



# Niagara Homelessness Services Community Plan

April 2011

## **Niagara Region Homelessness Services Community Plan**

### **BACKGROUND**

Niagara Region Community Services Department manages the Niagara Homelessness Service System with funding provided through Federal, Provincial and Regional homelessness programs. The Federal government's Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) in combination with the Provincial government's Consolidated Homelessness Prevention Program (CHPP) has helped individuals and families in the Niagara community access emergency, preventative and housing services. Regional programs also fund activities in the community related to Niagara's homelessness strategy and they are:

- Niagara Prosperity Initiative – a poverty reduction strategy using 100% Niagara Regional funding to provide project support at the neighbourhood level.
- Youth Without Secure Housing - a strategy focused on prevention with the aim of keeping youth in school, in their home community and housed.

As the community entity for HPS, Niagara Region Community Services is required to engage with the Niagara Homelessness Advisory Committee (NHAC) to develop and submit a Community Plan to Service Canada in regards to local homelessness issues and priorities to address. The NHAC ensures identified priorities in the Community Plan are met through the funding process and a subgroup of members review and recommend projects to the community entity for implementation. The advisory body consists of representatives from municipalities in Niagara, local service providers and client groups, members in the private and Aboriginal sector, in addition to Federal and Provincial representation.

The preparation and development process for the 2011-2014 community plan involved a Community Services Department Stakeholder Consultation, assessing the previous community plan in regards to the objectives and targets achieved and the relevance of the contents towards updating the 2011-2014 community plan. In addition, the creation of the community plan considered information obtained from Dr. Stephanie Baker-Collins report on youth homelessness in Niagara and a survey conducted on service agencies regarding various aspects of homelessness including priorities, gaps, strengths and funding.

### **2007-2010 ASSESSMENT**

As a condition of the funding allocated to successful proponents, information regarding client and program outcomes was documented. This has provided Niagara Region with a more accurate picture and increased awareness of the homelessness issues faced by the community.

From 2007 to 2010, outcomes pertaining to housing transitions, housing retention and social and economic improvements were tracked. Results are as follows:

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<b>NUMBER OF PEOPLE REPORTING HOUSING TRANSITIONS</b>			
<b>TRANSITION TYPE</b>	<b>ANNUAL RESULTS 2007-2008</b>	<b>ANNUAL RESULTS 2008-2009</b>	<b>ANNUAL RESULTS 2009-2010</b>
Street to more stable housing	76	0	0
Emergency shelter to more stable housing	0	42	25
Hidden homelessness to more stable housing	0	6	44
Transitional housing to more stable housing	0	0	0
Supportive housing to more stable housing	0	0	0
Criminal justice system to more stable housing	0	1	0
Child welfare system to more stable housing	0	0	0
Health facility to more stable housing	0	4	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>NUMBER OF PEOPLE THAT MAINTAINED HOUSING</b>			
<b>OUTCOME</b>			
Number of people that maintained their housing	0	86	176
<b>NUMBER OF PEOPLE REPORTING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPROVEMENTS</b>			
<b>OUTCOME</b>			
Improvements in income	0	41	247
Improvements in employment status	0	30	35
Improvements in participation in volunteer work	0	19	3
Improvements in participation in education	0	22	13
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>298</b>

Over the three results reporting periods, 198 unique individuals received support and were able to move to more stable housing. Of those 198 individuals, 103 were contacted for a three-month follow-up and 85% of them were able to retain their housing (not shown in chart).

During the 2008-2010 period, 262 at-risk and/or at-imminent-risk individuals received homelessness prevention services. Successful follow-up was made with 223 of the individuals and 90% of them were able to maintain their housing after three months (not shown in chart).

With respect to changes in social and economic attributes, 288 individuals experienced an improvement in income, 65 individuals improved their employment status, 22 individuals improved their participation in volunteer work and 35 individuals improved their participation in education.

Although targets were set for some of these outcome categories when the 2007-2009 community plan was developed, figures were not updated to include 2010 expected outcomes. However, it can be concluded based on the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009

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results that Niagara Region has met or exceeded most of their targets as shown in the following chart.

OUTCOME	2007-2009 Targets	2007-2009 Actual Results
1.1 NUMBER OF PEOPLE REPORTING HOUSING TRANSITIONS	94	129
1.2 NUMBER OF PEOPLE SUCCESSFUL IN RETAINING HOUSING AFTER 3 MONTHS	66	68 <sup>1</sup>
2.1 NUMBER OF PEOPLE RECEIVING PREVENTION SERVICES	104	86
2.2 NUMBER OF PEOPLE SUCCESSFUL IN RETAINING HOUSING AFTER 3 MONTHS	66	73 <sup>2</sup>

The most recent data collected thus far is for the period from March to December 2010 and the figures show that many more people are accessing housing and preventative services compared to previous reporting years. The conclusions drawn are: 173 individuals were able to transition to more stable housing; 164 individuals received housing loss prevention services and of the follow-ups completed for both outcomes; and over 90% of individuals were able to retain their housing after three months. In addition, 86 individuals experienced social and/or economic improvements.

These figures provide significant information about the positive changes made to members of the community with housing stability issues, but they also help identify where improvements need to be made. Through the data tracking process, it has become apparent that the term *homelessness prevention* has multiple meanings to multiple agencies, groups, and individuals. As a result, Niagara Region Community Services has been working with the NHAC to develop a standard prevention model to be used as a guideline by agencies providing preventative services. In addition, data collection methods have been inconsistent between, and sometimes within, agencies. However, hostels across the region are currently in the phase of implementing the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) as the standard system for data tracking. The ultimate goal will be for all service agencies to include HIFIS as part of their operations such that reliable data will be available at the regional level.

### **CURRENT SITUATION**

Niagara Region was one of the CMAs in Ontario hit hardest by the economic downturn. The demand for tourism declined which negatively impacted cities such as Niagara Falls that heavily rely on the hospitality industry as a source of revenue and job creation. This led to a decrease in job opportunities for students and other seasonal workers during the summer months. However, it was not only seasonal positions that

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<sup>1</sup> Determined by multiplying the success rate of clients contacted for follow-ups by the total of the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 reporting period.

<sup>2</sup> Same comment as above.

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were affected. Poor economic prospects in the Region has led many youths, including recent graduates, to move out of the area to larger cities or other provinces for job opportunities. The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for St.Catharines-Niagara in the first quarter of 2011 has been averaging 9.6%, well above other Ontario CMAs and the provincial and national average of 8% and 7.8% respectively. Recent news of a manufacturing plant in Welland closing and thus eliminating over 300 jobs emphasizes the dire situation that municipalities in Niagara face in regards to increasing unemployment.

Since 2007, the list of individuals on the waitlist for affordable housing has increased and with the implementation of the HST in Ontario this past summer, families and individuals are spending a greater portion of their income on their cost of living. This new tax system has a larger, negative impact for those in the low income range who are already struggling to cover their basic necessities as one can tell based on the persistent increase in the number of Ontario Works caseloads and the increase in food bank usage in Niagara. Given the current economic conditions with food and energy prices at levels above historical highs and a projected forecast of an upward trend for the rest of 2011 from multiple consulting groups, Niagara's Homelessness Service System will have to meet greater demands with fewer resources. As a result, it is expected for prevention and support services to have a bigger impact than emergency shelters in tackling homelessness in Niagara for the period of April 1, 2011-March 31, 2014.

The number of immigrants coming into the Region decreased in 2009 and this group have the tendency to rent upon their arrival. Since one of the core groups of renters decreased, the Region experienced an increase in apartment and housing rental vacancies that were difficult to fill due to decrease demand and increase in costs. Despite the upward trend in vacancy rates, average rents in Niagara continued to rise. Between 2001 and 2006, Census data showed that the average monthly shelter costs for homeowners and renters increased by \$182 and \$95 respectively. The trend for renters is relatively stable compared to previous census years, but the increase experienced by homeowners is twice as much when compared to previous trends. According the CMHC's Rental Market Report 2009 for St.Catharines-Niagara, "The average rent...increased 2.3 per cent between October 2008 and October 2009. This increase was above the Residential Tenancies Act Guideline for 2009 of 1.8 per cent, and larger than the 1.8 percent increase which occurred in 2008." Average income has not increased at the same rate so this puts more families and individuals at risk of becoming homeless.

The growth in transitional housing units was able to house some of the previous hostel users, but they have to compete with the portion of the growing homeless population, that does not seek or require emergency shelter services, for housing so the supply of units does not meet the demand. Most, if not all, transitional housing service providers maintain a waitlist for their clients who are eager for a vacancy. This gives the community a clear indication of the importance and necessity for additional supported

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transitional housing units to not only house, but guide and support individuals toward stable, independent housing.

The Niagara Region is active in developing HIFIS as the service data template of choice for all of our purchase of service agencies including our emergency hostels (shelters). A project manager was hired to implement and support this effort and have funded it to date with local 100% funding until March 31, 2011. Unlike previous years, 100% funding for this project is no longer available. In order for the project to continue to move forward funding in excess of HPS needs to be acquired. To utilize HPS funding for HIFIS would negatively impact the amount of funding for direct service projects. Obtaining funding from within HIFIS is an important consideration for moving forward and being able to effectively collect data to share with the Homelessness Partnering Secretariat.

### **ISSUES**

After consultation with the NHAC, it was decided that the four homelessness issues identified in the 2007-2009 community plan are still relevant to Niagara's 2011-2014 community plan. These issues are:

- 1) Invest in supported transitional housing for the chronically and episodically homeless to assist this population in acquiring skills, making the connections with sustainable income and receiving supports they need to maintain their housing.
- 2) Current prevention programs are limited in number and are underfunded. Such programs are not found in some municipalities in Niagara and where offered, access and level of service is not evenly distributed across the region.
- 3) Current outreach services are underfunded and as a result are unable to provide a level of service equal to the demand. Access to current service varies from municipality to municipality with some areas only receiving part time service.
- 4) Niagara lacks a systematic approach to data collection resulting in a knowledge deficit when it comes to knowing the full extent of the homeless situation in Niagara.

CHPP and HPS funding will be utilized to address these four issues in Niagara's twelve municipalities with annual CHPP and HPS funding levels of \$512,000 and \$476,000 respectively for a total of \$988,000.

### **PRIORITIES**

It is the responsibility of the NHAC to identify the priorities in the community in order to determine service areas that require attention and to provide an indication of how funding will be allocated for each priority. Four priorities were identified for Niagara and they include:

#### **Priority #1: *Supported Transitional Housing***

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### Objectives

- 1) Increase the number of supported transitional units/beds in Niagara.
- 2) Decrease in the number of episodically sheltered.
- 3) Decrease in the number of homeless living on the street.

### Rationale

Investments in supportive/supported transitional housing are needed to address the needs of the episodically homeless. Despite a significant increase in hostel/shelter beds from 2008 to 2010, 30 % of hostel users remain chronically homeless. They receive supports while in a hostel and are able to secure housing but are unable to hold onto it for any significant period of time as the supports do not travel with them to their new residence.

Based on the figures gathered from community agencies' data reports, the outcomes for this priority have been positive, but the need for the service continues to grow. As a result, the development and continuation of supported transitional housing was seen as a priority by the Niagara Homelessness Advisory Committee during the community plan consultation on January 21, 2011.

### **Priority #2: Prevention**

#### Objectives

- 1) Expand prevention services so that all Niagara residents have equal access to these services.
- 2) Increase in the number of individuals receiving prevention services.
- 3) Increase in the number of individuals who are and remain housed.

#### Rationale

With a wait list of 11,520 for affordable housing there is a documented need for additional affordable housing in Niagara. The numbers on the waitlist capture the largest portion of those at risk of homelessness but often don't include those who are episodically homeless or those living on the streets.

Prevention programs are high leverage activities that assist individuals with retaining housing once it is acquired following a period of homeless and for individuals at risk of homelessness it prevents homelessness from occurring and the development of the occurrences associated with it.

Our current system of prevention programs as the centre piece does not come close to meeting the demand for this type of service. Additionally, the distribution of this service

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is uneven across Niagara with some municipalities receiving little or no supports. The current level of prevention programs has resulted in a greater number of incidents of homelessness that is preventable. An investment in prevention programs would result in a reduction of the numbers of homeless individuals on the street and allow outreach services and hostels to focus on providing services to the chronically and episodically homeless.

The need to clarify the term for prevention was previously identified given the large diversity found in service provisions. As a result, Niagara Region with the help of the NHAC developed a model that incorporates pertinent aspects of homelessness prevention in a general manner. The model consists of five (5) components and they are:

- 1) Identification of Client Group Served
  - Consists of identifying specific subpopulation(s) that the program will serve;
  - Design program and services catered to meet the specific needs of the client group.
- 2) Housing Stability Focused
  - This may involve providing assistance to at-risk households in finding housing;
  - Provide supports and resources necessary for households to meet their goals and prevent another (at-risk-of) homelessness episode.
- 3) Client Choice
  - Clients are actively involved in the design, development and implementation of their case plans, and they have a clear understanding of their options, rights and responsibilities within them;
  - This allows clients to have control, in combination with guidance from the agency, to empower them and provide the confidence they need to meet their goals.
- 4) Case Management
  - Involves:
    - a. Assessment
      - i. Respond to crises and provide clients with the option to participate in programs or receive services;
      - ii. Each client participating should be assessed to determine the necessary type and level of support to meet their needs;
      - iii. Focus on information that is pertinent to the client's current housing situation.
    - b. Case Planning
      - i. Creating individualized case plans for all participating clients;

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- ii. Case notes of clients' progress are maintained and frequency of updates corresponds to the level of supports provided;
  - iii. Community resources should be made available to clients during program participation and after their exit (if applicable).
- c. File Standards
- i. Data collection and documentation of service and program outcomes are essential for:
    - o *Agency accountability*;
    - o *Identifying best practices and areas for improvement*.
  - ii. At a minimum, the following should be documented:
    - o *Intake and assessment*;
    - o *Case plan and notes*;
    - o *Copies of identification*
  - iii. All records are to be stored securely in accordance with agency, funder(s), government and other standards.
- 5) Collaboration
- Develop working relationships with landlords, housing authorities and individuals or groups providing counseling and treatment for mental health and addiction issues which are vital for effective service delivery and response;
  - Collaborate with other service providers to keep people housed by:
    - a. Efficiently maximizing use of limited resources
    - b. Reaching out to areas with limited or no service
  - Engage current and previous clients to assist in identifying strengths and weaknesses of the program(s) for improvement.

### **Priority #3: Outreach**

#### **Objectives**

- 1) Expand outreach services so that all Niagara residents have equal access to these services.
- 2) Increase in the number of individuals receiving outreach services.
- 3) Decrease in the number of individuals living on the streets.

#### **Rationale**

Outreach services are not equitably distributed across Niagara with some communities receiving part support and others full time. In all communities the service is more reactive than proactive and although the service provides a quality response as situations develop, the sheer size of the problem relative to the resources available limits time to be divided between responding to those in need of short-term or crisis sheltering and the chronically homeless or episodically sheltered.

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An investment in outreach programs will create a system of outreach with equal access to outreach services regardless of where an individual lives and allow the system to continue to respond to short-term or crisis sheltering but also enhance the ability to provide service to the chronically homeless and episodically sheltered population, hopefully steering this group to the newly developed supported transitional housing system.

Overall, current outreach services have limited ability to adopt a proactive approach to outreach as they respond to situations as they develop due to understaffing. Local communities have responded to gaps with underfunded resources creating a patch work system of response in some communities.

### **Priority #4: *Data Collection***

#### **Objective**

Improved data on homelessness to facilitate a more coordinated community response to homelessness.

#### **Rationale**

Although data collection does occur within funding silos such data is not shared beyond the organization or service sector and because there are geographical gaps in funding in some areas of Niagara there is no tracking and reporting of data. Compared to 2006, data regarding Niagara's homeless population is more readily available today. However, there are concerns about data consistency.

The exercise of completing the data tables has reinforced the need for a system of data collection. Such a system would enhance customer service by way of tracking client service, reduce duplication of effort between agencies, enable the community to develop a pool of data that will assist the Niagara community and agencies to develop a better understanding of homelessness and provide data for advocacy and funding submissions.

Through the consultation process the community identified the following coordination of services priorities to meet this objective:

- 1) Create a process where a client enters any door and it will be the right door – “a seamless ability to move through services”.
- 2) Develop and establish agreement on intake and outcome benchmarks (i.e. create a measurement system for intake & outcome)
- 3) Collect and disseminate statistics on homelessness throughout the Region as a mean to keep all stakeholders informed (e.g. social justice committee)
- 4) Create and use a common tool/model that will coordinate statistics and

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determine next step in referral process

### **SUMMARY**

As the coordinator of Federal and Provincial homelessness funding, Niagara Region with the assistance of the NHAC will work together to decide on how to best serve Niagara's homeless population. The outcomes from projects supported through HPS and CHPP thus far has had a positive impact on individuals, families and the community. However, the need for services providing longer-term supports has persisted and grown over the years. In addition, recent economic conditions have left the community with varying challenges to tackle with respect to employment and housing. This has led service agencies to adapt to the changing needs of the clients they serve. Niagara Region will continue to collaborate with the NHAC to focus on addressing the priorities identified in order to meet the needs of the homeless population and the objectives of the community's priorities.