To End Homelessness, Prevent It from Happening in the First Place

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It was some of the toughest weather he'd seen yet on the day Joe Roberts spoke to me, holding his phone in one hand while pushing his tricked-out shopping cart along the Trans-Canada Highway with the other. I heard truck horns blare as they passed him.

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Roberts was on day 281 of his ongoing walk across Canada, pushing his cart through heavy falling snow and whiteouts on a stretch of two-lane highway approaching Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. The cart is a symbol of homelessness, and his cross-country trek a fundraiser for a project to keep youth from falling into it. He plans to reach Vancouver in late September.

Roberts was pushing a real shopping cart in 1989. He was living then in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside after abandoning his family in Ontario. He struggled with a heroin addiction and mounting mental health issues. He collected cans and bottles to make ends meet.

"I lived under the Georgia Viaduct," he recalls. "I thought my life was over."

Can Medicine Hat End Poverty in 13 Years?

The Alberta city of 63,000 has already claimed victory over homelessness. Next, it hopes to eradicate poverty inside city limits by 2030.

Jaime Rogers, a manager with the Medicine Hat Community Housing Society, was among the community members who developed a response to street homelessness that has all but eliminated it.

From April 2009 through this past January, Medicine Hat says it has housed 1,075 individuals (763 adults and 312 children) through its Housing First program. Through preventative rapid housing intervention, it has also helped 190 other people who did not want to access homelessness supports stay housed, according to Rogers.

"We're not saying we don't have individuals who are experiencing homelessness," Rogers says. "We do. It's about how quickly we connect them to a system of care, and make it so their experience of homelessness is short lived.

"We would classify that as an early intervention. People are homeless, or they are at risk of becoming homeless. Let's make it so they don't go further down that river."

To that end, Rogers' Community Housing Society, the city of Medicine Hat, and other stakeholders, consulted 500 community members over four years to develop a strategy to end poverty in the city altogether by 2030.

Released recently under the name Thrive, the plan has 13 priorities around income security, affordable housing, business innovation, food security, transportation, health and education, among other items. Its proposals include making banking more accessible and exploring new incentives for private landlords to make more affordable shelter available.

Its proponents — led by the Medicine Hat Poverty Reduction Leadership Group — are now seeking $1.27 million in grants and government funding for a three-year project.

— *Stefania Seccia*

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Thanks to his determined mother and a sympathetic Vancouver police officer, Roberts was connected to support services and his life turned around. He went from being a high-school dropout to building a multimillion dollar website development company, Mindware Designs Communications, during the dot-com era.

He credits his escape from the street to his mother and what happens when the system works. For many, it's much easier to wind up homeless than it is to get a home back.

That's contributed to a social-service focus on rescuing those who are homeless already. That's valuable work, as Roberts' own story illustrates. But the focus on the already homeless tends to accept the condition as somehow inevitable and a perpetual problem for society.

It doesn't have to be, observers and social workers say. A more organized effort to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place, they say, would lessen the pressure on the band-aid of emergency response.

Learning from Down Under

Innovative communities are taking steps to head homelessness off at the door. They're assessing young people especially for early indicators they may be at risk of homelessness, and providing them with adequate support before they become embedded in street life.

It's why Roberts is fundraising for the Ontario-based Upstream Project. The initiative hopes to introduce in Canada an approach to keeping youth from becoming homeless that's already been successful in Australia.

The Geelong Project is named after the Australian city not far from Melbourne where it began. Community support providers there came together to keep youth out of the emergency shelter system by identifying individuals at risk, and then co-ordinating their services to meet those individuals' particular needs. Through early intervention, they hoped to prevent young people from ever becoming homelessness.

The project uses a survey tool developed by Dr. David McKenzie: the Australian Index of Adolescent Development. It asks high school students questions about their home life, if they've moved out, their relationship with parents or family, and their sense of their personal safety.

During its pilot phase in 2013, the Geelong Project identified and intervened with 95 young people and 43 of their family members. The distressed teenagers were connected to youth and family-focused case management. All subsequently remained in school and retained "safe sustainable accommodation," according to a report on the pilot.

In a study by researchers at Melbourne's Monash University who surveyed several thousand high school students in the Geelong region, McKenzie's Index questions were found "to detect a significant subpopulation of adolescent students suffering from emotional and family distress" whose unhappiness may otherwise have flown under the radar.

Stopping the flood

Raising the Roof, a Toronto-based national charity that aims to end homelessness, is among the organizations that want to import something similar to Canada.

"If you had a flood in your basement, would you spend the next 10 years mopping up the water?" asks Elisa Traficante, the organization's manager of community initiatives. "No, you would go upstairs and turn off the tap."

To begin to "turn off the tap" leading people to the street, Raising the Roof and four other groups have launched the Upstream Project — the initiative Roberts is raising money for somewhere north of Sault Ste. Marie by now.

It will closely mirror the Geelong Project. Beginning this year, it will survey students in a number of high schools in Ontario's Niagara and York regions with questions similar to those in Australia's Index of Adolescent Development. Students identified as being at risk will be connected with appropriate support from other project partners like community-based 360° Kids in York, and the Raft in Niagara. Both provide education and support services in their respective regions.

"We estimate that approximately five per cent of the student body will be identified as at-risk for homeless[ness] or school dropout," Traficante says.

The national non-profit Canadian Observatory on Homelessness is another sponsor sharing the $449,000 costs of the Upstream pilot project. Its director, Stephen Gaetz, says the organizations selected the two Ontario school regions because service providers there are deeply connected to their communities.

Australia has long focused on homelessness prevention, Gaetz says, but it's "a thought that still doesn't really occur in Canada that often." He hopes the pilot project will collect evidence that similar early interventions keep youth off the streets here.

If it does, Gaetz plans to push the federal government to implement the model nationwide. "If we really want this to take hold in Canada, we need to get some facts on the ground and demonstrate that it works here," he says.

Schools are key to acquiring that proof, Gaetz argues, because youth often continue to show up at their desks after their shelter has become precarious. Melanie Redman, executive director of A Way Home, another national coalition to end youth homelessness, is sold on the Geelong/Upstream model, but cautions that it's only one of many necessary interventions, emphasizing that there is no single "silver bullet" to sheltering everyone.

Alberta is ahead

Identifying someone on the brink of homelessness in time to connect them to services is a strategy already being employed in Alberta.

Calgary's Homelessness Assets and Risk Screening Tool seeks to pinpoint people in precarious living situations so they can be connected to appropriate services and kept from ever ending up actually homeless.

Unlike the Australian survey, Alberta's asks more questions that try to suss out a person's current housing situation and their concerns about it, while also assessing mental health and substance-use issues. It also includes questions targeted to various sub-groups, to try and determine what intervention would best suit that person.

A pilot study of the Alberta tool in 2012 was administered to 740 Calgarians who were not seeking assistance at the

time. It "provided a unique exploration of risks," according to the report on the [pilot]. When researchers followed up with participants several months later, the tool had correctly assessed 81 per cent of those who had or had not become homeless.

Alina Turner was on the team that developed the risk-screening tool. She has since helped Alberta cities like Medicine Hat reduce their homelessness numbers. She agrees with Gaetz that Canada's homeless crisis is a by-product of failing to focus on prevention. Alberta's tool was borne, she says, from "the idea that we needed to get a better sense of the risk factors that impact how we design interventions."

While the tool has been adopted in Calgary as part of a multi-model city strategy to end homelessness, it's not yet as widely implemented as Turner would like to see. Her hope is to have service providers across the spectrum — even physicians and dentists — use it to screen their clients for people who may need help with shelter, but are not yet asking for it. She envisions those professionals referring patients to support services, as they do already for cancer screenings or mental health issues.

Welfare is homelessness prevention too

Tools like those developed in Alberta and Australia are designed to identify people for help before they face the street. But to provide that help, other services and support need to be both available and adequate to make a difference.

One such critical support for preventing homelessness, Turner argues, is the welfare system. It is, after all, meant to provide the necessities of life to those without enough means of their own.

Yet B.C.'s notoriously low welfare rate of $610 for an individual hasn't risen in a decade. Not only is it one of the lowest in the country, but it pales in comparison to the average cost of living in the province — one of the highest in Canada, according to a recent Statistics Canada report. In 2015, the average B.C. household spent $2,178 on just shelter and food each month. In Vancouver, the average monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment is $1,820.

But even that inadequate welfare can be hard to get, according to both advocacy groups and those with experience in the system. Over the years, the process of applying has changed. Where once people could walk into an office and ask a person there for assistance, now a more centralized system favours contact by phone or internet.

Fourteen Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation offices have closed since 2005. In some, critics say, welfare enrolment was handed over to Service BC staff who haven't been trained in income-assistance legislation. Service hours at 11 of the remaining 82 offices have been reduced to three a day. Internet and phone services are available only in English. Those who phone often wait on hold for 45 minutes.

All that makes simply applying for welfare a huge undertaking for people who don't have a phone, don't use the Internet, have limited funds to pay per-minute connection charges while they wait, or whose first language isn't English, says Erin Pritchard, a lawyer with the BC Public Interest Advocacy Centre.

She gets the constant calls to prove it — from those trying to navigate the system alone, and other advocates attempting to guide a client through an application. "We talk to people all the time who have essentially been blocked from accessing services that they're legally entitled to, which is just so problematic," Pritchard says.

In 2015, the centre filed a complaint with Jay Chalke, B.C. ombudsperson, on behalf of nine other provincial organizations calling for dramatically improved access to welfare. The ombudsperson denied the complaint, says Pritchard, and problems persist. Indeed, she says, "it just seems to be getting progressively worse in terms of aligning with the needs and resources of people who rely on the system."

The ministry [argues] that people can still access services face-to-face, but claims its clients have shown a growing interest in online services.

For its part, BC Housing insists that its Homeless Prevention Program is working. The agency declined to make a representative available for an interview, instead providing a list of provincial programs that address homelessness. Meanwhile, there are as many as 15,000 people facing homelessness in the province at any one time.

The province says it funds about 1,520 portable monthly rent supplements, allocated to service-providers across the province. It claims to have connected 7,130 people to stable housing in 2015-16, through contracts with outreach and emergency service providers.

But other reporting has found that there are catches to accessing those supports too.

After escaping homelessness and making his money, Roberts left his web company in 2003 to become a motivational speaker. Now 50, he bills himself as the "Skid Row CEO." He formed his Push for Change charity in 2011 in an effort to create sustainable change for youth, which prompted him to go back to pushing a shopping cart.

Roberts says he has high hopes that the Upstream Project will deliver on preventing youth homelessness, because he's an example of what can happen when the "system works."

"The thing that keeps me awake at night," he says, "is how many great kids, or people, had that opportunity waiting to [be found] within themselves, but they don't have the systems or resources to access.

Getting in upstream, before someone hits the streets the first time, and giving that person that help, Roberts says, is "really what we're advocating for."

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