THE 41ST CHRA CONGRESS: FOCUS ON HOMELESSNESS

BY JOHN PARKER

The 41st annual congress of the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association (CHRA), which was held from April 15-17 in Toronto, Canada, focused on one of the most persistent and challenging issues facing housing professionals: homelessness, an issue that defies easy solutions and offers few political benefits. "We wanted to demonstrate that we were serious about the issue," explained Geoff Gilbard, CHRA's acting Executive Director.

The four-day event drew nearly 400 participants from the private sector, nongovernmental organizations and all levels of the government. NAHRO is a partner organization of the CHRA; this year, the author joined the congress as NAHRO's representative. Toronto was more than simply the event's host city for the congress—it became a testing ground in which to examine issues as well as demonstrate ideas and solutions. Participants joined in discussions on how to build a national housing policy framework for Canada; they were also offered an opportunity to become directly involved in local efforts to document and respond to homelessness in Toronto.

At the pre-congress workshop on April 15, CHRA President David Eddy and Stephen Gaetz of CHRA's Policy Advisory Committee hosted the organization's policy position on homelessness. This was based on the principle of Housing First, which centers on providing homeless people with permanent housing and follow-up services as required. Unlike transitional housing models, housing is not contingent on compliance with services. Residents must comply with the terms of a lease and are provided with services to help them do so. In other words, homelessness is treated first and foremost as a housing problem.

Housing First represents a policy shift away from "managing homelessness" through emergency services and law enforcement, and towards a focus on preventing and eliminating homelessness. It's a policy that can yield economic and social benefits. Post-occupancy research shows that, once housed, formerly homeless clients experience dramatic improvements in physical and mental health, social interaction, personal safety and nutrition, resulting in reduced service system costs. Housing First also makes good economic sense. The cost of a shelter bed in Toronto is $1,932 per month; rent supplements cost $701 and social (public) housing costs just $199.92 (see chart).

Nan Roman, President and CEO of the U.S. National Alliance to End Homelessness, was keynote speaker at the pre-congress workshop. "Housing is the platform for families and people to thrive," she said in a phone interview afterwards. "Any disruption to housing stability makes it hard to take on challenges of life." A strong advocate of Housing First, she added, "It's not reasonable to expect people to thrive in a temporary housing situation. Transitional housing is not a home." Ms. Roman maintained that permanent housing provides the necessary stability for supportive services to be effective. "The more stability you have, the better you're able to take on treatment, get a job."

Interest in Housing First models has increased over the last 10 years in the United States. In 2000, the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAHRO) advocated a Housing First approach in its 10-year plan to end homelessness. The plan served as a model for local plans to end homelessness across the United States. In 2009, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) launched a three-year, $25 million Rapid Re-Housing demonstration project. In February 2009, Congress approved $1.5 billion for the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HRP). Housing First programs currently operate throughout the United States in such diverse cities as Los Angeles, Calif.; Lancaster, Penn.; Washington, D.C.; Denver, Colo.; and New York, N.Y.

### Daily or Per Use Costs of Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service Type</th>
<th>Cost ($)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private Market Rent</td>
<td>$25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Housing</td>
<td>$25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative/Supportive Housing</td>
<td>$31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emergency Shelter</td>
<td>$69</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jail/Detention Centre</td>
<td>$143</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emergency Room</td>
<td>$212</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychiatric Inpatient Care</td>
<td>$665</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ambulance</td>
<td>$785</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hospital Acute Bed</td>
<td>$1,048</td>
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1. Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness. For more on Housing First, go to www.nahro.org/sections/housingfirst/
"Streets to Homes": A Local Response

Homelessness in the city of Toronto, and strategies to address it, were a focus of the congress. Toronto is Canada’s largest city, with a population of 2.5 million, and a regional population of 7 million. A 2005 report by the City of Toronto found that, despite a booming regional economy, a substantial portion of Toronto’s population was being left behind. Fully 25% of the city’s population lives below the poverty level; nearly 32,000 different people lived in its emergency shelters in 2002.6

The Streets to Homes initiative, a local response to homelessness that was launched in February 2005, was highlighted at the congress. The program is part of a commitment by the City Council to end street homelessness, under which City of Toronto staff and more than 250 nonprofit organizations provide extensive outreach to homeless people living on city streets and other public spaces, as well as a range of supports once they are housed. A committee of health care professionals, local government and business representatives serves as an advisory board. Thus far, Streets to Homes has helped about 2,400 people move directly from Toronto’s streets into permanent housing.

Streets to Homes has earned the support of the local business community by reducing panhandling. In 2007, the program was enhanced to include an intensive social service response to people who were housed and panhandling lawfully; as a result, almost two-thirds of clients stopped panhandling within the 12-week pilot period. The enhanced program now operates throughout the city, with a focus on the downtown core.

The program is structured to minimize barriers to permanent housing. Streets to Homes clients are able to choose where they live, with the requirement that rents get paid directly to the landlord. Clients must agree to follow-up services and must fill out an application for social housing. Follow-up case management services are provided for a period of at least one year—but, clients do not need to be in treatment programs as a condition of housing. The results have been impressive: follow-up studies show that more than 90 percent of clients remain in their housing.7


RANGE OF SERVICE USE COSTS WHILE HOMELESS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low Service Users</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under $10,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medium Service Users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000 to $20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Service Users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than $20,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- 6 Individuals: 39% of costs
- Average cost while homeless = $56,000
- 18 Individuals: 12% of costs
- Average cost while homeless = $4,000
- 20 Individuals: 48% of costs
- Average cost while homeless = $15,000

Self-reported service use (annual cost per person) of sample of 44 Streets to Homes clients while homeless. Source: City of Toronto staff report, "Cost Savings Analysis of the Enhanced Streets to Homes Program", January 19, 2009.

RANGE OF SERVICE USE SAVINGS ONCE HOUSED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Less Service Cost</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greater than $10,000 savings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Less Service Cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$0 to $10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Service Cost</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- 45% used for less services
- 20% used more services
- Average savings once housed = $17,000
- Average cost once housed = $1,200

Self-reported service use (annual cost per person) of sample of 44 Streets to Homes clients once housed. Source: City of Toronto staff report, "Cost Savings Analysis of the Enhanced Streets to Homes Program", January 19, 2009.

In Practice: Visiting the Native Men’s Residence

Canada’s Aboriginal (Native) population is an important element in any examination of homelessness. Aboriginals are over-represented in the homeless population. While the Aboriginal population comprises less than one percent of Toronto’s population and less than 10 percent of Canada’s total population, 8 26 percent of Toronto’s street homeless are Aboriginal. In some cities, more than 70 percent of the homeless are Aboriginal. The reasons for this include a history of discrimination in housing, employment and services that have made the transition from rural to urban life more challenging.11

One of the workshops took participants to the 63-bed Native Men’s Residence, which both serves and is managed by Aboriginals. This new facility will provide both transitional housing and training pro-

programs. The strong sense of ownership created by the facility both serving and being managed by Aboriginals adds value for clients, in the form of no-interest mortgages, volunteer time, cash, donated professional services and employment training.”

In Practice: Visiting the Native Men’s Residence

Streets to Homes has been recognized with numerous awards, and was a finalist for the 2008 United Nations World Habitat Award.

Streets to Homes is just one of many initiatives that have received support from the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, a $134.6 million per year initiative to prevent and reduce homelessness in Canada. One key feature is its community focus. Funding is provided to 61 ‘designated communities’ across Canada—mostly urban centers that have been identified as having a significant problem with homelessness. Projects funded through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy are based on priorities identified in plans developed by the Community Advisory Boards, which lead the local planning process. Board representatives include homeless service providers and representatives from all three levels of government. The strategy has also drawn private sector sup-

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but also creates some tension. We were told that, until recently, a sign displayed in front of the center read, "Celebrating 20,000 Years in the Neighborhood."

The Native Men’s Residence is part of a network of housing, health, employment, youth and family agencies providing culture-based services to Aboriginal people in Toronto. Some offer interpretation for First Nations languages.

Participating in the Process

In a departure from the traditional conference format, attendees were given the opportunity to participate as volunteers in Toronto’s homeless count on the evening of April 15. The Street Needs Assessment was the second of its kind in Toronto, following a 2006 survey that counted 5,052 homeless people, more than 800 of them living directly on the streets.

Iain De Jong, Manager of Streets to Homes, calls the Street Needs Assessment “a Herculean task” that requires a team of eight people working for four months to prepare. The count component of Toronto’s Street Needs Assessment is a replication of methods used in other jurisdictions, including New York City. However, Toronto’s methodology is more detailed than most jurisdictions, as the city uses the survey to assess needs, not just perform a census. "The benefits are huge," explains Mr. De Jong. "It’s the difference between having a number and understanding a need."

Approximately 1,600 volunteers signed up to administer the survey and follow a strict methodology to survey Toronto’s 209 geographic areas. Teams of volunteers, each with a leader experienced in working with the homeless, surveyed an assigned area between roughly 7:30 PM and midnight; specially-trained city staff completed areas that were deemed to be of higher risk due to security or safety concerns.

The author and two other volunteers were part of a team led by CHRA board member Nick Volk. We were assigned to an area, roughly a square mile across, near the University of Toronto. Up and down the street grid we went, checking public spaces and posing screening questions to 127 people. While only one of the people we surveyed reported being homeless, most of the people we spoke with knew about the Street Needs Assessment and were pleased to be “counted.” "What we got [from all questioned] was an appreciation that the city is doing something about this problem," Mr. Volk noted.

To avoid undercounting or bias, volunteers were instructed to approach everyone they saw on the street—regardless of whether they appeared homeless. If they were in fact homeless, they were asked a second set of questions. Approximately 60 people were stationed as “decoys” throughout the City to ensure that volunteers stopped everyone as instructed and completed their study area. A survey of shelters, hospitals and jails counted people who slept indoors but had no fixed address. The results of the Street Needs Assessment will be available this summer and posted on the City of Toronto’s website (www.toronto.ca/housing/).

John Papagni serves as Special Projects Manager in the Division of Neighborhood Revitalization at the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development. He lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

Special thanks to Geoff Gillard, Acting Executive Director of CHRA; Iain De Jong, Manager of Streets to Homes, Shelter Support and Housing Administration, City of Toronto; Natasha LeCours, Homelessness Partnering Secretariat, Human Resources and Social Development Canada; Nan Roman, President and CEO of the National Alliance to End Homelessness; Jane Vincent, Vice President/International, NAHRO; and CHRA Board Member Nick Volk for their time, helpful comments and background.