

ENDING Homelessness

IN MEDICINE HAT

Alberta communities share the goal of ending homelessness in our province. This community profile examines the accomplishments, people, innovations, and challenges of Medicine Hat.

By redesigning the local homeless-serving system to focus on permanent housing, Medicine Hat has re-housed 248 of its homeless citizens in the past two years.¹ Medicine Hat has been successful because of provincial support, a collaborative approach, the use of strategies that have been shown to work elsewhere, and innovations to address local needs.

Medicine
Hat ●

¹ April 1, 2009 to December 31, 2010.



Is homelessness inevitable? Not in Medicine Hat.

Homelessness is not just a 'big city' issue in Alberta. There are individuals and families experiencing homelessness even in smaller communities where the problem may be less visible, but no less challenging. In the sprawling metropolis and in the close-knit town, the underlying causes of homelessness are present. They typically include a combination of personal factors such as substance abuse, family breakdown, insufficient income, unemployment, or mental illness, as well as societal factors such as prevailing poverty and not enough safe, affordable housing. Too often, homelessness is the result.

But homelessness is not an inevitable social ill. Medicine Hat and other Alberta communities have a shared vision of ending homelessness, and the plans, resources, and commitment that make this an achievable goal. In 2009, Premier Stelmach introduced ***A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years***, which led to new Government of Alberta investments in housing capital and support services for homeless Albertans. The provincial plan supports community plans such as ***Starting at Home in Medicine Hat: Our 5 Year Plan to End Homelessness***, which was endorsed by the municipal government and set in motion in January 2010.

Medicine Hat's efforts to end homelessness are showing results thanks to inter-agency collaboration, committed professionals, the leadership provided by the Medicine Hat Community Housing Society (MHCHS), and the financial support of the Government of Alberta.

A client who graduated from Housing First at Musasa House shares her story:

"I had left him five times; I had been to five different shelters before coming to Musasa. I would go back to him over and over again. Always thinking it would be different this time. Without the help of the programs offered at Musasa and the support from the ladies who work there, I would not have made it this far."

"I have recently moved out of [Musasa], but they continue to give me support I need to make it without my ex. I have more peace in my life now, than I did before. I am going back to school in the fall and started writing again. My little boy is amazingly well, too ... every day I see him glowing with joy."

'Housing First:' A New Approach for Medicine Hat

When Housing First (HF) was identified as a key strategy to ending homelessness in Alberta, there was some uncertainty. HF represented a new way of doing things that contradicted the traditional "housing readiness" approach, whereby people are expected to address the issues that contributed to their homelessness before being housed. This method may be successful for some, but not for others who struggle to escape the trap of homelessness.

Housing First is successful because it does not mean "housing only." Those experiencing homelessness are provided with immediate access to permanent, affordable housing, along with the supports they need to remain housed and move towards greater self-reliance. Supports may be financial, physical or mental health care, substance abuse treatment, life skills, job training, and more. People can address their issues from the safety and stability of a home, where they have a greater chance at success.

There are economic benefits, too. HF has been shown to be two-thirds less costly than traditional emergency and institutional responses to homelessness, which rely heavily on expensive public systems such as shelters, corrections, policing, and emergency medical care. The frequency at which people access these systems decreases once they are housed with the supports in place to help them stabilize their lives.

HF has had positive results in Medicine Hat, especially for those suffering from mental health disorders or substance abuse. Tracy Flaherty-Willmott, Manager of the Homeless and Community Housing Department of the Medicine Hat Community Housing Society (MHCHS) says: "Before Housing First, we didn't have a program model to meet the needs of our most vulnerable homeless citizens."

Tracy says once people see the difference HF has made in the lives of their fellow citizens and how it benefits the entire community, they're supportive of the approach.

Emergency shelters will continue to serve a need in Medicine Hat for those in crisis situations, as they were originally intended, but not as a long-term solution to homelessness. The solution to that is permanent housing, with assistance to ensure well-being and stability.

Supporting Those who Support the Homeless

Providing intensive case management services to HF clients requires specialized expertise that is not commonly available in smaller communities. But Medicine Hat has tackled capacity challenges head on.

"Addressing our capacity within the homeless-serving sector has been one of our priorities, and biggest accomplishments," says Robin Miiller, Chief Administrative Officer of MHCHS. Investments in capacity building for service providers have resulted in improved service delivery, as confirmed by external reviewers who indicated that professional development activities have resulted in more people being successfully housed.

In addition, through community sponsorship and financial support from the Alberta Secretariat for Action on

Homelessness, one local participant attained the University of Calgary's Working With Homeless Populations in 2010 certificate.

Medicine Hat will continue to support the professional development of those providing housing assistance to the homeless, and is designing an innovative training schedule for 2011 that will focus on a range of activities, such as lunch-and-learns, job shadowing, coaching, and external training opportunities.

Housing First in Medicine Hat is a three-way partnership:

MHCHS assesses the needs of each family and individual, and refers them to McMan or MHWSS, which provide housing and the appropriate client-centred follow-up supports that will increase their clients' health, stability, and independence.



Innovations in Medicine Hat Improve Services

Just as the situation of each individual who is experiencing homelessness is unique, each community has its own challenges and assets when confronting homelessness. One key innovation introduced in Medicine Hat is centralized assessment and triage, which makes use of the Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT). This tool is used to assess a client's housing needs and establish a case management program tailored to each individual. Those who are at risk or currently homeless can now go to a single location where their needs are assessed and they are connected with the right services and supports that will help them be successful in the long term. Centralized assessment and case management are internationally recognized best practices.

By using the SPDAT and continually monitoring progress, much has been learned about homelessness in Medicine Hat. One significant finding is that many of the city's homeless are long-time citizens of Medicine Hat with community connections, and not transient individuals, as was suspected. These findings have helped shape the services that will end the trap of homelessness for these citizens.

Serving Homeless Youth in Medicine Hat

Youth homelessness is of great concern in Medicine Hat, where nonprofit agencies have limited means to connect with at-risk youth and address their individual needs, whether it be housing, mental health supports, family reconciliation, substance abuse treatment, or something else. Part of the issue is that the prevalence of youth homelessness is unknown. Chris Christie, Executive Director of McMan Community Services, which operates the Inn Between McMan Youth Shelter, notes that "We don't have an accurate account of our homeless youth population." Ms. Christie says this is partly because youth in housing crisis often remain hidden by "couch surfing" from one friend's house to another.



Housing First Progress:

Number of formerly homeless people housed in Medicine Hat: **248***

87% of Housing First clients have remained stably housed, exceeding the provincial target of **85%**.

*April 1, 2009 – December 31, 2010.
Source: Housing and Urban Affairs.

Community members recognize how important early intervention and prevention is because research shows that this population is very vulnerable. A recent investigation revealed that homeless youth in Medicine Hat require the same level of support as the "chronically homeless," who often require the most intensive and costly supports. Of greatest concern are those youth aged 16 – 17 who are confronted with provincial policy barriers and service gaps that restrict their access to housing assistance.

Despite the challenges, Medicine Hat is providing emergency shelter and transitional housing opportunities for youth between 12 and 17 years of age. In 2008, McMan opened *The Launch Pad* – a five-unit apartment building with on-site support for older youth that need temporary accommodations.

As in communities across Alberta, Medicine Hat is challenged to serve youth in housing need, but is committed to finding solutions that will permanently end youth homelessness.

RMV received housing in April 2010, and receives supports from McMan Community Services. He talks about how Housing First has changed his life:

"It wasn't easy at first. I made mistakes. But Housing First helped me to take responsibility and be accountable for my actions. In the past, I always took off. It was easy to run away. But with the support of Housing First I learned to face my fear, which to me, equaled responsibility. Now, I am responsible for myself. I do things that I didn't think I could do before. I am working now at a great job, with great pay. I have a beautiful apartment and a great landlord. I don't gamble because I never want to be homeless again."

"I have been given a second chance, and I want to make the most of it. I am independent and I am free. I also want to say that this wasn't a free ride. I had to put into the program as much as I got out. I took a hand up, not a handout."

Ending the Cycle of Homelessness: The Connection Between Housing First and Subsidized Housing Programs

In Medicine Hat, the effort to end homelessness is led by the Medicine Hat Community Housing Society (MHCHS), which is the designated community-based organization (CBO). The CBO brokers partnerships within the homeless-serving sector, identifies local priorities, and administers both federal and provincial homelessness programs in the city. Besides being the CBO, MHCHS is also the local management body (MB), which oversees the delivery of provincial rent support programs. Medicine Hat is unique within Alberta because it is the only community where the CBO and the MB are part of the same organization. This structure has given Medicine Hat a valuable perspective on the connection between Housing First programs and subsidized housing programs.

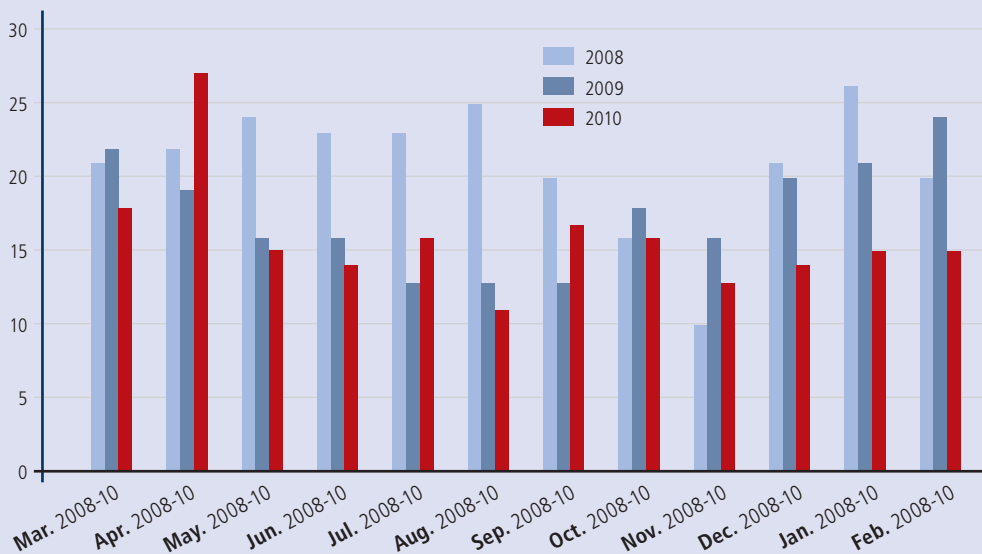
Community members are concerned that some HF clients cannot access government income or rent supplements, even though they appear to meet eligibility guidelines. Yet, they require continued financial support to maintain their housing. Tracy Flaherty-Willmott of MHCHS notes that “Our key challenge is the long-term sustainability of housing and support for clients when they are struggling with deep poverty.”

To sustain the link between Housing First and subsidized housing programs, Medicine Hat has established a Centralized Rental Support Fund, supported by the Government of Alberta. A portion of this fund is currently dedicated to HF clients who are ready to “graduate” from the program because

they’ve achieved stability, but require ongoing rental assistance in order to prevent a relapse back into homelessness due to lack of financial security.

Partners in Medicine Hat agree that Housing First is a critical component of a long-term strategic approach to ending homelessness, which must also include targeted financial supports that prevent homelessness before it begins.

Emergency Shelter Use in Decline in Medicine Hat: 2008 to 2010*



*Monthly average occupancy per night in shelters funded by Housing and Urban Affairs. Since 2008, shelter use in Medicine Hat decreased 19% in 2009 and 10% in 2010.

For more information about **A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years:**

Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness

Phone: 403-297-3368

E-mail: secretariat@gov.ab.ca

www.housing.alberta.ca

For more information about **Starting at Home in Medicine Hat:**



Medicine Hat Community Housing Society

Phone: 403-527-4507

www.mhchs.ca