

## Family Reconnect: a Path for Youth to Return from Homelessness?

"We were surprised by the percentage of young, homeless people who wanted to reconcile at some level with family—but we hadn't seen that as a priority in the research literature in Canada," says Dr. Daphne Winland, Associate Professor at York University and one of the co-authors of *Family Matters: Homeless Youth and Eva's Initiatives' "Family Reconnect" Program*. Another co-author, Dr. Stephen Gaetz, also at York and Director of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN), observes that the same gap exists on the ground: "We have created a system that focuses on emergency services—and it's not that they're doing a bad job, but the longer a young person remains unsheltered, the more entrenched they become in the street lifestyle, and the harder it is for them to move forward in their lives."

Interested in how a more preventive, family-centred approach might help homeless youth, they profiled the Family Reconnect Program spearheaded by Eva's Initiatives, a Toronto-based group, to determine the effectiveness of the approach, and what elements of it could be replicated on a larger scale.

From 2009 to 2010, the two researchers, along with their research assistants, Tara Patton and Melissa Atkinson-Graham, interviewed staff of the Family Reconnect program to get a solid understanding of how the program works; they also interviewed program clients—both youth and family members—about personal and family histories, the circumstances that led the youth to the streets, their experience of homelessness and their involvement in the program. Finally, they analyzed client data gathered by Eva's Initiatives over the previous five years, comprising information about more than 1,000 individuals.

The analysis showed that the Family Reconnect model, which focuses on counselling for youth and family, diagnosis and mental-health supports, encouraged many young people to renew contact with family and demonstrably improved relations between them. The program was also able to better identify underlying mental-health issues, which in turn can bring the right supports into play.

With recommendations at the municipal, provincial and federal level, the report is a guide for agencies and governments across the country on what they'll need to make their youth-homelessness strategy more family-centred and more proactive.



It also makes a forceful case for the cost-effectiveness of the approach: while Family Reconnect spent \$7,125 for each of the 32 young people it helped to return home or into more stable housing, keeping them in a shelter runs in excess of \$20,000 per year. This does not include other costs that Dr. Gaetz says only escalate if left unchecked: "The longer a person is homeless, the more likely their physical and mental health deteriorates meaning their use of health services increases, or that they'll become involved in the criminal justice system—both very expensive."

Replication or adaptation of the program in other municipalities will depend on both the policy context and the scale, as many smaller urban centres are less focused on youth and homelessness. Whatever the local situation, he notes, "this kind of program is probably more effective when it is incorporated more broadly at a system's level, not an agency one, because every agency needs to be involved"—for example, to facilitate prevention and to ensure that any time a young person enters the shelter system, he or she receives an assessment and intervention to either help him or her move back home or into independent living (with supports).

A family-centred approach will also have to take into account a realistic notion of what constitutes a family, says Dr. Winland: "There's such a focus on nuclear families, in terms of who can step in—yet we saw many cases of people from different cultural backgrounds, where the relations young people had developed might be an aunt or a more distant relative."

For the future, the research team hopes to use its findings to promote dialogue, and possibly to engage in a broader study of the issue of youth and homelessness, which would allow them to analyze different sub-sets of the youth population that may have different experiences, perspectives and needs. ■

The *Family Matters* report is published on the Homeless Hub website at [www.homelesshub.ca/ResourceFiles/FamilyMatters\\_April2011.pdf](http://www.homelesshub.ca/ResourceFiles/FamilyMatters_April2011.pdf). For more information, contact Dr. Stephen Gaetz at 416-736-2100, ext. 20050 or [sgaetz@edu.yorku.ca](mailto:sgaetz@edu.yorku.ca) or consult the Eva's Initiatives website at [www.evasinitiatives.com](http://www.evasinitiatives.com).