

# ENDING Homelessness

IN RED DEER

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

From April 2009 to March 2011, Red Deer has used provincial funding to house 344 chronically or episodically homeless individuals. Red Deer's success is built on a strong foundation of community partnerships that support the development of locally driven initiatives to meet unique local needs.

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Deer

Red Deer has consistently demonstrated leadership, innovation, and collaboration in addressing homelessness issues. In 2008, the city released ***EveryOne's Home – Red Deer's Vision and Framework on Ending Homelessness by 2018***.

The following year, the Government of Alberta released ***A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years***, which led to new provincial investments in housing capital and support services for homeless Albertans.

In 2011, the community came together to reflect on efforts to end homelessness to date. As a result, a revised framework was developed, known as the ***EveryOne's Home Leadership Model***. Stewarded by the Red Deer and District Community Foundation, the model established working groups to support specific strategies for ending homelessness, informed by the original vision and framework. A leadership team ensures that work is effectively coordinated and communicated between working groups.

Although the political and economic climate has changed since Red Deer first committed to ending homelessness, the community's resolve has not. Working together through the ***EveryOne's Home Leadership Model***, Red Deer continues to make important strides towards its goal of ending homelessness by 2018.



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## John's Story

John lived on the streets for five years before coming to Harbour House. He "gave up on regular life", and started to "sell dope, buy dope, and do dope." John was referred to Harbour House by a support worker and has lived there and been sober for five years. John notes that if he had stayed on the streets, "I'd probably start doing armed robberies to get more dope and stuff. I guess that's how it progresses. It was time to get out of there before it got to that point."

John and his dog Patti are now a familiar sight in the neighbourhood. He calls Patti his best friend, and pays for Patti's food, license, and veterinary appointments himself. John sees himself remaining at Harbour House, and is very appreciative of what the program has done for him. "I did lots of things I'm not proud of," he admits. "Without Harbour House I wouldn't be sober today. I would still be on the streets doing dope."

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## The Buffalo

A 39-unit permanent, supportive housing complex located in downtown Red Deer, the Buffalo houses people who have lived on the streets; who may have an addiction, mental illness, and/or other disability; and who have had trouble finding and maintaining housing in the past. Buffalo clients tend to have complex needs resulting from an extensive history of homelessness.

Operated by the Canadian Mental Health Association, the Buffalo uses a Housing First approach, meaning that immediate, permanent housing is provided to homeless people, along with any needed support services. Housing does not depend on maintaining sobriety or undergoing treatment; instead, services are offered to tenants and participation is voluntary. On site 24 hours a day, Buffalo staff focus on building relationships with tenants based on trust and respect, while encouraging them to reach their highest level of self-reliance. Staff may also help tenants with day-to-day necessities like keeping appointments, doing laundry, cooking nutritious meals, and cleaning apartments.

The Buffalo has had tremendous success in helping tenants maintain stable housing, a success that Supervisor Sarah McIntosh attributes to the strong sense of community tenants have developed. "People will help each other out, do things for each other; it's almost like a little family," she remarks. "I am always amazed when I see two people that don't necessarily get along sit down together, play a game of crib, and talk for an hour." Flowers boxes blossoming

around the back door of the Buffalo testify to the pride tenants take in their home. "We've seen tremendous growth," says McIntosh. "We've had family reconnections; people work more on their physical and mental health."

Connecting with the greater Red Deer community has been difficult for the Buffalo. "Some people have a negative perception of the Buffalo," says

Program Manager Susan Saville. "The biggest challenge of our location is that we are in a fishbowl . . . we have public parking all around us. Our tenants can't sit outside and enjoy any privacy like people do in other neighbourhoods." Marion McGuigan, Executive Director, notes that "in spite of their somewhat rough exterior, our clients are sensitive to the community's perception of the Buffalo, their home."



Connections between tenants and downtown businesses are slowly growing. McIntosh and Saville both praise the downtown TD Canada Trust, whose clients include several Buffalo tenants. "I watched a transaction between a teller and one of our tenants the other day," says Saville. "Neither of them knew I was watching. And she treated him with utter and total respect." Adds McIntosh, "That bank has been nothing but kind to us over the years."

Saville speaks eloquently about the root causes of homelessness and substance abuse: "Underneath so many of the stories in this building and on the street is mental illness . . . quite frankly, the mental illness came before the substances were introduced. They're killing pain; they're killing loneliness; they're killing delusions, illusions, depression, anxiety."

Public education and awareness are key to overcoming any misconceptions of the Buffalo, Saville says. She hopes that a better understanding of how mental illness contributes to homelessness and addiction will elicit compassion and acceptance for Buffalo tenants. "We are as much a part of this community as everyone else and we have as much to contribute, but we need to work together. You have to embrace all of the people in the Buffalo into the community and then the community will be healthy."

*We have the Housing First model functioning where homeless people are offered a place to live and supported in their move with community support agencies so that they can stabilize their lives. I am encouraged by the progress we have made in Red Deer in assisting people who are at risk of becoming homeless and those who are actually homeless.*

— Mayor Morris Flewwelling

## Harbour House

Harbour House is an eight-bedroom home designed to support people who have difficulty accessing and sustaining housing. Operated by the Safe Harbour Society, Harbour House has 24-hour staffing and emphasizes improving health through harm reduction strategies. Sobriety is not a condition for housing; however, staff help connect tenants to community resources and support services.



“Our number one goal is to help our clients sustain housing,” says Tammy Nooskey, an on-site worker at Harbour House. “Even in low-cost housing, without supports, they end up back on the streets. Harbour House is the end of the line for the people we serve.” The impact of the program is evident: “People known to us, to the RCMP and EMS . . . we’re seeing them stay housed and become part of the community” observes Stacey Carmichael, Director of Programs with Safe Harbour Society.

Harbour House has overcome initial community apprehension as its tenants have proven they can be good neighbours. “We were not welcomed in the beginning,” says Nooskey. “Now we’ve got great neighbours. The whole community actually acknowledges our tenants and they greet them and ask them how they are doing. We are very welcomed now.” The house and yard are voluntarily maintained by the tenants, and neighbours often shovel the sidewalks for Harbour House in the winter.

Korine Redcalf, another on-site worker, attributes the success of Harbour House to close collaboration among Red Deer’s non-profit and volunteer sectors. “Red Deer is very community-oriented. We have a good connection with people in the community. We’ve been able to pick up the phone and call to get support for our tenants because we have relationships with other agencies.”

Nooskey highlights the importance of supporting tenants and meeting them where they are at: “I think this program is successful because of the supports people receive and the resources we are able to give them . . . We support our clients without judgement, and that’s huge. They are so used to being judged by society.” It’s paramount to treat tenants with decency

## Housing First Progress:

*Number of formerly homeless people housed in Red Deer: **344\****

*\*From April 1, 2009 to March 31, 2012  
Source: City of Red Deer*

and respect, adds Redcalf. “We remember why we are here: to support them and see them be as successful as they can be. I’ve seen lots of change, lots of growth . . . it makes me proud to work with them and be a part of their journey.”

## Celebrating Successes

Partnerships and relationships: these themes arise again and again when speaking with people involved in local efforts to end homelessness. Red Deer’s achievements to date are largely due to government, organizations, volunteers, and other stakeholders recognizing that they are stronger together.

“This community has always been about collaboration and relationships. We’ve been able to foster that and people have been willing to come to the table and work together,” says Linda Healing, Community Development Supervisor with the City of Red Deer. “It’s natural to be competitive, but the agencies we fund are setting that aside and focusing on the client.”

## Ed’s Story

*Ed has lived at the Buffalo for eight years and witnessed its transition from a hotel to a Housing First facility. Before living at the Buffalo, Ed was employed, but unable to afford housing. He slept in his vehicle every night.*

*Living at the Buffalo has given Ed the opportunity to work on improving his health. “I’m mentally ill,” states Ed. “When I go off my medication, I act a little weird. Hell, a lot weird,” he says with a grin. Ed hopes to eventually return to work, but in the meantime, he struggles with misconceptions of both mental illness and living at the Buffalo. “Every time I say I’m from the Buffalo and I get a negative reaction, I feel filthy.”*

*The stigmas associated with homelessness and mental illness add another challenge to people attempting to address these issues in their own lives. However, Ed credits the Buffalo with helping him face these challenges and focus on his future: “It’s like, you’re here now; what’s next?”*

"I think that's a real strength, that those barriers between organizations are dissolving," adds Roxana Nielsen Stewart, Program Coordinator – Housing with the City of Red Deer. "Partnerships are a really hard thing to do."

Yet partnerships are something Red Deer does very well. A partnership among three community agencies, Safe Harbour Society, Canadian Mental Health Association, and Central Women's Outreach Society, resulted in the creation of the Red Deer Housing Team, which acts as a central intake to help the homeless and those at risk of homelessness locate housing and



support services. The team itself has further partnered with Red Deer landlords to help implement Housing First programs. "We're lucky to have a good relationship between the team and private landlords so we can get our clients into housing," says Stacey Carmichael, Director of Programs with Safe Harbour Society.

People who are passionate and dedicated to ending homelessness are at the heart of successful community

partnerships. Nielsen Stewart notes that "this work could not be done without the agencies at the ground level . . . they need to be recognized. They're the ones who do the tough work. They're the ones who are visiting the clients and supporting the clients and dreaming up new ways to keep them engaged."

## Meeting Challenges

Although Red Deer has made great strides in ending homelessness, the community continues to face challenges that underscore the need to be flexible and creative. For example, being located along the Edmonton–Calgary corridor attracts a transient population, as well as rural residents who are unable to access services in their own communities. Also, like many other Alberta communities, aboriginal people are overrepresented in Red Deer's homeless population.

Provincial and federal funding is calculated on a per capita basis, which does not account for the influx of people with housing needs from other regions. However, Red Deer's homeless-serving agencies do not differentiate between clients. "They're our citizens once they are here," says Linda Healing, Community Development Supervisor with the City of Red Deer. "We find a way to make it work." Many local homeless-serving agencies have taken the

initiative to create programs that meet the needs of specific homeless subpopulations. For example, Julietta's Place, operated by the Central Alberta Women's Shelter Society, was the first facility in Central Alberta to offer a safe, supportive, and healthy environment for women and children fleeing domestic violence. Also, the Red Deer Native Friendship Society provides permanent, supportive housing to homeless aboriginal people, and promotes their success and wellness through all aspects of the Medicine Wheel.

With the provincial economy again gaining speed, Red Deer is struggling with low vacancy rates, increasing rents, and a shortage of affordable housing. In response to these challenges, the City has committed to working with the community to develop an affordable housing strategy. The community also recognizes the need to ensure its plan to end homelessness is flexible enough to respond to shifting economic and political environments. The **EveryOne's Home Leadership Model** provides a collaborative mechanism to discuss issues as they arise, learn from past experiences, and focus on solutions.

### Additional Reading and Links:

- **EveryOne's Home – Red Deer's Vision and Framework on Ending Homelessness by 2018**
- **Report to the Community: Homelessness & Affordable Housing Initiatives 2010-2011**  
([www.reddeer.ca/City+Government/City+Services+and+Departments/Social+Planning/Reports+and+Publications/default.htm](http://www.reddeer.ca/City+Government/City+Services+and+Departments/Social+Planning/Reports+and+Publications/default.htm))
- **A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years**  
(<http://employment.alberta.ca/homelessness/14601.html>)