

Westgate Emergency Housing Project

Evaluation Study

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Introduction

This report presents preliminary findings from an evaluation of the Westgate Emergency Housing Project. The investigation was undertaken at the request of Aspen Family and Community Network Society for an independent assessment of the structure, organization, and service delivery of the program and the experiences of families housed. Studies of family housing programs are scarce, and where available emanate from programs in other countries, chiefly the United States. The Westgate project presented a unique opportunity to capture important program features that could inform future housing initiatives for homeless families.

An important discovery was that a significant number of housed families consisted of dual parent households. The majority of studies of homeless families have focussed on single-parent, female headed households.¹ This group of two-parent units presented an important opportunity for understanding factors affecting their housing status.

Additionally, most studies of homeless families have focussed on single mothers with dependent children. Often these families are housed in women-only shelters for victims of domestic violence. Frequently these shelters also exclude adolescent males, who are forced to seek refuge in shelters for adult men. This tends to present a picture of family homelessness as primarily an issue for women with young children. The strength of the IFTC program, and the Westgate project is that an emphasis was placed on keeping families together, regardless of the age and gender of family members.

In order to provide a comprehensive overview of this project, every effort was made to examine the experiences of the participants (residents) who were served by the project and those who were homeless but for unknown reasons did not get housed at the Westgate. In addition, the organizational elements of the project were also examined. Hopefully the lessons learned from this venture will be applied in future temporary housing initiatives for homeless families.

The Westgate initiative was also a remarkable example of inter-agency cooperation and community connectedness. In addition to the partner agencies numerous volunteer and support services were quickly put in place in order to assist families in dealing with various aspects of their homelessness. As such it presented a remarkable achievement on the provision of a comprehensive set of services within a short time-frame. The Westgate project would not have been possible without the tireless efforts of staff and administrators from Inn From The Cold and Aspen Family and Community Network Society, and countless volunteer hours provided by people associated with both organisations. This report attempts to capture the main elements of this complex effort.

Background and History of the Project

The Westgate project began as an idea of John Martin a member of Alberta Seniors, Alderman Craig Burrows and the motel property owner. Although slated for demolition and property redevelopment, the timetable for this undertaking was such that the facility would remain vacant, and essentially furnished, over the winter. The Westgate Hotel was scheduled for demolition in the spring of 2004 and the parties involved believed it would be beneficial to provide homeless families with shelter through the coldest months. Following the termination of the project, the hotel would be returned to the owner to proceed with his development plans.

Following initial talks in November 2003, service providers were invited into the process to see if a collaborative effort could be pulled together to operate such an initiative. The City of Calgary, CUPS, Inn From the Cold and Aspen Family and Community Network Society were a part of these initial discussions. Shortly after, other service providers were invited when the need became evident, i.e. Community Kitchens. Aspen Family and Community Network Society was asked to be the fiscal agent, with Inn From the Cold providing the initial program and staff support. Inn From the Cold also fulfilled the client screening and referral functions.

Initially, it was hoped the Westgate could be re-opened and providing shelter to families prior to Christmas 2003. Unfortunately, the property required substantial maintenance and cleaning before being suitable for occupancy. The new opening target became January 2004. This allowed some time to prepare the property while developing the operating side of the project.

Partner Organizations

A. Inn From the Cold

The Inn From The Cold (IFTC) is a grass-roots organization that has provided emergency shelter for the homeless since 1997. Using the facilities of local churches (of all denominations), it provides nightly accommodation, a hot evening meal, a modest breakfast and bag lunch for the homeless guests who are sheltered. Each Inn (host congregation) accommodates up to 15 individuals. Priority is given to families and then women. Currently 65 congregations are part of IFTC.

B. Aspen Family and Community Network Society

Aspen Family and Community Network Society is a medium- sized, community based agency. The organisation provides a wide continuum of services ranging from residential treatment facilities for children and adolescents, to community outreach and development programs for homeless and at-risk families. Aspen Family and Community Network Society has been providing child-oriented operating programs for over 20 years and programs specific to the homeless family population for the past five years.

Westgate Project Description

The Physical facility

The Westgate Motel is a facility located outside of the downtown core of Calgary but convenient to public transportation and a large shopping mall within walking distance. It consists of 70 sleeping units as well as banquet rooms and a (closed) restaurant. For purposes of the housing project the bedroom units, front lobby area, two administrative offices, the banquet rooms on the lower level and the kitchen and laundry facilities were available. This allowed for the accommodation of families in individual bedrooms, with the several existing “suites” used to house families with adolescent children who required greater space and privacy than a single bedroom would allow. Although the building was slated for demolition, all furnishings and equipment (including kitchen and dining room equipment) were still present and available for project use. Thus meals could be prepared and served on premises to all residents.

Communal space consisted of the front lobby and the banquet areas on the lower level. The front lobby area was designated as a gathering place, with a small room off to the side that was used as a play area for younger children. The only televisions in the facility were located in this area, and were shared by all residents. Downstairs, the banquet area was sectioned off by room dividers, which provided a generously sized dining room and a separate playroom for the children. This playroom was used primarily in the evening to provide a supervised recreational program for the children. Because the building was slated for demolition, permission was obtained for the children to decorate the walls of this play area. This allowed for a personalizing touch that quickly allowed the children and youth to establish their own space. This was a small but significant feature for children whose homelessness had not given them an opportunity to feel connected to the space they were staying in.

The provision of meals was under the auspices of the Community Kitchen program. Breakfast was continental style and consisted of a simple selection of cereal, beverages and toast. At residents’ request a hot breakfast was added for

one weekend morning. A chef from the Community Kitchen program was seconded from his regular position to provide a hot evening meal each day. Community volunteers assisted in the set-up, serving and clean-up from dinner. Families were expected to clear their eating area but not to wash the dishes. After supper, fixings for lunch for the following day would be put out so that families could prepare their own take-out lunch (since all families were expected to be out of the facility during the day).

The motels commercial laundry facilities were made available to residents. Since these facilities were limited, families had to learn to cooperate in the days and times of the use of the washers and dryers. This cooperation was a new experience for some people whose life struggles had generally been for individual survival rather than group cooperation. Similarly, families were expected to keep their own rooms clean, and to do some communal chores such as vacuuming common areas and cleaning communal bathrooms. There was no housekeeping or janitorial staff attached to the project, thus maintenance of the physical plant (specifically cleaning) was a responsibility that all residents had to share.

Staffing

Residents (referred to as guests) were expected to be out of the facility between the hours of 9AM and 3 PM (later modified to a 2PM return), attending support programs, or seeking employment and housing. The original staffing plan called for a program supervisor acting as the facility manager. This person would be available primarily during the day-time hours and would also be available when residents awoke and when they returned in the afternoon. This person would also coordinate and supervise all program logistics. An evening shift was staffed by two “facilitators” and one staff person remained at the facility overnight. The facilitators had generally defined responsibilities for dealing with practical issues presented by residents, and monitoring the general safety and well-being of all guests. A security person was also on duty during the evening and overnight hours to assure the safety of guests and staff. Staff were hired immediately before the opening of the program, and were hired by Inn From the Cold, since Aspen Family and Community Network Society as the fiscal agent and partner had not yet come on board to the project. None of the staff had prior experience in working in programs for homeless families or in residential programs.

Within the first few weeks of operation two of the evening facilitators had to be terminated from their positions and they were not replaced. The decision not to fill these positions was based in part on the rationale that there were only a small number of families housed at that point (eight) and that guests had been told that the persons involved were laid off due to budget constraints. The result was that for the last two months of the project there was only one facilitator on most nights, even when the total families housed rose to twenty, and consisted of over 55 individuals (adults and children).

Three weeks before the termination of the project, the program manager resigned. An experienced staff person from one of the Aspen Family and Community Network Society residential programs was seconded to fill this position for the remainder of the project. Her skills in working with families and in working in a residential setting were quickly put to use. The families became

more settled, despite increasing tension about obtaining housing before the end of the program.

Support Services

Staffed by volunteers and local agencies, an impressive number of support services were made available to guests, both on-site and in the community. In-house, the City of Calgary Dept. of Parks and Recreation supplied staff five evenings a week to provide a supervised recreation program for the children and youth. The program included play, arts and crafts, outside activities when weather permitted, and some special events (a carnival, a lip-sync show, a talent show). The program also availed itself of the local branch of the public library, which was within walking distance, and obtained library cards for parents and children. Applications for parks and recreation passes to local facilities were made available and family-oriented recreational activities were organized and offered on the weekends. This provided some families with the rare opportunity to enjoy leisure events with their children, something that they generally did not have the financial resources to do, or to avail themselves of when they were homeless.

A men's support group met weekly, as did an AA group. Mid-way through the project at guest request, aboriginal elders from the Metis Calgary Family Services Association began to offer traditional ceremony, including healing circles. A health services mobile unit (bus) came weekly in the evenings to address any guest medical concerns.

Through the efforts of IFTC arrangements had been made through the Board of Education for school-aged children to be placed in designated elementary, junior high and high schools. Most importantly, the children would retain their school placement regardless of where the family was living. This allowed parents to consider housing options without worry about having their children switch schools in the middle of the year. For some children who had already been to three or more schools, this was an extremely important move

towards providing them with some stability. Parents were most grateful and appreciative of this arrangement.

The outreach workers from Inn From the Cold provided an impressive array of support and linkage to local housing and support services. They assisted families in applying for housing, financial assistance where necessary, obtaining required documentation, negotiating lease arrangements and repayment of prior housing debts where necessary. Without their interventions, most families would still be struggling to navigate through the multiple requirements of housing and support agencies.

Families were encouraged to join one of the support programs available to homeless families. The Other Twelve Hours is a program for homeless families, and those at high risk of losing their housing. It provides an individual and group-oriented program to assist participants in acquiring pragmatic, financial, social and emotional life skills that will help them to maintain housing and increase their ability to parent effectively. An ancillary program, Families in Transition, also under the auspices of Aspen Family and Community Network Society, is an in-home support program that provides outreach, support and linkage to community agencies who assist high risk and vulnerable families in keeping their housing and caring for their children. In addition, Aspen Family and Community Network Society also has community outreach workers available to assist families in need of support and linkage. Because The Other Twelve Hours is a program that is six months in duration, and has a limited enrolment, not all families in the Westgate housing project could be accommodated during their stay at the Westgate. Some opted for, and were involved with One World Child, an early intervention pre-school program for vulnerable children and their parents. The rest of the families generally spent the day at the Family Resource Centre of CUPS (Calgary Urban Project Services). This Centre provides space for parents and children to be in a safe, sheltered environment during the day. It also makes a variety of support services available on a drop-in basis. All of these support services continue to be available to families after they leave the Westgate project.

Intake Procedure

Since the Westgate Project was established as a temporary alternative housing option for homeless families who had sought shelter at Inn From the Cold, any family unit of a custodial parent (or parents) plus minor children (age 18 and under), were eligible for this housing program.

Normal procedure at Inn From the Cold is to obtain basic information from persons seeking shelter (names, ages, pertinent medical information) at the time a family registers for nightly shelter. At that time family members (generally the parents or guardians) are also screened for current substance use/intoxication. While no formal documentation of custody is required to be produced, staff reserve the right to request this if there is cause to suspect that the parent may not have legal custody. This became especially important when families were provided with ongoing housing at the Westgate.

The Inn requires families to register each day for accommodation that night. A more complete intake is conducted during the evening hours while the family is at the host church. Since these intakes are generally conducted by volunteers, they are scheduled when volunteers are available. In order to place families in the Westgate motel, The Inn staff needed time to assess each family, and initially established a requirement that each family stay at an “Inn” (i.e. church hall accommodation) for 72 hours to allow for an intake to be completed. While this time was subsequently shortened to 48 hours approximately a month into the project, in reality there continued to be considerable variability in the amount of time families spent in church accommodation before moving into the Westgate facility.

An added complication was that some families use the Inn shelters on an irregular basis, and not always on consecutive nights. Therefore, they might not meet the 72 or 48 hour requirement for staying at the customary Inn From The Cold Church hall or basement accommodation. This resulted in at least 11 families not being available for the intake and subsequent placement. Efforts

were made to locate these missed families, but only two could be found in the time span of the study.

During the months of the Westgate project intake volunteers were usually available only two nights a week. In several cases Inn From the Cold staff conducted daytime intake interviews in order to facilitate placing families in the Westgate motel. Because of the intake procedure eligible families were not always placed at the Westgate as expeditiously as possible. In some cases families remain lodged at the churches for a week or longer although there was available space at the Westgate.

Families moved in gradually, as they came to the attention of Inn From The Cold staff. Seven moved in when the facility opened and another three arrived within the same week. The rest were housed, one or two families a week, until March 2, when the last unit moved in. Since a commitment had been made to place all families in permanent housing by the closing date of the project, no families were accepted into the program in the last three weeks it was operational.

Methodology of the Evaluation

Competent program evaluation involves an examination of program structure, characteristics, procedures and feedback from the client group intended to be served by the program. The size of the Westgate project made a qualitative analysis of these components the most feasible and practical approach. Thus a series of semi-structured interviews was conducted by the research team. Those interviewed included all available and willing Westgate residents (18 out of 21 families that were housed during the project were interviewed. One family moved out before the evaluation study began) and 12 agency staff: the program managers and facilitators, Inn From the Cold outreach and office workers, senior management from both Inn From the Cold and Aspen Family and Community Network Society, and program staff from The Other 12 Hours program and the CUPS Family Resource Centre.

Interviews were all conducted during the last three weeks of operation of the program. All but one of the resident interviews were conducted at the Westgate. Staff were interviewed either in their office or off premise, at their convenience. Most interviews lasted about an hour, although they ranged in length from 30 minutes to almost two hours. During the early weeks of the project, site facilitators had little opportunity to debrief their ongoing experiences. This led to extensive interviews as individuals took the opportunity to process their experiences.

Interview protocol called for an anonymous information gathering procedure. This approach was felt to offer the greatest privacy protection to persons who were being housed in a well-publicized program. It was also intended to assure participants of the safety of the information provided. The hope was that participants would more freely share their experiences if the feedback was anonymous. The interviewers took written notes but did not otherwise record the interviews. Although this methodology may have resulted in

some loss of information, it was deemed important to preserve participant anonymity.

In addition, the evaluation team spent non-structured time at the Westgate, observing weekly resident and staff “house” meetings, and informal interactions of staff and residents. These periods of observation provided validation of some of the interview content and additional information on the structure, function and organisational dynamics of the group of residents and staff at the Westgate.

Demographic Description of the Housed Families

During the three months that the Westgate project was operational a total of 21 families, consisting of 64 men, women and children, were housed. There were 32 adult and 32 child residents. Ten of the families consisted of both parents (or partners) and their children. Eight family units consisted of female-headed households and in three families the custodial parent was the father. The children ranged in age from 7 months to 17 years. Twenty of the children were 5 and younger. Seven ranged in age from seven to 12, and there were five adolescents. Parental age ranged from 19 to one person who was in the 50's. The size of the family units ranged from one couple where the woman was eight months pregnant to the largest families with 3 children (three families). Four of the women were pregnant. Four of the families were attending The Other 12 Hours program at Aspen Family and Community Network Society and eight families relied primarily on the Family Resource Centre at CUPS as a place to go during the day.

Consistent with research reports of homeless families in other areas, these families did not report a history of mental illness and some, but not all, reported a prior history of substance abuse. None were abusing alcohol or drugs while housed at the Westgate. Most had lived in their own home/apartment in the past but many had stayed with family or friends before becoming absolutely

homeless. Many had a substantial history of employment. For most, this was their first experience with homelessness.

A precise accounting will be available for the final report of this project. Information about the reason for each family's homeless situation will be analyzed and also presented in the final report.

The Housing Experience:

The Families' Views

All the families expressed a great deal of gratitude for the availability of the Westgate housing and offered high praise for the staff and organizations that had provided this opportunity. Some had stayed for an extended time in the church shelters (some for weeks and in several cases, for months). They were thus able to offer some important reflections on the differences between the two programs.

The stability of being able to stay in one place was unanimously cited as the most important reason why families chose to stay at the Westgate. Many commented that while church volunteers were very kind and hospitable, the regular IFTC shelter program is organized so that a family must register for shelter each afternoon between 4:00 PM and 5:30 PM. They are not informed of which church will shelter them until after that time. Host churches change daily, so no-one is sheltered in the same facility for two consecutive nights.

There are generally two or three churches used as shelters each night. Families are given priority for bed space, followed by single women and then single men. This effectively means that one any given night a host church will accommodate a combination of families, single women and men. Families who know each other through the IFTC or the CUPS family resource centre program may not necessarily be assigned to the same church on any given evening. Additionally, children are housed with single men and women – a situation that other shelters such as the Drop-In Centre avoid.

The churches shelter people in meeting halls and basements, usually in a communal area, resulting in a lack of privacy for parents and children. Some

women also report unease in sleeping with single homeless men in the same room, and are unable to sleep as a result. The opportunity for privacy was the second most important reason why participants appreciated the Westgate. Several persons commented on how good it was to sleep in the same bed night after night, door closed and not disturbed by strangers.

For logistical reasons, guests who stay at an IFTC church are required to rise and be ready to leave the shelter by 6:30 AM. They are brought to the downtown area by bus and most families make their way to the Family Resource Centre at CUPS which opens early to accommodate them. This poses a hardship for parents with very young children, sick children, and school-aged children who must rise several hours before school time and relocate to CUPS before going to class. While the Westgate also required families to be out of the premises between 9 AM and 2 PM, this was not perceived by most as burdensome – except when a child was seriously ill. Families appreciated being to return early enough for little children to have an afternoon nap. However, there were several families whose children were quite ill and who were upset at having to leave the Westgate during the day. Also, the women were pregnant sometimes found it tiresome to be on the go all day.

The availability of bathing and laundry facilities were also cited as important features of the Westgate program. Since not all churches had bathing facilities with bathtubs (and it is difficult to shower a toddler), parents were grateful for this convenience. They also did not have to worry about keeping all of their possessions, including dirty laundry, with them all day.

Many families also expressed appreciation for the on-site services provided. The evening recreation program was singled out as an important activity for children, and offered a welcome respite for parents. Weekend activities were also hailed as a way to allow parents and children to enjoy leisure time activities – a rare treat for most, and an important part of acquiring new parenting skills.

Most of the negative feedback arose from interpersonal relationships among the residents and, to a lesser degree, the staff. This element had not

been taken into account in the organization and staffing arrangements for program operation. According to most of the families of those first housed, the Westgate had been presented as “another Inn” (IFTC), except that families would not have to move each night, and would have their own rooms. This explanation failed to take into account the elements of interpersonal and group dynamics that occur when people spend significant amounts of time in the same living space. Apart from the individual rooms, the front lobby area of the motel had been designated as a “sitting room” and was equipped with a TV. An adjacent room, also with a TV, had been converted into a play area for little children. There were no TV’s in the bedrooms. This became a logical gathering place for many people in the afternoons and evenings. Here relationships were formed, issues discussed, and “gossip” passed on. The families quickly established beginning relationships.

However, the families had arrived at the Westgate with a variety of personal and interpersonal problems to contend with. Some had difficult partner relationships, and some had recently left an abusive relationship. Some had also recently experienced trauma and/or abuse. Many had recently arrived in Calgary and had little or no local support network. Many had worn out their welcome with family and friends, and many came from strife-ridden families. They also came bearing the stress of life as a homeless family – nowhere to establish stability, no privacy, no opportunity for marital intimacy, no relief for constant child care, and generally no social support system. This resulted in many positive, and some negative interactions among residents.

As it was not clear to families that there would be significant interpersonal differences at the Westgate from normal IFTC shelters, likewise staff hired for the project were unaware of, and unprepared to deal, with these dynamics. None had training in group or family dynamics, and supervision was limited to brief contact as people were changing shifts.

Senior administrative staff were initially concerned that the extensive media coverage the generated about the Westgate project would act as a deterrent to families in need of housing. The media, television, radio and

newspapers had published numerous accounts of the project and its opening in a highly visible location on a major commuter route. Thus there was understandable fear that family anonymity would be compromised. Adult residents, however, did not report this as a major issue. They did comment that some of the children were identified at school as living at the Westgate. Classmates knew of it as a homeless program and this resulted in some humiliation for these children.

The Housing Experience:

Staff Views

Both direct services and administrative staff were interviewed as part of this evaluation. Their perceptions and experiences were markedly similar about some aspects of the project, and markedly different on others. The differing views sometimes made it difficult to deliver consistent, focussed messages about the program and its operation to families housed there.

All front-line staff at the Westgate noted that there had been inadequate time to set up the Westgate facility, establish operating guidelines, and provide staff training before the families arrived. Since the program manager, as supervisor, worked during the day, and the rest of the staff evenings and nights, there was little opportunity to debrief recent events and problem-solve potentially difficult situations.

As is the case with any new venture, not all issues could be anticipated in advance. So often procedures needed to be developed as issues emerged. Staff were not certain of the chain of command, but generally felt that operating procedures had to be approved by IFTC administration, or they could be overturned. They were also unclear as to the exact role occupied by senior administration from Aspen Family and Community Network Society and could not describe the chain of command of the Westgate project. They also felt that families could bypass on-duty staff and go directly to IFTC administrative staff for

procedural and operational direction. This frequently left front-line staff feeling unempowered and unsupported. The results were low morale and feelings of isolation for the staff.

The lack of a clear vision of the nature of the Westgate project also created confusion. The Westgate was initially described as a variation of the IFTC shelters in that families would not be forced to move each day. The Westgate was termed an emergency shelter program. However, the nature of the housing arrangements created a community of homeless families with individual and group issues. It quickly became evident that some families lacked basic household management and parenting skills. However, the structure of the program did not allow for activities of staff and residents together that would assist residents in acquiring these skills. Additionally, staff were not prepared to deal with the myriad of interpersonal issues that arose. These issues were frequently seen as isolated events, rather than part of a larger host of factors.

With the termination of two front-line staff early in the project, and the lack of replacement staff, the remaining facilitators were often overwhelmed by being the sole person on duty with twenty families (over 60 individuals). This meant that facilitators had time for little other than handling routine requests, dealing with conflicts among families and handling the occasional medical emergency. While additional relief staff, seconded from Aspen Family and Community Network Society programs, were deployed to the Westgate in the latter weeks of the project, this provided temporary assistance rather than regular adequate staffing.

Despite the stress created by inadequate staffing, the facilitators spoke of the Westgate as a rewarding and challenging experience. They also acknowledged that the program had evolved into more than mere shelter for homeless families. They recommended that any future initiative of this type include staffing with professionally trained persons, at least one of whom was a counsellor who could help families and individuals to deal with the inevitable issues that arise in such a setting.

Evaluator Observations

Although there is a small, but growing body of research on homeless families, and there is frequent reference to “emergency” and “transitional” shelter programs, most studies do not describe the physical organisation of the shelter program, or whether support services are available onsite, by referral, or not at all. These operational differences make an enormous difference in the type and quality of the experience that sheltered families have ².

Many family shelters are specifically targeted to serve victims of domestic violence and their children.³ In Calgary these programs have a maximum length of stay of 28 days, which is generally insufficient time for many women with young children to reorganize their lives. Such shelters often exclude adolescent male children, and do not offer shelter to male victims of domestic violence. They usually consist of a “group home” style atmosphere with residents occupying individual rooms and sharing common space. Guests are often discouraged or not allowed.⁴

Other types of family shelter programs found in other localities include “welfare hotels” and “welfare motels” where families are housed in separate rooms, but no common eating and social areas exist. In Great Britain a variation of this arrangement is provided by “welfare style” bed and breakfast facilities.⁵ They also lack common social space and dining facilities for evening meals.

The Westgate housing project does not neatly fit into the models described above. It had no limitations on family size, restrictions on family members, exclusion of adolescent or adult males, or whether the family was headed by single or two parents. It provided motel-style sleeping accommodations, but had a common social area for adults, a common dining room for breakfast and dinner, a recreation area for supervised evening activities, and outdoor space for recreation when weather permitted. The social area was in the original front lobby of the motel, and was thus also the place to catch people coming in and going out of the facility. A single telephone was available for resident use and so had to be shared by all. Guests were welcome to visit,

and could with advance notice stay for dinner, but could not go to residents bedrooms.

Alcohol was not allowed on premises, nor were residents permitted to stay in the facility if they had been drinking, or suspected of being under the influence of illegal substances. However, residents did not lose their housing if they were “under the influence”. Instead they were invited to spend the night in another shelter that would allow them to “sober up”. In reality, most residents did not use any substances during their stay, and in the few instances where a person had been drinking, the parent was one of two adults in the family unit, and could thus spend the night elsewhere without endangering the supervision of his/her children. This tolerance of modest and infrequent alcohol consumption was a normalizing experience for people who were otherwise under strict and restrictive program rules in other shelters.

The availability of common dining, recreation and social space made it possible for the Westgate to evolve from mere shelter to active therapeutic community. The evolution took place during the period of time that the program was being evaluated, and thus provided an enriched experience in the needs of these homeless families that extended beyond the simple provision of “a cot and a hot” (street lingo for a bed and a meal). This development also helped line staff and administrators to appreciate the importance of social interactions, supportive relationships and group dynamics in helping families to re-established themselves in regular housing.

As the Westgate project moved towards its predetermined closing date families started to obtain housing and began to move out. However, in many cases they voiced a reluctance to leave what was perceived as the support and safety of the motel community. Many continued to return to visit those still awaiting housing, and provide support for these remaining families. And in the final days before the permanent closure of the facility many people expressed sadness at the dissolution of the Westgate community. Especially poignant was the reaction of several of the adolescents who had changed from rebellious (angry at their situation) teenagers into helpful young people, quick to provide a

bit of supervision for the younger children when parents were trying to tend to re-housing details.

Beyond interpersonal support some families became involved with teaching arts and crafts to both children and other adults. Some provided parenting role models for others, and some became active in arranging for traditional aboriginal healing ceremonies. One of the adolescents became a volunteer with the evening City Parks and Recreation program. All of these activities empowered the participants and enhanced their self-esteem. These are important features of the project since prior to the Westgate housing project many families had experienced a succession of failures and dependencies. Now they could give something back to the community.

Recommendations

The following are preliminary recommendations based on a review of resident and staff interviews, conversations with senior administrative personnel and evaluator observations. All persons interviewed were invited to offer suggestions for the improvement of the program should a facility such as the Westgate be available for homeless families in the future. Their comments reflect a recognition that the Westgate project evolved into something much greater than emergency shelter in which families did not have to relocate on a nightly basis.

All of those interviewed strongly agreed that a similar housing opportunity needs to be available to homeless families. The universal concern was with nightly stability, especially for children, privacy for the families and for adult partners, and safety for the family unit.

The feedback provides some important lessons about the prevalent issues in this type of facility. A more detailed analysis of the frequency with which these recommendations were mentioned will be presented in the final report.

Recommendations: the families

Most of the recommendations from the families focussed on specific operational issues at the Westgate. They are summarized below and will be more completely detailed in the final report.

1. There should be flexibility with regard to having to be out of the facility during the day. While in many cases this is helpful in mobilizing people to deal with their situation, it poses a hardship for families with young children who are ill, and for expectant mothers who may require extra rest.

2. Adults should be involved with meal preparation and cleanup. This fosters a greater sense of communal responsibility, and can be used as a training vehicle for food and nutrition skills.
3. Likewise, adults should be more involved and responsible for facility maintenance (basic cleanup).
4. Residents who have an income should pay a portion of their income for their accommodation. This money can be held for them to help establish a security deposit fund for their use in obtaining housing.
5. Some parents, especially single parents, need occasional childcare so they can attend to business issues and have some time to themselves.
6. Staff should be available to help residents address parenting issues and develop more effective parenting skills. This should be a supplement to skills learned at day programs such as The Other 12 Hours.
7. Program rules and expectations should be clearly articulated and consequences of failure to comply should be concrete and enforced.

Recommendations: the staff

Staff recommendations included those mentioned by residents, but also extended into more formal operational issues.

1. Operational guidelines, rules and protocol should be clearly established before the program opens.
2. Staff should be trained in, and experienced in residential care, counselling and family dynamics.
3. There should be adequate time for staff recruitment and training before the facility is open.
4. All shifts should have a minimum of two staff.
5. One staff person per shift should be a counsellor trained in individual, group and family issues.

6. Lines of authority and responsibility should be clearly established and conveyed to all staff and residents.
7. Staff should be trained and expected to model household management skills and parenting skills.
8. Staff should be prepared to work along side residents in developing skills (cooking, cleaning, money management, parenting) in areas where there are deficiencies.
9. In order to protect the privacy of the families, the program should carefully determine what media coverage is in the best interests of all stakeholders.

Recommendations: Administrative

Establishment of a joint venture by two (or more) organizations requires the development of a working relationship and the clarification of roles and responsibilities. The IFTC and Aspen Family and Community Network Society moved to work together on a project of timely value and immense benefit to the community with little time to prepare. Their efforts have been massive, and they should be highly applauded.

Future endeavours should include an initial preparation period where program logistics and issues of accountability and authority can be clarified for all participants. This preparation should include mutually agreed-on hiring policies and practices.

The provision of housing does not address all of the needs of homeless families. Support services, including parenting, partner and life skills training are needed by many (but not all). Some parents need substance abuse treatment services to maintain sobriety established while at the shelter. Most families need budgeting and financial management training. Some require assistance in obtaining other entitlements such as AISH and Native Status identification. Finally many families need the support network that family and friends can provide. Future endeavours to house homeless families should include the formal

provision of services in an individualized plan suited to each family's circumstances.

Recommendations: The Evaluator

Although a final analysis of all of the data gathered from this evaluation remains to be done, the main conclusions stand out by virtue of their near universal acknowledgement by all who were involved in this project. While The Inn From The Cold has provided shelter for over 500 homeless families since it was established seven years ago, the Westgate housing project, without question, served a vital need in the provision of shelter to **some** of these homeless families. The stability of staying in one consistent place while working on obtaining permanent housing was the universally acknowledged, most important feature of this project. Most profoundly impacted were the children who had previously led disrupted lives characterized by sleeping in different locations each night of the week.⁶ However, with the housing of 21 families the broader issue of sheltering other homeless families has not been solved.

A program similar to the one the Westgate provided is urgently needed in the City of Calgary. However, it should be established with careful planning around its mission, organizational structure, staffing pattern, and service delivery, both on-site and through partner agencies. A critical component is the provision of adequate, qualified staff.

This type of program should acknowledge that homeless families are a diverse group, some with multiple problems, others quite resilient and able to rapidly move to stable housing when offered the opportunity. Time limits on the length of stay for families need to be carefully established, but individualized to meet specific needs. The program should also acknowledge that while the children of these families face a greater than average possibility of coming under the care of the Child Welfare system, all efforts to keep the families intact result

in immediate benefit and financial savings of public funds, and long-term savings in the reduction of system-dependent children and families.

Endnotes

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