

# Homelessness efforts will expand beyond the scope of housing first

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An ongoing local program to alleviate homelessness will concentrate on providing broader support over the next year, beyond the immediate housing strategy that has been the group's hallmark over seven years.

The annual update and “community celebration” of the Medicine Hat Community Housing Society heard that over the past 12 months, 588 individuals were dealt with by intake workers, but only 72 were admitted to the “housing first” program.

The majority were helped with less intensive — and less expensive — support programs or by other agencies.

The Miywasin Counselling program, McMan youth programs and the Medicine Hat Women's Shelter are other destinations for referral, said MHCH manager Jaime Rogers.

Also, the project is seeing very few of them become repeat clients, she said.

“We have a lot of new people who are using the system,” said Rogers. “That tells us that we have people who are having their first experience facing homelessness, and that our services are very good at keeping people out of the shelter system — we're not seeing them re-enter.”

“We can get more into preventive services, which is where this community needs to go,” said Rogers.

A permanent supportive housing program is now being developed by the inter-agency group. That could include providing around-the-clock access to addictions counselling and mental health professionals at residential facilities.

“Individuals who need supportive housing are facing quite a few barriers,” she said. “Having support available 24/7 will help them maintain housing stability.”

About 100 people took in the lunch meeting at the Esplanade where they heard keynote speaker Joe Roberts tell the audience that the local initiative is inspiring. Its approach and success makes it easier to lobby other locations for support to end youth homelessness.

No one plans to be homeless, he said, and caring “societies must give them access to an escape route.”

Roberts himself detailed family strife in his own life growing up, and substance abuse issues that led him to homelessness in Vancouver's eastside in the 1980s. Eventually he reconnected with his mother via the Salvation Army, became sober, went to university and grew his own successful technology firm.



He is spearheading a “Push for Change” campaign that sees him push a shopping cart 24 kilometres each day, six days a week on a cross-country tour. Along the way he speak with groups and lobbies local leaders for support to end youth homelessness.

Roberts said governments tend to spend a lot on emergency response to the problem, whereas money can be better spent on prevention and long-term supports.

“By concentrating on either side (of emergency shelter), we respond pragmatically and have better outcomes,” he told the audience.

Beyond financial benefits “it’s the right thing to do,” he said.

“We’re not talking about ending homelessness, we’re talking about how we respond to it.”

Of the 777 adult individuals the group has helped house since 2009, one-third had substance abuse problem, one-quarter were at one point in the foster care system, half had physical health problems and nearly two-thirds a mental health issue.

The report also states that 75 per cent of those who entered the program successfully completed it.

Over seven years, approximately 1,100 have been housed under the program, including 317 children.

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