

Community Case Study Thunder Bay, Ontario

1. Introduction

This case study of Thunder Bay 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 the Thunder Bay 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 and 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

In May 1987, the Lakehead Social Planning Council hosted a regional workshop on homelessness in Northwestern Ontario to encourage concerned individuals and groups to find solutions for some of the problems of people who were homeless or under-housed in the region.

Recommendations from six sessions in the workshop dealt with the following issues:

- high cost of housing
- long waiting lists for rent-to-income units
- lack of housing with support services for disabled people, ex-psychiatric patients or women escaping a crisis situation or leaving transitional housing

The city of Thunder Bay is an amalgamation of two cities: Fort William and Port Arthur. As a result, services for people who are homeless are primarily located in the north and south city cores of the two former cities.

Thunder Bay has six emergency shelters: Women and their children - Beendigan, Community Residence Women's Shelter and the Faye Peterson Transitional House; Shelter House (men and some women), Salvation Army Booth Centre and the John Howard Society "Howard House" (men). All but one of the shelters offer counselling and four offer some clothing on site. The churches, the majority of the shelters and other community groups in different locations provide meals and groceries, which can be obtained at 15 sites across Thunder Bay.

Community planning

Among service providers, joint efforts on homelessness issues were done informally on an as-needed basis. Discussions focused on concerns about particular clients or general community issues.

Thunder Bay community groups have a history of working together on affordable housing issues through the Community Housing Coalition. The Coalition comprises 20 community housing providers or agencies requiring housing for clients. It has been in existence since 1998 and continues to explore various housing opportunities, analyze legislation and make recommendations through its Board of Directors to the Thunder Bay City Council.

Involvement by federal, provincial and municipal governments

The local HRDC office has worked with shelters in Thunder Bay in the past through the Job Creation Partnerships funds program, but there had been no other federal homelessness related activity prior to the NHI.

In March of 1999, the Ontario Government Provincial Homelessness Strategy was announced. The province held a one-day information session on homelessness in Thunder Bay at which the community indicated a need for a housing registry. A Housing Registry was established through a purchase-of-service agreement with the Canadian Mental Health Association. The Registry supports service providers by collating a list of available housing and distributing it within the community as well as assisting in resolving conflicts between landlords and tenants. If requested, the Registry will pay rent directly to a landlord.

The province and the municipality cost-share per diems for clients at emergency hostels.

3. How Thunder Bay Has Responded to the Federal Government Initiative

Initial work by HRDC

Thunder Bay was informed that it would be receiving NHI funding in the fall of 2000 and organized and facilitated two meetings by early November to inform the community about the NHI. At the second information meeting, it was decided the Community Housing Coalition had the necessary institutional capacity to initiate the community planning process.

HRDC provided SCPI planning funding to hire a consultant to facilitate discussion among community members to develop a community plan. The funds were administered through the Lakehead Social Planning Council.

Community planning process

In the early stages of the planning process, the Thunder Bay Community Housing Coalition contracted a consultant's services to develop the plan.

Under the direction of the Housing Coalition, the consultant facilitated a series of interviews, questionnaires, surveys, meetings and two community workshops. Approximately 200 people, representing a wide variety of agencies, organizations and the three levels of government, attended the workshops. Participants were divided into sectors, such as shelters and youth, and each was asked to choose a representative to sit on a committee responsible for further development and implementation of the Community Plan on Homelessness. This committee forms the Thunder Bay Community Planning Group for Homelessness, referred to as the Planning Group.

Fifty-nine people who were homeless or who have experienced absolute or relative homelessness attended the workshops. They are referred to as "consumers" of homelessness services. This particular sector's participation was arranged through a number of agencies as well as individuals attending the community workshops. The Ontario Trillium Foundation assisted by

providing an honorarium to “consumers” who participated in the community planning process. Currently there are four “consumer” positions filled on the Planning Group.

The Planning Group’s role was initially to:

- provide leadership in developing the community plan;
- monitor the progress in the implementation of the goals and objectives;
- ensure that applications to funding sources the plan may identify are completed;
- ensure that formal support from stakeholders and the broader community is obtained

By winter 2002, the Planning Group/Advisory Group (a.k.a. the Thunder Bay Homelessness Working Group) also had the role of recommending which SCPI proposals fitted the component of the Community Plan to which the application was being made.¹

The information gathered through consultations was used to formulate the “Thunder Bay Homelessness Initiative: A Search for a Solution to Thunder Bay’s Rubik’s Cube.” This document is a long-term plan for homelessness and explores how Thunder Bay could provide safe, secure and affordable housing for everyone on the housing continuum.

The Planning Group, with the support of the consultant, then reviewed the SCPI fund criteria and matched them to some of the main components of the Rubik’s Cube community plan. A second plan called the SCPI Thunder Bay Planning Group for Homelessness Plan, was then developed to work specifically within the NHI timeframe. The City of Thunder Bay, the Ontario District Social Services Administration Board and the Robinson-Superior Chiefs Aboriginal Homelessness Conference have given their support in principle to the plan. This NHI community plan recognizes that a high percentage of Aboriginal people use the services for those who are homeless and that they have specific needs as Aboriginal peoples.

Responsibility for taking the minutes of the Planning Group meetings is rotated among members. The Canadian Mental Health Association administration staff support the Planning Group’s work by distributing the minutes and sending out notices and agendas of upcoming meetings.

Committees

There are six components to the SCPI Community Plan: Outreach, Emergency Fund, Education, Resource Development, Housing Facilitation and Small Capital. The Community Plan for the SCPI budget required a collaborative proposal process. HRDC held a workshop on the process. From the workshop, six committees of agency representatives formed to work on developing a proposal for each of the six components of the Plan. Membership of each committee is drawn

¹ At the time of the study, the Working Group had recommended the second Emergency Assistance Funding proposal, the Housing Facilitation proposal, Shelter House Resource Development proposal, Haven House Youth Shelter proposal, and also a Homelessness Education proposal for HRDC Job Creation Partnership funding.

from the Planning Group, other service providers, church groups and individuals. HRDC staff usually attended these committee meetings to provide advice on SCPI criteria.

The Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS) and Youth Initiative funding for Thunder Bay were announced at the same time as the SCPI general stream. While both sectors are represented on the Planning Group, it was acknowledged that these two sectors have particular needs and had specific streams of funding through the NHI. The Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres administers the UAS fund and HRDC is administering the Youth Initiative funding.

Aboriginal planning process

The Robinsons-Superior Chiefs within the Anishinabek Nation identified a need to address the issue of homelessness within their region. A Homeless Conference was held in April 2001, to help explore ways a partnership with the Thunder Bay Planning Group could continue to ensure the needs of the Aboriginal population were considered in the plan. HRDC staff and members of the Planning Group were invited to attend the conference and this helped make the existing links stronger.

In October 2001, Thunder Bay Aboriginal representatives met and decided that a portion of the UAS funding would be allocated to support two of the SCPI Community Plan priorities: a new or newly renovated shelter and the hiring of an outreach worker. The other portion of UAS funding will be allocated to the start-up costs of the Thunder Bay Street Patrol and Emergency Assistance. The Thunder Bay Indian Friendship Centres representative was asked to remain as the Aboriginal representative on the Planning Group.

Youth planning process

Participants at the initial community-planning meeting acknowledged that the extent of youth homelessness within the community was unknown. One of the main reasons suggested was that young people tend to sleep on friends' couches, moving from one to another when their welcome wears out. Also, for a variety of reasons related to safety and comfort, youths do not often utilize the existing services available to people who are homeless.

The management team, consisting of Youth Employment Services Thunder Bay (YES), Shelter House and the Children's Aid Society, in cooperation with the Planning Group, put together a proposal to gather relevant data and publish information on street youth in Thunder Bay to help the Planning Group make the community plan youth-inclusive.

Funding for the research on the needs of street youth was obtained through SCPI planning funding, and HRDC Youth Services Canada, which is part of the Youth Employment Strategy. YES administered the funds for this project.

The report “Youth Homelessness In Thunder Bay: A Snapshot” recommends:

- establishing youth-targeted outreach services that cover evening and weekend hours seven days per week
- establishing a youth centre to provide safe, free, emergency transition beds and supportive outreach services
- giving priority to at-risk youth requiring affordable, low income-subsidized housing through the housing services available in the community; for those requiring supportive housing situations, programming conducive to client needs should be considered
- developing an information booklet specific to youth services to be distributed within the community, and stakeholders establishing a youth-at-risk coalition
- providing information pro-actively to children in elementary and secondary schools regarding the risks of street life
- establishing emergency assistance fund specific to youth

Several people interviewed stated that this report helped to heighten awareness of the special needs of homeless youth.

The Thunder Bay Community Planning Group agreed in principle with the recommendations, but expressed concern with the recommendation to establish a separate youth shelter. While acknowledging that youth need to feel safe, and that having a specific shelter would deal with this issue, it was noted that the community cannot support the existing shelters’ needs. An additional shelter would draw from an already small pool of resources. Nevertheless, the Planning Group is willing to support the development of a youth shelter as a pilot project for the duration of the NHI because of the needs identified.

Gaps and priorities

The planning process identified lack of income as the primary cause of homelessness, and lack of psychiatric supports within the community as the secondary cause. It also indicated that all of the services are stopgaps rather than a means to a permanent solution. The community plan provides provision through the implementation of the six components for the movement of people up the housing continuum.

The formation of the six components was based on an initial misunderstanding that SCPI funding could not be used for capital expenditures, which was not clarified until April 2001. The majority of the Planning Group members spoken with said that they would have altered the funding priorities if this information had been known before the plan had been approved. Several shelters are in need of repair or replacement. The Planning Group has therefore redirected some funding from the Resource Development and Outreach components to Shelter House as a springboard for fund-raising required for its capital expenditure.

The six components are:

1. Outreach component to assist people in transition, or at risk of becoming homeless, in meeting their day to day needs
 - UAS funding will be used to hire an Aboriginal outreach worker who will work with all members of the community
 - At the time of study, a proposal for SCPI general stream funds was being developed for an outreach worker.
2. Emergency Fund component to assist those in desperate need of obtaining specialized shelter, protective clothing, baby supplies, medication and in securing identification documents
 - This component originally received funding under the Urgent Needs funding and was implemented for a period of eleven weeks; the current project proposal is drawing from the lessons learned
3. Education component to inform people living on the streets about the services that are available to them, ensure coordination among service providers and inform the general public about the reality of homelessness in the community
4. Resource Development Component to help shelters develop sustainable funding sources
5. Housing Facilitation component to work with landlords, tenants, agencies and service providers in accessing available programs in order to create additional affordable housing units
6. Small Capital component to provide for small capital needs identified by shelter and transitional homes for their respective facilities

HRDC staff is supporting developing proposals for each of the six components.

Implementation to date

At the time of the case study, the following project had been approved:

- Emergency Assistance Funding to implement an emergency assistance fund accessible by all agencies serving people who are homeless

The Community Housing Coalition's Emergency Assistance Funding (EAF) project was funded through Urgent Needs prior to the community plan being developed, as a way to meet critical needs across the range of existing services. The EAF was implemented through three service agencies that work directly with clients. Other service agencies needing access to the EAF were able to refer clients to one of the three implementing agencies.

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

- The Thunder Bay homelessness community found that developing the community plan was a long, laborious and bureaucratic process. However, they believe that the planning process brought key players together in a way that would not have happened otherwise. Thunder Bay now has a community plan addressing homelessness, agencies have a better understanding of how different service methods affect clients, and homelessness has been widely acknowledged as an issue that needs to be dealt with.
- Several agency representatives did suggest that the local and regional HRDC offices are knowledgeable about the local situation, and should be in a position to approve funding (as opposed to requiring the community to go through a lengthy planning process).
- The method used in Thunder Bay for developing project proposals was different than in most participating communities, in that agency representatives with an interest in a component of the plan self-assigned themselves to form a committee to prepare a proposal for that component. While there are advantages to this approach in fostering joint action and consensus building, it was found to be a laborious process, and difficult to sustain because agencies that were not going to receive funds from the process found it hard to justify the time and effort involved. The Planning Group acknowledges that several groups are no longer participating in the proposal writing because it is such an involved process, and some proposals have been slow to be developed because no agency would take primary responsibility for doing so. Some members believe that with this collaborative approach to project development, the agency taking on the main administrative burden needs to be compensated.

- The homelessness community feels that an important aspect of the development of the community plan in Thunder Bay was the involvement of a large number of homeless people, both in the initial consultations and as part of the Planning Group.
- The broader community of service providers also believes that some aspects of the collaborative approach have worked well. Groups have come together and explored the best way of using the existing resources, for example the Emergency Assistance Fund (EAF) and the management team that coordinated the Youth Homelessness in Thunder Bay have become familiar with each other's work. It has helped to establish trust, develop stronger linkages, enhance existing partnerships and build credibility with one another. The same groups mentioned that one of the most important unexpected understandings that have developed is a clear comprehension of how a particular agency's work affects one part of the whole client's daily life.
- Some new partnerships have developed among community members. For example, historically the Aboriginal community and the non-Aboriginal community have not worked together on homelessness issues, but they have now developed a closer working relationship as a result of the community planning process.
- Members of the Youth management team felt HRDC staff was supportive of the youth project that received funding. HRDC staff explored other federal funding streams the management team could tap into and helped the team go through the bureaucratic maze to access the funding. Communication was open, for example, during the writing of the proposal, staff helped to clarify why specific things were needed and were available when needed.
- The Emergency Assistance Fund was seen as a very good forum for networking with all agencies offering front line services. Agencies learned about supports available to clients and how to advocate on an individual or a family's behalf. It was also a good place to help develop accountability by establishing criteria that were fair and open for the clients while staying within the SCPI Urgent Needs guidelines.

Winter 2002