed to. The towns of Ajax and Pickering have participated in community planning, but

have encountered a problem in obtaining a share of funding. They had been included in Toronto's SCPI funding allocation because they belong to the Toronto Census Management Area for provincial funding purposes, but Toronto does not provide service or funding to agencies in those two communities. At the time of writing this report, this issue was still being actively debated.

HRDC worked closely with regional staff to support the community planning process. They assisted with the costs of workshops and meetings held to develop the plan, and participated in the hiring of consultants to work on the plan. Staff also provided stakeholders with advice and support on proposal writing. From the beginning of the NHI, local HRDC staff was active in supporting agency managers and staff with this task.

Community planning process

Community planning on homelessness in Durham began with open meetings sponsored by the Regional Social Services Department. Invitations to the planning sessions were posted in local newspapers. Consultants with expertise on housing and homelessness were hired to assist with the original planning meetings and the preparation of the community plan. They conducted focus groups and interviews with community members and representatives of WTHIG and DACH. Members of the Aboriginal community were invited to participate, as were service groups involved with local homeless youth. Information from a number of reports such as the Provincial Task Force on Homelessness contributed to the plan.

Durham region officials chose to adopt a shared model to administer the community plan, with the community making allocation decisions through the Region, and HRDC administering the project contribution agreements. The community used the following structure to plan and implement its response to NHI:

Community Planning Group (the DACH)

- 7 regional groups
- 4 community groups
- 20 service providers

Community Project Selection Committee

- 1 regional representative
- 2 regional officials
- 1 community agency representative
- 1 business/labour representative

At one of the first planning workshops, organizers decided a crash course on homelessness would be an appropriate way to begin. They invited actors from the Cornerstone Association's "Homeless Maze" to participate in an interactive presentation to educate the audience about the barriers and difficulties experienced by the homeless about the barriers and difficulties experienced by the homeless in their attempts to navigate Ontario's social safety net. (Homeless Maze is a Community Economic Development initiative managed by persons who were once homeless.)

Once enough data was collected from the community planning workshops, participants met in small discussion groups that reflected eight major homelessness categories. This exercise culminated in the setting of priorities to fill the identified gaps and the development of priority-based criteria to assist in the selection of projects for SCPI funding.

Durham's Regional Council oversaw the project selection process. Elected regional councillors were expected to approve funding recommendations from Durham Region's Health and Social Services committee. The municipal body received the recommendations from the DACH sub-committee on SCPI funding.

The Planning Group held regular meetings and distributed minutes. Regional staff updated local politicians and community members. Local HRDC staff shared the information they received from headquarters and made efforts to keep stakeholders advised of new directives during the RFP exercise.

The Aboriginal community in Durham is small, and Aboriginal people in need of housing or other social service assistance typically use mainstream services. When the local HRDC office informed Aboriginal groups in Durham of the NHI and the dedicated Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS) funds that were available, the Native Cultural Centre inquired about funding to build a community resource center, but this was turned down because it did not meet the criteria for funding under the NHI. They then submitted a request to fund a study of employment services for Aboriginals, the creation of a database of local Aboriginal people, and a study of how best to raise funds for a community centre in Durham. The Native Cultural Centre did participate in community consultations, but did not have a representative on the Planning Group, and no Aboriginal proposals have been submitted for homelessness projects.

Some youth homelessness funds were also available in Durham in addition to the SCPI allocation, and these too have yet to be used, because local youth organizations have decided to do a planning process of their own, independently of the broader community planning process.

Gaps and priorities

The gaps and priorities exercise included the identification of eight priority areas (listed below) and an inventory of supports and services already available to the homeless in the region. The exercise was deemed very positive. Community members had a chance to review the priorities designed to fill the gaps and deliver appropriate services and the majority approved the final choices.

1. create additional shelter spaces in communities without these services
2. create additional transitional and supportive housing units and develop transitional housing that allows homeless families to reside together, i.e., both parents with children, male one-parent families and female one-parent families
3. develop outreach services to link homeless people with the resources they require in the community
4. ensure the delivery of adequate health care, employment supports, assistance for homeless youths to pursue their education and training for staff providing services to the homeless

5. establish prevention strategies for homeless persons
6. encourage the development of multi-service centres to address the recreational and community needs of homeless persons; in addition, provide permanent support services for homeless aboriginal people
7. encourage activities that support a “continuum of supports” approach
8. support initiatives that strengthen the capacity of community organizations to address homelessness

Implementation to date

At the time of the case study, the following projects were underway or had been approved:

| Projects Funded to Date |
|---|
| <p>Bethesda House (Shelter support and advocacy for abused women and children)</p> <p>1) To build a new shelter, 2) Emergency funding to complete urgent renovations on the interior of the existing shelter in order to keep it open while the new shelter is being built</p> |
| <p>Cornerstone Community Association (Men's hostel)</p> <p>1) To fund the expansion of the existing shelter capacity and enhance the current space to include beds for all individuals seeking shelter, 2) To provide substance abuse treatment, and find housing and employment for homeless individuals</p> |
| <p>Gate 3:16 Outreach Centre (Drop-in and medical centres)</p> <p>1) To cover the costs of additional space needed to accommodate the increased number of homeless clientele, 2) To assist health care services, the youth centre, the drop-in and the day-care centres</p> |
| <p>The Ark Youth Shelter</p> <p>1) To keep the shelter open for the winter months in order to serve the youth homeless population of the community, 2) To renovate the existing space to allow up to six more beds</p> |
| <p>YWCA Housing</p> <p>1) To expand the existing 30-bed base to 50 beds for homeless women and children, 2) To purchase kitchen supplies, cots, bunks, mattresses, health and safety equipment, and personal necessities for use in the shelter</p> |

Respondents were asked about the sustainability of the projects approved for SCPI funding. Responses were consistent with those heard in other parts of the country. Agencies will be able to maintain the capital projects financed with federal dollars. Those with projects that involve operational funding are concerned about the future and are resolved to find the financial support from other sources when the SCPI initiative ends in 2003. Most of the stakeholders seeking on-going support will almost certainly participate in the information sessions held by the "Fundings Cafe," every year in the region. The "Fundings Cafe," sponsored by the Durham Region Funding Network, is made up of funding groups from various federal and provincial ministries, foundations and local United Ways.

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 Durham Region, researchers developing the case studies reported the following key observations about the way this community is responding to the federal homelessness initiative to date:

- Like several other communities that participated in these case studies, Durham Region already had committees and working group planning activities to assist the homeless prior to the NHI. The community worked together to persuade HRDC officials to recognize the needs of the homeless throughout Durham Region, not only in the city of Oshawa.
- Respondents praised HRDC locally for their commitment to the initiative and for their assistance during the SCPI process planning. Some respondents expressed frustrations with confusing communications or lack of information during the initial planning, the amount of paperwork required in the application process, the stringent accountability requirements, and delays in getting projects approved..
- The majority of respondents were satisfied with efforts made to draw the community to the planning table. Some interviewees mentioned the business and private sectors' lack of interest in the issue. Others stated that although some homeless persons provided input, the majority stayed away because they felt intimidated by the process, lacked the literacy skills to provide input or could not afford the transit costs to attend planning sessions if they lived outside of Oshawa. Comments about the communication strategies used by the Durham Advisory Committee on Homelessness, regional staff and HRDC staff also revealed satisfaction among those involved.
- Community planning was believed to have been enhanced by the audience participating in the "Homeless Maze" interactive event about the barriers and difficulties faced by homeless people, as it broadened committee members' understanding of the issues that needed to be addressed in the planning process.
- Stakeholders and interested parties all expressed satisfaction with the allocation of SCPI monies in the region.
- Learning to benefit from the strengths of the different stakeholders and organizations involved in the community planning process was a unique experience for many managers and staff of agencies and shelters in the Durham region.
- Over time, smaller, less sophisticated agencies benefited from HRDC support with proposal writing as evidenced by improvements in proposal submissions.
- Community leaders characterize the Community Plan for Homelessness in Durham as a "work in progress" and feel that the community still has a long way to go to develop a long-

term plan to deal with homelessness, beyond SCPI. Regional officials and local HRDC staff have committed to working with the community to continue this work.

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