

**Project Case Study
John Howard Society — Going Straight Home
Toronto, Ontario**

Introduction

This case study of the John Howard Society's Going Straight Home program 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 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

Among the services that the John Howard Society (JHS) of Toronto provides to its clients, assisting former inmates to find adequate affordable housing has become a significant one. That job is an on-going challenge for staff of the Toronto JHS. Clients struggle with issues resulting from incarceration and homelessness. These include large

numbers of prisoners released from the Toronto jail system who have no fixed address to return to. For others, the terms of release prevent them from returning to their former communities. When released, inmates generally have one set of civilian clothes and perhaps a bus ticket to the nearest urban centre. They often leave jail with little or no planning for their re-integration into the community.

Once released, men and women who have completed their sentences or been released on parole or probation face other challenges. For example, many Canadians maintain wide-ranging prejudices about ex-convicts, concerns about the risks of former criminals returning to a life of crime and anxiety about the types of crimes committed by this population, e.g., assault, spousal abuse, physical violence and, especially, crimes of a sexual nature such as paedophilia. This assumption is believed by the JHS to be influenced by the fact that most ex-convicts have not received any type of rehabilitation or community re-integration counselling while incarcerated

Besides the support they provide to clients on homelessness and housing issues, staff members also offer employment and life skills programs to clients, one on one case management counselling, Native specific programs, anger management programs, and domestic violence programs. The JHS also refers clients out to other agencies in cases where clients have highly specialized needs such as severe mental health problems, or where they require more in-depth employment and life skills training. Also, as part of their mandate, staff members make efforts to visit Toronto's local jails to help those who are about to be released with discharge planning. However, the staff reports that their resources are not sufficient for them to do as much of this activity as they would like.

What the project involves

When the availability of federal SCPI funding was announced in Toronto, JHS staff submitted an application for funds to research existing information and statistics regarding the integration problems of homeless ex-offenders. Staff also wanted to gather and analyze data, develop a public education strategy and create a workshop presentation that would inform audiences about alternatives to incarceration, homelessness and housing issues for ex-offenders in Toronto, super jails and prison privatization. In addition, staff hoped to do outreach to housing providers, service providers for former inmates and community stakeholders, in order to assist with the housing needs of this group.

The project was approved and began to operate in the summer of 2001. The project's apparent success thus far has prompted the city of Toronto to provide additional funding until the spring of 2003. Since the project's inception, the staff has been gathering information from its clients about the challenges of reintegrating into the Toronto community. With this information and client input, they developed an interactive public education presentation entitled, "Going Straight Home?" to sensitize the community to the links between incarceration and homelessness. Staff recruited and trained JHS clients and some clients of other agencies in the community to participate with them in the workshop presentations.

The Society's concern with incarceration and homelessness has encouraged staff to generate partnerships and working relationships with fellow service providers in the community. Staff members have become active members of Toronto's Alternative Housing and Services Committee and maintain partnerships with the Toronto Disaster Relief committee, the Toronto Tenants Association, the Board of Health and the Queen West Community Health Centre. In addition, the staff works closely with their counterparts in the Aboriginal community such as Spirit of the People and NA-ME-RES and are involved with the city's Out of the Cold community program team. JHS also collaborates with a number of provincial organizations in the region such as the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice, and Housing Action Now, and co-chairs a sub-committee on Housing and Homelessness issues for the City of Toronto.

Objectives of the project

The Going Straight Home program has the following nine objectives:

1. To research current information and statistics regarding integration issues for ex offenders who are homeless
2. To analyze information and develop a public education package and workshop presentation
3. To do outreach to housing providers, service providers who work with our clients and community stakeholders in order to promote the housing needs of ex offenders
4. To do 25–30 workshop presentations to housing providers and community stakeholder to promote ex offenders who are in need of housing
5. To develop a pre-test and a post-test for usage before and after each workshop
6. To recruit and train ex-offenders to take part in the presentation who can share their experiences and expertise with audiences
7. To identify issues and concerns identified by the workshop participants
8. To develop an action plan to identify the methods of addressing the issues and concerns raised by the housing providers and community stakeholders
9. To produce a report upon completion of the project with recommendations for next steps

3. Implementation to Date

The research and data-gathering to develop a public education package and workshop presentation was completed in the late summer of 2001. JHS staff succeeded in recruiting a number of its own clients and some clients of other community agencies to contribute to workshop presentations. At the beginning, seven clients joined the workshop team. Although the number has decreased since the project started, staff is actively recruiting more clients. Recruitment is difficult as many potential candidates are

already busy with jobs and careers or participating in different programs to help them re-integrate into their communities.

Since the end of May 2002, more than 22 workshops have been delivered to a variety of groups including local high school students, housing providers, community agencies and faith-based organizations. It appears that staff and clients will surpass their initial goal of delivering 25 to 30 workshops by the end of August 2002, as the presentations have elicited a lot of interest from the community.

In order to measure the impacts of the workshops, participants were invited to evaluate each presentation using a survey sheet. Comments from workshop attendees have been very positive overall and in many instances, the opinions of audience members were transformed once they had a chance to become acquainted with the issues connected to incarceration and homelessness.

Encouraged by the city's decision to extend funding until the spring of 2003, the program's developers are in the process of analyzing the workshop evaluations. The analysis will help them to revise the presentations and update the information imparted in the workshops. There are also plans to consult with their community partners in order to identify new audiences.

4. Outcomes to Date

Preliminary observations

While it is premature to make any assessment of the impacts of the JHS Going Straight Home program on the lives of its many clients in the longer term, it is possible to make the following preliminary observations:

- Through its public education package and workshop presentations, the Society has succeeded in reaching out to several groups in the city who would otherwise not have been exposed to this issue. Housing providers and members of community and faith-based organizations attended the presentations. Both the coordinator of the Going Straight Home workshops and the clients involved in the delivery of the workshops are enthusiastic about the feedback they have received.
- As a result of the workshops, project staff has acquired accommodations for their clients from ECU Homes and are in talks with Habitat and St. Claire's Multi-faith organization, in the hopes of securing more housing for the many clients they serve.

Workshop presenters told us that some presentations have been attended by landlords, and that some of them have subsequently expressed a willingness to make their accommodations available to former inmates.

- Overall, the project's coordinator believes that the workshops have increased the community's awareness about incarceration and homelessness. There is of course, much more work to do. The next step is to motivate the community to make the leap from becoming aware of the issue to posing concrete actions to resolve it.

Client comments

In order to get a sense of the project's impact on clients, the researcher spent time at John Howard Society having informal conversations with three Speaker's Bureau members, two of whom were former clients of the Going Straight Home project. The researcher asked them 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 said, "I'm a former ward of the Children's Aid Society. I was homeless before going to jail and after I was released from jail. Going back to jail was an option I considered because I was very discouraged. The JHS helped me to connect with LOFT community services. I am HIV-positive and have addictions. The community services provided me with a rent-to-income unit that I can afford with my ODSP pension."

Another reported, "I was in federal jail for five years. When I was released from prison, I faced much prejudice from landlords. I stayed in Toronto shelters for four months. Staff from the JHS helped me to find room and board in a farmhouse in exchange for doing chores. In Toronto, there's a low vacancy rate. Rents are very high. The government closed all the halfway houses and I didn't get any help from the jail system when I was released."

A third said, "Landlords are not very sympathetic to our situations. While I was in jail, there weren't any rehab programs so I didn't do very much during my stay there. The living arrangements in the jails are bad. I'm involved in the JHS speakers' bureau. I'm helping with the Going Straight Home workshops. Most of our audiences are curious and sympathetic. What we share with them opens their eyes and they become more concerned after that. Educating the public is important."

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