

Project Case Study Out of the Rain Program Victoria, British Columbia

1. Introduction

This case study of the Out of the Rain 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 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

Although a number of youth-oriented agencies were aware of the increase in youth homelessness in Victoria, none of them had the resources, financial or other, to deal with the problem. Young people tended to seek shelter wherever they could find it. They typically slept in the doorways of businesses, in abandoned buildings or in local parks. These youths tended to shun the adult shelters because they did not feel safe or comfortable in them, they had formed strong attachments to pet dogs or cats that were not permitted in shelters, or they preferred to sleep in quarters surrounded by the friends they had made

on the streets and their peers rather than adult strangers. According to outreach workers that serve this group, in most cases, homeless youth have run away from destructive family situations that include emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Many have become hardened by street life and survive by prostitution, drug trafficking and violence.

In 1998, community awareness grew about the numbers of youths living on the streets, and outreach workers and staff from the local YMCA approached church groups and other youth organizations with a plan to respond to the problem in the downtown core. After several meetings and consultations, a coalition of agencies – made up of the YM/YWCA, the Boys and Girls Club Services, the Canadian Red Cross, Christ Church Cathedral, Church of St. John the Divine, First Metropolitan Church, Queen Alexander Foundation for Children, the Victoria Real Estate Board, the United Way of Greater Victoria and, more recently, Silver Threads (a senior's organization) – formed a partnership to provide temporary shelter to youth on a rotating basis during the cold and wet weather months in the city. In that first year, the project relied on small donations from the church congregations as well as limited funding from other sources. As there was no money to pay for salaries, the temporary shelter providers were expected to rely exclusively on volunteers to operate the program in 1998 and 1999.

What the project involves

The Out of the Rain program was set up to provide more appropriate shelter and services to young homeless men and women during the winter season in Victoria, and is maintained by the coalition described above. All the groups share the responsibility of providing temporary shelter to young homeless people by offering their facilities one night a week. Youth can access the temporary shelters at 11 p.m. They are served a light meal and provided with cots for the night.

As a support to the shelter program, the YM/YWCA provides a mobile van equipped with food, supplies and information for homeless youth in the city's downtown. The van follows the same route every evening and makes regular stops throughout the city. In most instances, the mobile van's staff (volunteer counsellors and nurses) is the first point of contact for homeless youth who are new to the city. In addition to food and warm beverages, young people can ask for warm clothing and first aid supplies if required. The mobile van staff also offers advice and information and will refer the youth to specific health, social and income maintenance services when consulted.

A proposal to fund the salaries of two youth outreach and support workers to coordinate the mobile van and the shelters was submitted to the Victoria Homelessness selection committee in the spring of 2001 and SCPI funding was granted.

Objectives of the project

SCPI funds two coordinators to help ensure that young people in Victoria who need shelter for the night are directed to an appropriate location or receive assistance from a mobile van equipped with food and

other supplies. The Out of the Rain project provides night shelter to young homeless men and women seeking a safe and appropriate place to stay during the cold winter months of the year. The mobile van acts as a support to the night shelter program, to aid young people who choose to stay on the street overnight.

3. Implementation To Date

The provision of temporary shelter to young homeless men and women continues as it did prior to the SCPI funding, and the addition of the outreach services means that more youth are aware of the shelters, and know where to go on a given night. At this time, the facilities provided by the partner agencies are able to shelter 25 to 30 youths each night. The mobile van serves an increasing number of young people who turn to this service for food and supplies. For some of the youths already familiar with the mobile van, it has become a lifeline on which they depend for assistance, as they usually don't use the services of the temporary youth shelters.

There was support in the community for this type of service provision. Certainly, the congregations of the church partners have indicated a commitment to the project, as have the other agencies involved. The issue of youth homelessness was also recognized as a problem that merited the funding resources of the SCPI program. The risk of the partners pulling out is minimal. If any one of them did pull out, it might result in no shelter services being available for a particular night each week unless another partner filled the gap or a new partner joined the group.

4. Outcomes To Date

Preliminary observations

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

- The YM/YWCA took the lead with this project. Because of their limited resources, they needed more space to house youth temporarily during the cold winter months. Their staff approached local churches and other agencies for this space. The partners agreed to participate and also provide volunteers who supervise the youth on the nights they stay in their facilities. The future of this partnership is greatly dependent on the YM/YWCA's efforts to find on-going funding for the project's activities.
- The temporary service providers continue to monitor the program to determine its growth. In addition, the partners are working hard to try to secure alternative funding sources to support the project beyond 2003. Sustainability remains an issue.

Client comments

In order to get a sense of the project's impact on clients, the researcher spent a day at project facilities 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.

Many of the homeless youth are attracted to Victoria because of its mild climate, and the counsellors in the mobile van said they encountered youths from all over Canada. Reasons offered for leaving home included abuse and family break-ups. A number said they left home after their parents separated or divorced; they often didn't get along with "mom's new boyfriend," for example.

When the youth arrive in Victoria they tend to look for other youth to "hang out with." Young homeless women often look for other homeless women to stay with. There are loners as well (mostly young men) who try to fend for themselves. Some of the youth we spoke to expressed hopes for the future, such as returning to school, finding a job, settling down one day and "living a normal life".

All the young people interviewed expressed gratitude for the mobile van or for the shelter. One young woman said, "I was 15 years old the first time I was homeless...I've managed to stay out of trouble during my time on the streets...I'm staying at the youth shelter tonight...it's great to have a warm place to sleep when it's cold and wet outside."

Winter 2002