

Homelessness in Rural PEI

“Research Report”

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

In September 2008, the John Howard Society of Prince Edward Island received funding from Service Canada under the Homeless Partnership Strategy to research the issue of homelessness in rural areas of Prince Edward Island (PEI). The key activities carried out included:

- A literature review looking at homelessness issues in rural areas
- Interviews with key stakeholders and service providers who work with individuals/families at-risk of or experiencing homelessness

Methodology

Literature Review

The literature review focused on local, academic and online literature that provided insight into homelessness issues in rural areas. The first phase of research consisted of reviewing a PEI research project on homelessness conducted in 2001 and abstracting the information relevant to rural homelessness. The second phase included a review of academic databases to find Canadian and international research on rural homelessness, an internet search of Canadian websites, and an examination of research documents recommended by key stakeholders who work on homelessness issues.

Key Stakeholder and Service Provider Interviews

The interview process collected information from key stakeholders and service providers who work with individuals/families experiencing homelessness issues on:

- The level of homelessness in rural PEI
- The types of populations being affected by homelessness
- Characteristics/issues that lead to homelessness
- Current services available to address homelessness issues
- Gaps in and barriers to accessing these services
- The service and support needs of the population
- Ways to improve services

Of the more than 45 key stakeholders and service providers invited to take part in the interview process, 37 did so.

Research Findings

Literature Review

The literature review shows that there is a shortage of rural-focused homelessness research available. As a result, the literature review findings are based on a study of homelessness in urban PEI and a small number of academic articles that include limited information on homelessness in rural areas and related issues such as rural poverty, housing for adults with disabilities, and social housing policy themes for PEI.

The research done by Smith Green & Associates (2001) on homelessness in urban PEI showed that there are different causes of homelessness depending on age group and intrinsic and extrinsic factors. For youth, the main causes of homelessness were identified as drug/alcohol addictions and unstable home situations. For adults, the main causes included drug/alcohol addictions, mental illness, and poverty. Intrinsic reasons for homelessness were weakness in the response of an individual's social support system. Extrinsic reasons were lack of affordable low-income housing, the competitive housing market, wage structure and employment practices, indifference to youth experiencing difficulties, and historic landlord-tenant relationships.

In regard to rural homelessness, online and academic literature shows that it is a challenging issue to address because it tends to be an 'invisible phenomenon'. Some researchers believe that the 'invisibility' of rural homelessness is often a result of limited local services which forces migration to larger towns or cities where support services are located. There are vast differences in the quality and availability of services for the homeless across communities (Cloke, Johnsen & May, 2007). Due to the heterogeneous nature of the homeless population, there is no standardized programming that can meet all their needs. Programming must be developed for the specific context and population in any particular region (Peressini, 2007). Because there is a significant methodological difficulty in enumerating the homeless population, this makes it hard to develop policies and programs that are appropriate.

In Atlantic Canada, Dr. David Bruce of the Rural and Small Town program at Mount Allison University shared some insights on his work. He noted that the causes and outcomes of poverty, including homelessness, are complex and it is difficult for any single agency or organization to address the problems on its own. In many cases, the ability to introduce changes and make an impact at reducing the number of people in

poverty at the local level is difficult because of a lack of resources or a lack of authority and jurisdiction. Where local groups and agencies can make a difference, however is in creating conditions for improved chances of employment, working in partnership with federal and provincial government departments to improve the employability of marginalized populations, and providing services to alleviate the outcomes of poverty such that people have the opportunity to ‘get by’ while they work on making themselves more employable and self-sufficient.

A target population identified by several key stakeholders (and incorporated into the literature review as a result) as being particularly at-risk of relative homelessness is adults with intellectual/ physical disabilities. A survey conducted in West Prince of PEI in 2003 identified 41 individuals interested in supported housing, indicating a high need amongst this population. The reasons why current housing was seen as not suitable were primarily because respondents indicated that they did not have enough independence or privacy.

This was supported by research conducted by Community Inclusions Inc. (2007) and a book published by PEI People First¹ which outlines case studies of individuals living in community care facilities designed for the elderly and infirm across PEI. These individuals are living in these facilities because their parents/caregivers are deceased or can no longer care for them and there are no other suitable housing options available that provide the structure and support they need for independent living. The themes of resident adults with disabilities seeking independence and desiring to have an appropriate peer group were consistent throughout these stories. Most miss their home community, have limited opportunities to leave the facility and engage in their new community, are isolated from their peers, have limited funds and no opportunities to work, and miss being with their family and friends. This information makes it easy to argue that this population is experiencing a particularly high frequency of relative homelessness.

Given the need for addressing rural poverty and the relative homelessness experienced by adults with disabilities, social housing has a place of importance in dealing with rural homelessness. A comprehensive unpublished literature review conducted by Steve McQuaid of Atlantic Evaluation Group (personal communications, 2009) identified the following themes as important in developing good social housing policy to address the issues – ensuring multi-stakeholder responsibility and collaboration, a need for expanded continuum

¹ An organization that works with people with intellectual disabilities to help them become independent and make their own decisions.

of options designed to address a spectrum of needs across all age levels and special need or disability requirements, and community-based, person-centered, inclusive housing options.

Key Stakeholder and Service Provider Interviews

All key stakeholders and service providers interviewed indicated that they work with individuals/families at-risk of or experiencing homelessness in rural PEI. The main target populations they identified include youth, offenders, seniors, people living with intellectual/physical disabilities, women and children experiencing abuse/violence, people dealing with alcohol issues, people living with mental illness, and families/individuals living below the poverty line.

The most common type of homelessness interviewees are seeing in rural PEI is ‘relative’ homelessness. They noted that they are seeing more and more individuals/families move between family and friends, couch-surf or double up with others at-risk because there are no other options available to them. In severe cases, they are seeing them resort to sleeping in cars/the workplace/building entrances, trading sexual favors for a place to stay, or moving back in with an abusive partner/family member.

Interviews are also seeing more families and seniors living in unsafe/unsuitable housing due to the high cost of living and limited access to jobs or jobs that pay a livable wage. Unfortunately, there is little support for people in this situation which is resulting in them cohabitating, often under less than ideal circumstances, to share living costs.

In the case of people living with physical/intellectual disabilities, interviewees identified two crisis points in regards to housing and care issues. The first is when young adults with disabilities finish school and require care during the day. The school system provides these individuals with structure, valuable learning opportunities and social supports and allows parents/caregivers to work during the day. Once they leave school, parents/caregivers lose that support and often have to quit their job to stay home and provide care or are no longer able to keep them at home because of lack of resources and support. The second crisis point is when aging parents/caregivers of individuals with disabilities are unable to provide adequate care due to illness or the normal aging process. In both situations, there is very little support available and parents/caregivers often have to find alternative living arrangements for their dependent which is stressful for all involved. In many cases, people with physical/intellectual disabilities without care end up in inappropriate care contexts such as nursing homes or community care facilities because there are limited housing options available to them that are accessible, affordable, supportive, and designed to meet their needs.

When asked about the needs of individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues, key stakeholders and service providers identified the following:

- Access to affordable and safe housing within their community
- Transitional housing for men, women and youth
- Emergency shelters for men, women, youth and families
- Group homes, boarding houses and supportive housing options for men, women, youth and families that require structure and support with daily living activities
- Employment training
- Jobs that pay a livable wage
- Adequate financial support to help individuals/families with food, heating oil, transportation, etc.
- Services and supports to address the issues that contributed to homelessness – e.g. drug/alcohol addiction, family violence, mental illness, lack of life skills, unhealthy relationships, etc.
- Homecare support for seniors, people living with disabilities, and people living with mental illness
- Support with transportation
- Easy and timely access to programs and services within their own community
- Assistance accessing programs and services

Based on the interview findings, there appears to be limited services and supports available to individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues in rural PEI. Most available are open to all PEI residents, but are located in the more populated cities of Charlottetown and Summerside. They also tend to be supportive in nature rather than directly focused on aiding individuals/families in finding permanent housing. Overall, 27 such services were identified by interviewees.

Although interviewees generally feel that the services and supports currently in place are beneficial, they did note that there are some significant barriers to accessing them. They include long wait times, issues with transportation, limited finances, embarrassment/pride, difficulties in accessing services/supports available, and eligibility criteria.

Some of the gaps in current services and supports identified by interviewees include:

- Lack of affordable housing in rural areas
- Lack of temporary shelters,
- Lack of life skills and employment programs in smaller communities
- Lack of follow-up services

The main suggestions put forth by interviewees to address the gaps and needs of individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues and overcome barriers to accessing services and supports include:

- De-centralize services and supports
- Increase monetary support received through social services
- Provide more subsidized/low income housing in smaller communities
- Provide temporary shelters/housing options
- Provide group homes/boarding houses/supportive housing options
- Reduce wait times to access services/supports
- Create a database of housing options
- Better coordinate services
- Improve housing standards
- Increase Co-operative Housing
- Introduce the ‘Associate Families’ model

Conclusions

The literature review and key stakeholder and service provider interviews show that homelessness has always been and continues to be an issue. Although we are not seeing much absolute homelessness in rural PEI, we are increasingly seeing more relative homelessness. The populations experiencing homelessness are diverse and require diverse solutions. PEI appears to have a relatively good range of supportive services in place to help these individuals/families address their personal issues but limited homelessness specific services aimed at directly assisting them in accessing safe and affordable short-term and permanent housing. In addition, most of the support services available are located in Charlottetown and Summerside which limits accessibility; individuals/families living in the more rural communities have difficulties accessing them due to barriers such as lack of transportation and limited financial resources.

To address these issues and truly help individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues, there needs to be better access to services and supports in smaller communities and more focus on direct housing services (i.e. temporary shelters, more subsidized housing, better income support, etc.) that will help them obtain and maintain permanent housing that is safe, affordable and secure.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	Introduction	1
2.	Methodology	1
2.1	Research Approach	1
2.2	Limitations	3
2.3	Data Analysis and Interpretation	3
3.	Research Findings	3
3.1	Literature Review	3
3.2	Key Stakeholder and Service Provider Interviews	9
4.	Conclusions	22
5.	References	24

1. INTRODUCTION

In September 2008, the John Howard Society of Prince Edward Island received funding from Service Canada under the Homeless Partnership Strategy to research the issue of homelessness in rural areas of Prince Edward Island (PEI). The key activities carried out included:

- A literature review looking at homelessness issues in rural areas
- Interviews with key stakeholders and service providers who work with individuals/families at-risk of or experiencing homelessness

The original work plan also included connecting with individuals/families at-risk of or experiencing homelessness, but this piece of work did not unfold as planned due to difficulties in accessing these populations. The methods tried included asking service providers who work at two local shelters to ask adult residents if they would be interested in taking part in an interview, working through two government service providers to explore interest among some of their relevant clients, and directly contacting one individual who experienced homelessness in the past. In all cases, an honorarium was offered to those willing to share their story. Unfortunately, none of these methods proved to be successful.

The research was carried out between October 2008 and March 2009. It was guided by a Steering Committee made up of the research consultants, the Executive Director of the John Howard Society of PEI, and two key stakeholders who work on homelessness issues. The Steering Committee was responsible for creating the interview questions, identifying key stakeholders and service providers to engage in the research, setting the parameters for the literature review, and providing feedback on the research report.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Approach

2.1.1 Literature Review

The literature review focused on local, academic and online literature that provided insight into homelessness issues in rural areas. The first phase of research consisted of reviewing a

PEI research project on homelessness conducted in 2001 and abstracting the information relevant to rural homelessness.

A second phase included a review of academic databases to find Canadian and international research on rural homelessness. This search revealed very little rural-focused research, as most homelessness research focuses on urban environments. One article on the causes of homelessness in Canada and three articles on rural homelessness were analyzed.

In order to supplement the results from the academic search, an internet search of Canadian websites on rural homelessness was conducted. There were limited resources focused on rural homelessness, as the majority of homelessness sites were based on services and initiatives based in Toronto, Vancouver, Winnipeg, and other large Canadian cities. Two reports and the content of one website were included in the literature review.

In addition, various literature sources and research documents suggested by key stakeholders (i.e. Dr. David Bruce of Mount Allison University, Nova Scotia) were obtained and examined.

2.1.2 Key Stakeholder and Service Provider Interviews

The interview process was designed to collect information from key stakeholders and service providers who work with individuals/families experiencing homelessness issues on:

- The level of homelessness in rural PEI
- The types of populations being affected by homelessness
- Characteristics/issues that lead to homelessness
- Current services available to address homelessness issues
- Gaps in and barriers to accessing these services
- The service and support needs of the population
- Ways to improve services

Potential key stakeholders and service providers were identified and selected by the Steering Committee. Those selected were sent a letter of introduction from the Executive Director of the John Howard Society of PEI to introduce them to the project and invite them to take part in the interview process. They were then contacted by a member of the research team to

set up an interview time. Of the more than 45 key stakeholders and service providers invited to take part in the interview process, 37 did so¹.

2.2 Limitations

Due to limited time and resources, the interview process and literature review could not be exhaustive. In addition, more assertive methods of engaging individuals/families at-risk of or experiencing homelessness could not be explored. As a result, the research does not provide the most comprehensive examination of the issue of homelessness in rural PEI, but rather highlights the main views and interpretations of this issue through the lenses of certain key stakeholders, service providers and authors. These findings, while limited, will be useful in providing guidance to identify next steps and develop future programs/support services.

2.3 Data Analysis and Interpretation

All textual (qualitative) information gathered from the interview process was collated and analyzed manually for common themes (frequency and intensity of responses). To ensure proper interpretation of the findings, the Steering Committee was provided with an opportunity to review the findings and discuss their interpretation.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 Literature Review

The literature review shows that there is a shortage of rural-focused homelessness research available. As a result, the literature review findings are based on a study of homelessness in urban PEI and a small number of academic articles that include limited information on homelessness in rural areas and related issues such as rural poverty, housing for adults with disabilities, and social housing policy themes for PEI.

¹ The eight who did not take part in the interview process were invited to but either did not respond to the invitation or declined the invitation.

3.1.1 Homelessness in Urban PEI

Smith Green & Associates provided a review of homelessness research and a profile of homelessness on PEI for the Bedford MacDonald Trust in 2001. This research was conducted as part of a series prepared across Canada connected to the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI) of the Government of Canada.

As part of their research, Smith Green & Associates (2001) identified different causes of homelessness depending on age group as well as intrinsic and extrinsic factors. For youth, the main causes of homelessness were identified as drug/alcohol addictions and unstable home situations. For adults, the main causes included drug/alcohol addictions, mental illness, and poverty. Intrinsic reasons for homelessness were weakness in the response of an individual's social support system. Extrinsic reasons were lack of affordable low-income housing, the competitive housing market, wage structure and employment practices, indifference to youth experiencing difficulties, and historic landlord-tenant relationships.

In estimating numbers of homeless persons on PEI, the authors of this report recognized a well-understood fact about homelessness research in general: "There is no registry of persons who are homeless and no means whereby they can be identified to be surveyed in a way that would permit statistically valid projections as to their possible numbers in the population." (pg 5). Despite this fact, given the estimates of professionals and extrapolating from shelter usage data during a 12-month timeframe, the following estimates were provided:

- 64 youth
- 23 addicted persons
- 134 other adult males
- 20 other adults
- 10 women with children
- 40 persons with multiple needs
- Native males
- 8 Native females

The significance of urban homelessness rates as they relate to this project focused on rural homelessness is that the two are interconnected "...because homeless people on PEI tend to congregate in the two cities..." (pg 47). Therefore, it could be reasoned that prevention

programming in rural PEI could reduce the numbers of urban homeless persons down the road.

3.1.2 Rural Homelessness

Online and academic literature outlines the challenges surrounding homelessness initiatives from several angles and identifies rural homelessness has a largely ‘invisible’ phenomenon (Whitzman, 2006). Raise the Roof, a charitable organization in Toronto dealing with homelessness, states that invisible/hidden homeless makes up to 80% of the homeless population. They provide the following ten facts about invisible/hidden homelessness (<http://www.raisingtheroof.org/lrn-hh-index.cfm>):

- Every community in Canada has homeless people, even if you don't see them on the street.
- Most homeless people do not live on the street. More than 80% of Canada's homeless are improperly housed or on the verge of eviction. Many are sleeping in temporary beds - with friends or relatives, in church basements, in welfare motels, in abandoned buildings and vehicles, and in other sites away from the public eye.
- About one-in-seven users of shelters across Canada is a child. Compared to children with permanent homes, homeless children suffer more from lack of educational opportunities, infection, obesity, anemia, injuries, burns, developmental delays and incomplete immunization; youth suffer more injuries, sexually transmitted diseases, mental health problems, and pregnancies.
- As women generally earn less than men, women are more vulnerable to becoming homeless.
- Newcomers to the rental housing market, especially young people, immigrants and refugees, are often required to rent housing that they cannot afford. They are often one paycheck away from eviction.
- Many seniors face eviction due to fixed incomes and increased rents and taxes. Ensuring seniors stay adequately and appropriately housed prevents them from being part of the hidden homeless and ending up visibly homeless or in hospitals.
- Our young people also make up the hidden homeless. Many homeless youth are living in shelters or bunking with friends - many are fleeing abusive situations.
- The working poor, often single parents with young children, end up living in crowded housing as they are unable to afford a decent place to live while feeding and clothing their children.

- The hidden homeless are at risk of long-term physical and emotional harm. The longer anyone remains homeless, the greater the social and economic costs.
- As a society we all pay for the tragedy of homelessness.

Some researchers believe that the ‘invisibility’ of rural homelessness is often a result of limited local services which forces migration to larger towns or cities where support services are located. There are vast differences in the quality and availability of services for the homeless across communities (Cloke, Johnsen & May, 2007). Due to the heterogeneous nature of the homeless population, there is no standardized programming that can meet all their needs. Programming must be developed for the specific context and population in any particular region (Peressini, 2007). Because there is a significant methodological difficulty in enumerating the homeless population, this makes it hard to develop policies and programs that are appropriate. Fitzgerald, Shelley & Dail (2001) noted in their paper that policy makers are often working without a clear picture of the extent of the homelessness problem. Peressini, McDonald & Hulchanski (1995) also noted that policy makers are getting bogged down in the act of ‘counting’ the homeless which results in unnecessary roadblocks to developing policies and providing necessary services to address the problem.

The dilemma of rural homelessness is astutely summarized by anthropologist Janet Finchen: “In rural America, homelessness is hard to find. Visible homelessness, in the sense of people sleeping in community shelters or out of doors, is quite rare in small towns and the open countryside. However, a growing number of rural low-income people have housing that is so inadequate in quality, so insecure in tenure, and so temporary in duration that keeping a roof over their heads is a preoccupying and precarious accomplishment. Many rural residents who are living below the poverty line are potentially homeless much of the time, and an unknown number of them actually do become homeless. Because they are few in number and dispersed in space, they are seldom seen; they do not sleep on sidewalks where the public side-steps them, so their plight is unknown. From media coverage to scholarly writings, the homeless of rural America are hardly mentioned.” (Finchen, 1992, p. 173)

3.1.3 Rural Poverty in Atlantic Canada

Poverty is closely connected to the issue of homelessness in both urban and rural settings. Cloke, Milbourne and Widdowfield (2002) argue that “in order to gain a clear picture of homelessness in rural areas it would seem paramount to adopt a broad definition that

embraces not just those who are roofless, but poor households within inadequate or insecure accommodations living on the edge of homelessness” (pg 13).

Dr. David Bruce, Director of the Rural and Small Town program at Mount Allison University has studied the issue of rural poverty in Atlantic Canada and shared some insights from his work to contribute to this background:

The causes and outcomes of poverty are complex and it is difficult for any single agency or organization to address the problems on its own. In many cases, the ability to introduce changes and make an impact at reducing the number of people in poverty at the local level is difficult because of a lack of resources or a lack of authority and jurisdiction. For example, many of the income support and employment support programs are regulated by and administered by federal and provincial government departments and agencies. Social assistance rates (shelter and personal allowances) are set and administered by the provincial government.

Where local groups and agencies can make a difference, however, is on three fronts:

1. Create the conditions for improved chances of employment. This could be done by addressing infrastructure issues such as access to transportation and day care.
2. Work in partnership with federal and provincial government departments and agencies to improve the employability of marginalized populations. This could be done by providing training, literacy and skills upgrading.
3. Provide services to alleviate the outcomes of poverty such that people have an opportunity to ‘get by’ while they may work on making themselves more employable and self-sufficient. This could be done by providing access to affordable housing, healthy food assistance, and so on. (Overview of rural poverty background paper, April 2007, obtained directly from the author)

3.1.4 Housing for Adults with Disabilities

An issue raised by several key informant interviews (and incorporated into the literature review as a result) is the issue of relative homelessness among adults with intellectual/physical disabilities.

A survey conducted in West Prince, PEI in 2003 identified 41 individuals interested in supported housing, indicating a high need amongst this population (Housing Fact Sheet – West Prince, 2003, received via email from Canadian Mental Health Association). The reasons why current housing was seen as not suitable were primarily because respondents indicated that they did not have enough independence or privacy.

A book published by PEI People First², an organization that works with people with intellectual disabilities to help them become independent and make their own decisions, outlines case studies of individuals living in community care facilities designed for the elderly and infirm across PEI. These individuals are living in these facilities because their parents/caregivers are deceased or can no longer care for them and there are no other suitable housing options available that provide the structure and support they need for independent living. The themes of resident adults with disabilities seeking independence and desiring to have an appropriate peer group were consistent throughout these stories. Most miss their home community, have limited opportunities to leave the facility and engage in their new community, are isolated from their peers, have limited funds and no opportunities to work, and miss being with their family and friends.

Research conducted by Community Inclusions Inc. (2007) indicates similar trends. Surveys and interviews revealed challenges around planning for families with ageing parents/caregivers, clients feeling that services and supports are lacking, and clients desiring accommodations that allow them to be as independent and connected to their communities as possible. What is happening more and more frequently, however, is that they are being asked to move into nursing homes or community care facilities that are not designed to meet their specific needs. This is currently the only option available to them.

It is clear that housing adults with disabilities in nursing homes or community care facilities is inappropriate, but at the same time, this is the trend in meeting the housing needs of this population. As a result, it is easily argued that this population is experiencing a particularly high frequency of relative homelessness.

² “Where We Live” - excerpts accessed online at <http://www.institutionwatch.ca/stories-of-life>

3.1.5 Social Housing

Given the need for addressing rural poverty and the relative homelessness experienced by adults with disabilities, social housing (defined as providing for the shelter needs of various segments of the population who may be more vulnerable, and are not able to afford market rents or home ownership) has a place of importance in dealing with rural homelessness. A comprehensive unpublished literature review conducted by Steve McQuaid of Atlantic Evaluation Group (personal communications, 2009) identified the following themes as important in developing good social housing policy:

- Multi-stakeholder responsibility and collaboration - This includes government leadership, private sector roles and opportunities, non-governmental organization support and contributions, as well as a structured process to engage all stakeholders including consumers
- An expanded continuum of options designed to address a spectrum of needs across all age levels and special need or disability requirements - This includes a balance of funding between supply subsidies for the construction of affordable units.
- Community-based, person-centered, inclusive housing options - This includes future social housing strategies or initiatives that enhance the nature and quality of life through understanding and supporting housing needs, while simultaneously valuing and including individuals with disabilities within their immediate community.

3.2 Key Stakeholder and Service Provider Interviews

Overall, 24 interviews and one focus group were held with 37 key stakeholders and service providers representing such government and community organizations as:

- RCMP
- Child and Family Services
- The Salvation Army
- Queens County Residential Services
- Grandmother's House
- John Howard Society of PEI
- Community and Correctional Services
- Homelessness Partnership Initiative
- Department of Health
- Community Mental Health Association
- Department of Social Services and Seniors

- PEI Council of Disabled
- Community Connections Inc.
- Transition House Association
- Chief Mary Bernard Memorial Women’s Shelter
- Notre Dame Place
- East Prince Youth Development
- Bedford MacDonald House
- Native Council of PEI
- Next Step Housing
- East Prince Transition and Support Services
- Anderson House
- Local churches

Findings from the interviews and focus group are presented under the following headings: experience with homelessness in rural PEI, needs of individuals/families living in rural areas at-risk of or experiencing homelessness, available services and supports, gaps in services and supports, barriers to accessing services and supports, and suggestions to improve services and supports.

3.2.1 Experience with Homelessness in Rural PEI

All key stakeholders and service providers interviewed indicated that they work with individuals/families at-risk of or experiencing homelessness in rural PEI. The main target populations they identified include youth, offenders, seniors, people living with intellectual/physical disabilities, women and children experiencing abuse/violence, people dealing with alcohol issues, people living with mental illness, and families/individuals living below the poverty line.

Some of the issues and factors that appear to contribute to homelessness among these populations are:

- Lack of family support
- Aging parents/caregivers
- Lack of a stable home environment
- Witnessing/experiencing violence
- Unstable relationships
- Limited life skills

- Limited job opportunities
- Isolation
- Limited income and low wages
- Having a criminal record
- Issues with drugs/alcohol
- Limited housing options
- Inadequate social supports
- Limited education
- Lack of transportation
- Physical/intellectual disabilities
- Mental illness

The most common type of homelessness interviewees are seeing in rural PEI is ‘relative’ homelessness. Relative homelessness is when individuals/families are living in a dwelling that does not meet basic housing standards. Their dwelling might be too small, be in poor repair or cost an unsustainable proportion of their income, or they may have no dwelling of their own and be living with friends, couch-surfing or doubling up.³

Interviewees noted that they are seeing more and more individuals/families move between family and friends, couch-surf or double up with others at-risk because there are no other options available to them. In severe cases, they are seeing them resort to sleeping in cars/the workplace/building entrances, trading sexual favors for a place to stay, or moving back in with an abusive partner/family member.

They are also seeing more families and seniors living in unsafe/unsuitable housing due to the high cost of living and limited access to jobs or jobs that pay a livable wage. The high cost of food, transportation, electricity, heating oil, and repairs has resulted in many families/seniors having to choose between heat and food or put off important house repairs that are necessary for their well-being and safety. Unfortunately, there is little support for people in this situation which is resulting in them cohabitating, often under less than ideal circumstances, to share living costs.

Several key stakeholders and service providers noted that it is not uncommon for individuals/families in these situations to move from their rural community into more urban

³ Ajunnginiq Centre, National Aboriginal Health Organization, Homelessness and Housing Realities for Inuit: Glossary of Terms, http://www.naho.ca/inuit/e/resources/documents/2008-03-18_HousingandHomelessness_WorkingGLOSSARY.pdf

areas such as Charlottetown or Summerside to access services and find housing. They are also seeing them move away to other provinces to find work and a more secure income.

In the case of people living with physical/intellectual disabilities, interviewees identified two crisis points in regards to housing and care issues. The first is when young adults with disabilities finish school and require care during the day. The school system provides these individuals with structure, valuable learning opportunities and social supports and allows parents/caregivers to work during the day. Once they leave school, parents/caregivers lose that support and often have to quit their job to stay home and provide care or are no longer able to keep them at home because of lack of resources and support. There are currently very few services available to families in this situation which leaves them with limited options and opportunities to support young adults with disabilities in obtaining independence.

The second crisis point is when aging parents/caregivers of individuals with disabilities are unable to provide adequate care due to illness or the normal aging process. Again, there is very little support available to these parents/caregivers and they often have to find alternative living arrangements for their dependent which is stressful for all involved. In both situations, people with physical/intellectual disabilities sometimes end up living in inappropriate care contexts such as nursing homes or community care facilities because there are limited housing options available to them that are accessible, affordable, supportive, and designed to meet their needs. In the case of those living in rural communities, options are even more limited which results in many having to leave their home community and move to more urban areas. Being moved from their own community can take them away from supportive family and friends and out of a living situation where they feel comfortable and secure. This can impact on their quality of life and lead to depression, loneliness and isolation.

3.2.2 Needs of Individuals and Families Living in Rural Areas At-Risk Of or Experiencing Homelessness

When asked about the needs of individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues, key stakeholders and service providers identified the following:

- Access to affordable and safe housing within their community
- Transitional housing for men, women and youth
- Emergency shelters for men, women, youth and families

- Group homes, boarding houses and supportive housing options for men, women, youth and families that require structure and support with daily living activities
- Employment training
- Jobs that pay a livable wage
- Adequate financial support to help individuals/families with food, heating oil, transportation, etc.
- Services and supports to address the issues that contributed to homelessness – e.g. drug/alcohol addiction, family violence, mental illness, lack of life skills, unhealthy relationships, etc.
- Homecare support for seniors, people living with disabilities, and people living with mental illness
- Support with transportation
- Easy and timely access to programs and services within their own community
- Assistance accessing programs and services

3.2.3 Available Services and Supports

Based on the interview findings, there appears to be limited services and supports available to individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues in rural PEI. Most available are open to all PEI residents but are located in the more populated cities of Charlottetown and Summerside. They also tend to be supportive in nature rather than directly focused on aiding individuals/families in finding permanent housing – e.g. assisting in developing employment and life skills, accessing financial support, providing short-term housing support to specific target groups, etc.

Below is a list of the services and supports identified by interviewees:

- **Anderson House** is a provincial emergency shelter for women and children who have been physically or emotionally abused or live in constant fear of abuse. It is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week by trained women who honor confidentiality.
- **Bedford MacDonald House** is a homeless shelter for men ages 18 years or older. It is open from 4:00pm until 8:00am and has six beds. The average permitted length of stay is five to seven days and there is ‘zero’ tolerance for drugs/alcohol. There is a cost of \$25.00 per day for those residents who have income.
- **Boys and Girls Clubs of PEI** is a member of the Boys and Girls Club of Canada which is a national not-for-profit youth serving organization that provides a safe and supportive place where children and youth can experience new opportunities, overcome barriers,

build positive relationships, and develop confidence and skills for life. There are clubs located in Charlottetown, Summerside and Wellington. Each offers a variety of education, recreation, and support services and the Charlottetown club also offers a survival centre for teens. The survival centre is for youth who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness. It is open five nights a week from 5:00pm until 9:00pm and provides teens with access to a variety of supports and services such as showers, food, cooking classes, clothing, medical help, laundry facilities, personal care items, employment skills training, etc.

- **Canadian Mental Health Association** is a charitable community-based organization that promotes mental health and supports people experiencing mental illness. It supports and operates clubhouse programs in three communities across PEI – Fitzroy Centre in Charlottetown, Notre Dame Place in Summerside and Hope Centre in Alberton. These clubhouses provide individuals experiencing persistent mental health problems with opportunities to become involved in residential, pre-vocation, employment, social and recreation programs.
- **Chief Mary Bernard Memorial Women’s Shelter** is a shelter for young women and their children who are homeless and in need of some extra support. It is located on Lennox Island and has space for five families (women and their children). Lennox Island band members have first priority but it is open to off-reserve and non-Native families as well. Non-Native families can stay between three and six weeks and Native families can stay up to a year. Women staying at the shelter get assistance with housing applications and have access to programming that focuses on variety of issues such as budgeting, life skills, employment skills, and addictions. They are also connected with other health and social resources within the community as needed.
- **Child and Family Services** is a division of the provincial government department of Social Services and Seniors. It provides a broad range of services to promote the safety and well-being of residents of PEI. Their services are focused on protecting the rights and well-being of children where efforts of the family have been unsuccessful, providing supports for individuals and families who lack the resources to deal with crisis events and situations in their lives, and strengthening family and community resources to increase the capacity of individuals/families for more independent functioning.
- **Community Mental Health** is a community-based service offered through the Department of Health which provides professional assessment, consultation, treatment, crisis intervention, medication, monitoring, outreach and on-going support for individuals with mild to moderate mental health issues. They have offices in Souris, Montague, Charlottetown, Summerside, and Alberton.

- **Council of Disabled** is a non-profit and non-government organization whose mandate is to support people with disabilities by speaking out on issues such as housing, education, employment, transportation, human rights and access to support services.
- **Disability Support Program** is a social program offered through the provincial government department of Social Services and Seniors. It is open to all PEI residents with a qualifying disability and is designed to help them overcome barriers, attain a satisfactory quality of life, and strive for financial independence. It also assists children and youth with disabilities by offering support to them and their families.
- **Family Resource Centres** are community-based not-for-profit organizations that offer a wide range of services for children, parents and families. Services include parenting classes, playgroups, community kitchens, child development programs, prenatal nutrition programs, lending libraries, etc. Transportation and childcare support is provided when needed to ensure all families have an opportunity to access the services. There are eight family resource centres across PEI. They are located in Charlottetown, Summerside, Wellington, Alberton, New Glasgow, Montague and Souris. Many of these centres also offer outreach programs to extend their services to families in other communities.
- **Food Banks** are community-based organizations that provide individuals/families in need with basic food stuffs. There are food banks in several communities across PEI including Charlottetown, Summerside, Montague, Souris and O'leary.
- **Grandmother's House** is a homeless shelter for women (native and non-native) run by the Native Council of PEI. It is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week and has six to eight beds. It can accommodate women and their children and accepts women 18 years of age or older. The average length of stay is three to six weeks and there is 'zero' tolerance for drugs/alcohol. It is culturally sensitive to Native women but welcomes non-Native women as well. There is a cost of \$280.00 a month to stay at the shelter or \$10.00 a day for those staying for shorter time periods.
- **Habitat for Humanity** is an independent non-profit housing program dedicated to eliminating poverty housing by building homes in partnership with families in need. The criteria to qualify for a habitat home include a need for affordable housing, an ability to repay a habitat mortgage, and willingness to partner with the organization. Applicants must live in substandard housing and not qualify for conventional home financing.
- **Learn, Explore, Achieve, Prepare (LEAP)** is a life and employment skills development program for youth offered through the John Howard Society of PEI. It is designed to help youth develop the skills and knowledge needed to return to school or transition into the labor market.

- **Legal Aid** is a provincial government service offered through the Office of the Attorney General. It provides representation in family and criminal law to clients who can not afford to obtain essential legal services from the private sector. Legal aid offices are located in Charlottetown and Summerside.
- **Morell Region Community Learning Centre** is a non-profit organization that serves the immediate and surrounding communities of the Morell area. It offers various programs and services designed to enhance community development and help individuals access resources and increase their academic and computer literacy levels.
- **Project Discovery** is a youth employment preparation program for individuals ages 18 to 29. It offers life and work skills training, job shadow experiences, and on the job training.
- **Provincial Addiction Services** is a community-based service offered through the Department of Health which provides addiction counseling and programs for men, women, youth, and families across PEI.
- **Provincial Housing Services** is a service offered under the provincial government department of Social Services and Seniors. It includes the Social Housing Program which has two major components: the Seniors Housing Program and the Family Housing Program. The Seniors Housing Program is designed to provide self-contained, affordable (25% of income) apartment units to low income persons over the age of 60. Units are available in 37 communities across PEI. The Family Housing Program is designed to provide low income individuals/families with safe, secure and affordable (25% of income) rental housing. Units are available in nine municipalities across PEI.
- **Queens County Residential Services** is a community-based non-governmental organization that is a resource and support for persons with intellectual and other disabilities. It operates five long-term residential group homes and one small option home in Charlottetown which provides residents with attendant care, life-skills development programs, and assistance in daily activities. Each home is staffed and operated 24 hours a day. In addition, a variety of day programs are offered which are specifically designed to meet the individual needs of clients.
- **Richmond Centre** is a community-based program offered through the provincial government Department of Health which provides a broad range of mental health services to individuals, families, groups and communities. It is located in Charlottetown but open to all PEI residents.
- **Social Assistance Program** is a provincial government program under the department of Social Services and Seniors. It offers basic income support for children, families and individuals who are unable to provide for themselves. The program also provides

services and supports to enhance client self-reliance through access to training and employment.

- **Talbot House** is an extended care facility for men located in Charlottetown. It accommodates 14 residents and provides a safe and supportive environment for men working towards maintaining a chemical-free lifestyle. The minimum length of stay is six weeks and the maximum is six months. Talbot House also offers a Community Outreach Program in collaboration with the Provincial Corrections Center, which is designed to assist men who are struggling with their personal recovery plan while in the community or incarcerated.
- **The Adventure Group** is a non-profit community-based organization that offers opportunities for young people and their parents to learn and develop skills using an adventure-based approach. One of the key programs offered is the Life Management Program. It provides parents with education and training in areas such as parenting, employment skills and life skills.
- **The Salvation Army** is an international Christian church that provides direct social services to individuals/families in need. In PEI, they provide help in the form of heating oil, clothing, food, life skills training and counseling, and household furnishings.
- **Victim Services** is a provincial government service under the Office of the Attorney General. It assists victims of crime by providing them with essential information, support, referrals, and assistance throughout the criminal justice and criminal injuries compensation processes. Victim Services offices are located in Charlottetown and Summerside.
- **Wrap-Around Program** is a program offered through the John Howard Society of PEI. It helps homeless or at-risk youth identify and create strategies to address their individual issues with the help of a personalized support team. Some of the issues youth and their support team may focus on include housing, employment, medical, social, legal, education, financial, transportation, family, parenting, emotional, behavioral, spiritual, cultural and safety.

Most interviewees regularly recommend or refer individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues to the aforementioned services and supports. Due to limited follow up, however, they are unaware of the extent to which those referred actually access them or if the support they receive is helpful.

3.2.4 Barriers to Accessing Services and Supports

In general, interviewees feel that the services and supports currently in place are beneficial, but noted that there are significant barriers to accessing them. The key barriers identified were:

- Wait times – due to high demands on most government and community services and limited human resources, many individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues have to wait a long time to access services. Interviewees noted that having to wait such a long time to receive help and support can be very discouraging. If individuals/families are in crisis or have finally made the decision to seek help, they need to be able to access it in a timely manner. Having to wait weeks or months is often not an option and can result in the situation worsening.
- Transportation - there is limited public transportation and taxi services available on PEI and the majority of individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues do not have the financial resources to own and operate a car. This makes it very difficult for them to access programs/services, especially if they live outside of Charlottetown and Summerside where most are offered.

“...transportation is a real issue...these people don’t have access to cars and if they do, they can’t afford to put gas in them to get into town...this is a huge barrier for them...”
(Key Stakeholder and Service Provider Interviews)

- Limited finances - individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues generally live well below the poverty line and often do not have the financial means to meet even their most basic living needs. Most can not afford to own and operate a car, pay for childcare services, pay for a taxi or miss work which makes it difficult to go to appointments, access services or take part in supportive programs.
- Embarrassment/pride – some individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues feel ashamed or embarrassed of their situation and do not feel comfortable asking for support.
- Difficulties in accessing services/supports available – many individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues are unaware of what services/supports are available and do not know how to go about accessing them. They often need help navigating the system and connecting with the right people.

“...no one knows who to call for help and when they do call, they get the run around...it can be very frustrating trying to access services...no one seems to know who to go to...”
(Key Stakeholder and Service Provider Interviews)

- Eligibility criteria – many services and supports have set eligibility criteria which limit those who can access them. In the case of housing and financial support, the eligibility criteria often exclude youth and individuals without dependents.

3.2.5 Gaps in Services and Supports

In addition to barriers, interviewees noted that there are several gaps in current services and supports that need to be addressed. They include:

- Lack of safe, affordable housing in rural areas - there are limited subsidized rental properties in smaller communities and in some cases, those that are available are not in good condition. This has resulted in low income individuals/families living in substandard housing or having to move out of their communities to find more appropriate housing.
- Lack of temporary shelters – there are currently few temporary shelters for individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues and those that are available are limited to certain populations and support small numbers. There needs to be a variety of temporary shelters in place to support these individuals/families until a permanent housing solution can be found.

“...there is nothing available...I get calls from people who need help and there is no where to send them...it is very frustrating when you know someone doesn't have a place to stay and there is nothing you can do for them...” (Key Stakeholder and Service Provider Interviews)

- Lack of life skills and employment programs in smaller communities – many individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues require support in developing life and employment skills which will help them become more self-sustaining. In many small communities, life and employment skills programs are not available. In order to access such programs, those in need have to go to another community which is often a challenge due to transportation issues.

- Lack of follow-up services - there is currently no formal follow-up system in place to monitor progress and ensure that the needs of individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues are being adequately addressed.

3.2.6 Suggestions to Improve Services and Supports

Suggestions put forth by key stakeholders and service providers to address the gaps and needs of individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues and overcome barriers to accessing services and supports include:

- De-centralize services and supports - the majority of services and supports are offered in Charlottetown and Summerside which limits accessibility for many individuals/families who live in outlying communities. In order to increase accessibility, interviewees suggested offering the services and supports in smaller communities or expanding them through outreach approaches.

“...we need to move services outside of Charlottetown...we need outreach services in smaller communities because most of these people can’t get into town...the centralized approach doesn’t work...a lot of people are missing out on stuff because of this and it’s not fair...”
(Key Stakeholder and Service Provider Interviews)

- Increase monetary support received through social services – the current monetary support received through social services is inadequate to meet basic living needs. Interviewees noted that many individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues have to choose between basic needs such as food and heating oil due to limited financial support. They feel that income support needs to be increased to meet the current cost of living and provide individuals/families with enough money to obtain and maintain adequate housing as well as meet all other basic living needs.

“...we are seeing people having to choose between food and heat...with the cost of everything, the support they get isn’t covering it all...” (Key Stakeholder Interview)

- Provide more subsidized/low income housing in smaller communities – interviewees indicated that the availability of subsidized/low income housing in many smaller communities is very limited and in some cases, that which is available is less than ideal. As a result, some individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues are living in substandard housing or moving out of their communities to access affordable housing.

Interviewees would like to see safe and affordable housing options made available to these individuals/families so that they can stay in their community and live independently.

“There isn’t a lot of housing for people in smaller communities...there is very little available and a lot of people waiting for the few that are...people are having to move out of their community and into places like Charlottetown to get help with housing...” (Key Stakeholder and Service Provider Interviews)

- Provide temporary shelters/housing options – currently there are very few temporary shelters/housing options available across PEI. Interviewees would like to see more temporary shelter/housing options (emergency, transitional, residential) available in various key communities across PEI to support individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues until permanent housing solutions can be found.
- Provide group homes/boarding houses/supportive housing options – interviewees would like to see group homes/boarding houses/supportive housing made available in various communities across PEI for those individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues that require some structured support or help with activities of daily living (e.g. people living with disabilities). These types of housing options will provide them with the opportunity to live independently in a safe and secure environment.
- Reduce wait times to access services/supports – there are currently long waiting lists to access subsidized housing and other support services across PEI. Interviewees noted that waiting times to access some services is months, which is very discouraging, especially when individuals/families are in crisis. They would like to see more resources invested in these services so that wait times are shortened and individuals/families receive help when they need it.
- Create a database of housing options – interviewees noted that there is no ‘one-stop-shop’ to identify housing options available to individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues. Several suggested creating a database of housing options available in each community at any given time so that they can quickly and effectively focus their efforts on meeting the housing needs of individuals/families.
- Better coordinate services – there is no structured, coordinated system in place that promotes collaboration and ensures that individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues are receiving the services and supports they require. Interviewees are not fully aware of the types of programs and services currently available to these individuals/families and noted that there is no organized system in place to assess and prioritize their

needs and then assist them in accessing services. They feel that in order to meet the complex and multi-dimensional needs of these individuals/families, service providers need to work together in a collaborative manner which allows for better information sharing, better coordination of services, and easier access to services and supports.

“...there is no structure in place that supports us working together... we are all trying to do our bit but often in isolation...we don't really know what others are doing and there isn't as much communication as there should be...we need something in place that helps us work together better...” (Key Stakeholder and Service Provider Interviews)

- Improve housing standards – some of the subsidized/low income housing options currently available are less than adequate and require significant repairs. Interviewees would like to see the housing standards reviewed and improved to ensure that all subsidized/low income housing options are safe, healthy and truly ‘livable’.
- Increase Co-operative Housing – a small number of interviewees suggested building more housing co-operatives in various communities across PEI to help address the housing needs of individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues. A housing cooperative is formed when people join together to own or control housing facilities. Each member owns a share of the cooperative which entitles them to occupy a housing unit (e.g. apartment) as if an owner, have equal access to common areas, and have a say in how the cooperative is managed. This type of housing is very affordable and allows members to feel a sense of ownership as well as have a voice in how the housing community operates.
- Introduce the ‘Associate Families’ model – this is a model that provides private individuals with resources and supports to care for other family or community members in need. Interviewees noted that it is a very cost effective way of providing care and support.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The literature review and key stakeholder and service provider interviews show that homelessness has always been and continues to be an issue. Although we are not seeing much absolute homelessness in rural PEI, we are increasingly seeing more relative homelessness. The populations experiencing homelessness are diverse and require diverse solutions. PEI appears to have a relatively good range of supportive services in place to help

these individuals/families address their personal issues but limited homelessness specific services aimed at directly assisting them in accessing safe and affordable short-term and permanent housing. In addition, most of the support services available are located in Charlottetown and Summerside which limits accessibility; individuals/families living in the more rural communities have difficulties accessing them due to barriers such as lack of transportation and limited financial resources.

To address these issues and truly help individuals/families dealing with homelessness issues, there needs to be better access to services and supports in smaller communities and more focus on direct housing services (i.e. temporary shelters, more subsidized housing, better income support, etc.) that will help them obtain and maintain permanent housing that is safe, affordable and secure.

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