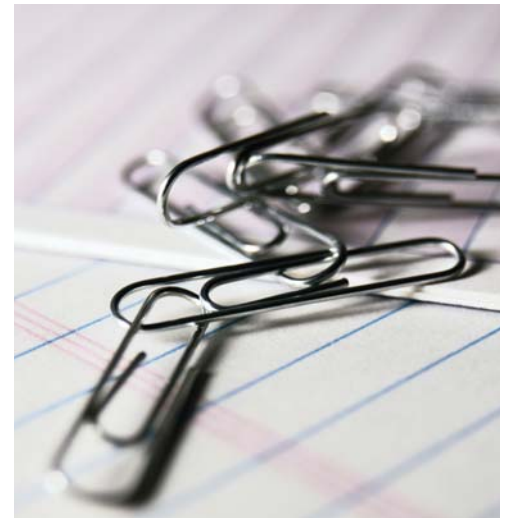


Toward a Common Goal for Shelter Service

What you need to know

Shelter service is a local response to the increasing number of homeless people in North America and Europe. The success of a shelter is commonly measured by looking at the shelter's ability to limit the amount of homelessness, meet the immediate and long-term needs of clients, and help shelter users secure stable housing after leaving the shelter. Service delivery tends to be different from one shelter to the next and also varies within shelters. Therefore, there is no single model of service delivery that can be effectively used across shelters.



What is this research about?

This research identifies three important factors that affect service delivery within homeless shelters: the relationship between the shelter and the community, the shelter's built environment and surrounding community, and the service delivery style. It suggests that these characteristics are interrelated and shelter success is best measured when considered in the context of these three broad characteristics.



KEYWORDS

homeless shelter, community involvement, service delivery

ARTICLE SOURCE

Walsh, C.A., Graham, J.R., & Shier, M. (2009). Towards a common goal for shelter service. *Social Development Issues*, 31(2), 57-69.

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What did the researchers do?

The researchers chose sixty shelters from across Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom and categorized them as either very successful or less successful at providing effective service to clients. Interviews were then conducted with shelter operators on topics relating to privacy, safety, location, styles of service delivery and concepts of an ideal shelter. The operators were encouraged to relate their answers to the built environment, the

relationship between the shelter and the community, and service delivery. The shelters used in the study varied in population served (women, men, mixed or youth), location (residential, commercial or a mix of both), style (house, apartment or dormitory), and service delivery provided (meals and a place to sleep or more intensive services such as counseling, life skills and health services).

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that community relationships, the built environment and service delivery are three underlying characteristics that need to be considered when measuring a shelter's success. Community members' attitudes toward homeless people were found to be an indicator of whether or not the relationship between the shelter and the community was a positive one. Community member involvement in initial shelter planning meetings and the subsequent daily operations indicated a strong relationship between the shelter and the community. Educating neighbours about the services offered also helped garner support for a shelter. With respect to the built environment,

the researchers found that private entrances and private outdoor areas preserved the clients' dignity while entering and exiting the shelter. Study participants reported that the physical characteristics of a shelter also have an effect on clients' sense of home. Private rooms instead of shared accommodations and apartment units instead of dormitory-style buildings helped provide a supportive environment for successful service delivery. The researchers found that regardless of the type of service offered (emergency, transitional, supportive or outreach), these services needed to be offered in a client-focused, dignified manner to be effective.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research provides information that can be used by planners, communities and service providers to help inform the appropriate locations for homeless shelters. It can also be used to ensure that shelters fit within surrounding communities, appropriately accommodate clients numbers and client needs, and provide services in a client-centered and dignified manner.



*Image: Laurel Finkel Photography



ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

Dr. Christine Walsh is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary. Her research interests include populations affected by social exclusion, poverty and homelessness.