REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY OF OTTAWA-CARLETON   REPORT

MUNICIPALITÉ RÉGIONALE D'OTTAWA-CARLETON   RAPPORT

Our File/N/Réf.
Your File/V/Réf.

DATE   29 March 1999

TO/DEST.   Co-ordinator
                Community Services Committee

FROM/EXP.   Commissioner Social Services Department
                Medical Officer of Health

SUBJECT/OBJET   **HOMELESSNESS: ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN**

DEPARTMENTAL RECOMMENDATION

That the Community Services Committee recommend Council assume the role of a local service systems manager for homelessness.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to present the findings of a preliminary study of homelessness in the Region of Ottawa-Carleton. This study will form the foundation for building an integrated community plan to end homelessness in the Region.

BACKGROUND

On November 14, 1998, in response to the level of homelessness in Ottawa-Carleton and other municipalities, a resolution was passed by Regional Council calling upon the Federal Government to declare homelessness a national disaster. In order to address the homelessness issue in Ottawa-Carleton and as a result of the Provincial Task Force on Homelessness recommendation that municipalities act as local service systems managers for homelessness, the Community Services Committee directed Social Services to study the issue of homelessness in Ottawa-Carleton in a manner similar to the Interim Report of the Toronto Mayor's Task Force on Homelessness.

Extensive public consultation with the Region's Community partners has begun to build consensus on an integrated community plan to deliver services to people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

The report of the Provincial Task Force on Homelessness, released in October of 1998, recommended that local governments assume the role of "local service system managers for homelessness." In this role the Region is expected to work with the community, service providers, provincial ministries and funders to develop co-ordinated approaches to achieve three goals, namely: to move people from the streets to emergency shelters; from emergency shelters to permanent housing and to prevent homelessness by supporting people in the retention of permanent housing. In its role as a local service systems manager, the Region will assume the role of facilitator, working with the community to ensure a co-ordinated and efficient delivery of services to the homeless and those at risk of becoming homeless.

DISCUSSION

The final report of the Toronto Mayor's Task Force on Homelessness, released in January 1999, contains comprehensive recommendations to address homelessness in that city. That report was the result of more than a year of work. Ottawa-Carleton will follow a similar two stage process albeit on a smaller scale.

This first phase of the process, consists of an environmental scan of homelessness in Ottawa-Carleton. The report is the result of a comprehensive review of existing data on homelessness in the Region and is intended to provide a basis for discussion and the development of an integrated community plan to end homelessness. The second phase of the process involves extensive community consultation which will take the form of interviews with key informants from various sectors involved in homelessness, a community forum and a public awareness forum organised in co-operation with the Alliance to End Homelessness and to be held April 8th, 1999. The results of this second phase as well as recommendations for the community plan will be presented in a report to the Community Services Committee in June of 1999.

The study has revealed that although Ottawa-Carleton, at the level of both the community and municipal government, has taken steps to deal with homelessness in the past, the problem persists. The number of people at risk of becoming homeless is on the rise. Data specific to Ottawa-Carleton indicates that in terms of poverty and affordable housing the scope of the problem is proportionately similar to the situation in the City of Toronto with the cities of Ottawa and Vanier having the highest levels of people at risk.

Emergency response initiatives will not result in long term solutions to the underlying causes of homelessness such as poverty and lack of affordable housing. Effectively dealing with homelessness will require a sustained effort by the community and all levels of government adopting a pro-active, co-operative and long-term approach to relieving the underlying issues that result in homelessness.

In order to effectively manage the solutions arrived at through the planning process, the Region must have the co-operation of several key provincial ministries including, but not limited to, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Community and Social Services.

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Public consultation is currently underway. A series of key informant interviews with service providers and representatives of government ministries, involved with services to persons who are homeless, have already been completed. A public consultation is scheduled for April 8, 1999 with community partners to discuss homelessness and work toward solutions. In addition, a public awareness forum is being planned, in partnership with the Alliance to End Homelessness, to take place concurrently with the submission of this report to the Community Services Committee.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The financial implications have not yet been determined. Once the public consultation has been completed and an initial plan has been developed the financial implications of such a plan will be determined. It is anticipated that an analysis of the financial implications will be included in the June report to Community Services Committee.

CONCLUSIONS

The study has confirmed that homelessness in Ottawa-Carleton is a problem that is large both in scope and magnitude. Many agencies and providers extend services to the homeless. What is required is a co-ordinated, integrated community wide approach to serving persons who are homeless and those who are at risk of becoming homeless with the exchange of information between agencies in order to support clients to move to stable housing and remain housed. Poverty and the lack of affordable, supportive housing options are core causes of homelessness.

Although the Region has been designated as the local service systems manager for homelessness, the solutions lie beyond the scope of local government alone. A commitment by all levels of government, service providers, funders, the private sector and the citizens of Ottawa-Carleton to a common vision is required to end homelessness. The Region of Ottawa-Carleton can support this vision by assuming the role of facilitating the understanding of the current situation, the causes that lead to unstable housing and by co-ordinating the development of an integrated community plan.

Approved by   *Approved by*
Dick Stewart   *Dr Robert Cushman*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Region of Ottawa-Carleton, through Social Services and Health, has undertaken a comprehensive examination of homelessness in Ottawa-Carleton. The study was conducted in response to the Region's Community Services Committee directing staff to develop an integrated community plan to end homelessness in the Region. The study will form the basis of the discussion, public consultation and planning required to produce long term solutions to homelessness.

Consistent with the recommendations of the Provincial Task Force on Homelessness, the development of a community plan is being done in the context of the Region's role as a local service systems manager for homelessness. To this end, the planning process is being conducted as a co-operative effort between Social Services, Health and Social Housing in partnership with the Alliance to End Homelessness and the Region's provincial and funding partners.

The study is an attempt to comprehensively document the causes of homelessness in Ottawa-Carleton, provide a profile of persons who are homeless in the Region and to provide an indication of the services available to the homeless in Ottawa-Carleton for the purpose of identifying gaps that may exist in the current system.

How homelessness is defined shapes the course of discussions on how to end it. Since the goal of this planning process is to arrive at long term preventative solutions to homelessness, a broad definition has purposely been adopted. The United Nations defines homelessness as being either absolute or relative. The absolutely homeless are those who are without housing and are living in the streets or in emergency shelters. The relatively homeless are those who are living in housing that is beyond what they can afford or which is unsafe or overcrowded.

The causes of homelessness are varied, yet when viewed together they provide a measure of society's ability to care for its members. The scan has confirmed that a combination of causes often contribute to homelessness. The primary causes of homelessness are Poverty, Lack of Affordable Housing, Evictions, Mental Illness and Addiction.

The diversity of those who are homeless, the many facets of homelessness and the lack of consistent data collection among service providers make it difficult to obtain a concise profile of the homeless at this time. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study provides an indication of the extent of homelessness in Ottawa-Carleton as well as illustrating who is homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

In terms of absolute homelessness, more than 600 men, women and children are sheltered in the Region's emergency hostels on a daily basis. In 1998, more than 4,500 single persons and 375 families, with a total of 901 children, were sheltered. Eighteen percent of all emergency shelter users are dependent children in the care of a parent.

In terms of relative homelessness, in 1996, 75,500 households paid in excess of 30% of their income on shelter and approximately 30,000 households were estimated to be paying in excess of 50% of their income on shelter.

Poverty and low income contribute to homelessness when people are unable to afford private market housing. The incidence of low income in the Region was 19% in 1996 representing an increase of 26% over the rate in 1990. Low income is particularly prevalent in the cities of Ottawa and Vanier where the rates are 28% and 34 % respectively. The incidence of low income for the former city of Toronto was by comparison 24%.

Vacancy rates for rental housing in Ottawa-Carleton dropped by half between 1997 and 1998, while at the same time the cost of rental housing in the private market increased. Very few new rental housing units have been constructed in Ottawa-Carleton in recent years and no new social housing has been built for several years.

Approximately 80% of persons receiving social assistance and living in non-subsidized housing, pay more than their maximum shelter allowance on rent. There are currently approximately 15,000 outstanding applications for social housing in the Region, which translates into a five to seven year waiting period.

Approximately 40% of the single homeless population suffers from some form of mental illness and a similar proportion suffer from addictions. Although it is agreed that a significant portion of the homeless population suffers concurrently from mental illness and addiction, an accurate estimate of this number is unknown at this time.

The length of stay in shelters varies among the various segments of the homeless population. For example, the average length of stay in emergency shelters for families is approximately 50 days. For single men and women it is approximately 20 days and for single youth it is 10 days.

The study has revealed that homelessness in Ottawa-Carleton is a problem that is as prevalent in this region as it is in other municipalities across the country. In light of these initial findings, it is clear that homelessness is a problem that must be addressed.

In Ottawa-Carleton, there is a strong network of services to help people who are homeless. We have an opportunity to strengthen the supports to people who are homeless by building an integrated approach to service delivery through community planning. An intensive community consultation is underway to begin the development of a community plan to end homelessness in Ottawa-Carleton. Presentation of an initial plan to the Region's Community Services Committee is anticipated in June of 1999.