

JLC Issue Corner

This is the first in a series of articles touching on some of the social challenges we see every day in a large city like Calgary. The information is not meant to be an exhaustive study on the subject, but over the coming months we'd like to give you some "food for thought" by showing how some of our JLC "Healthy and Active Living" initiatives fit into the bigger picture.

Homelessness in Calgary

You've often heard the old adage "home is where the heart is." To most, a home is a precious place and not something to be taken for granted. It's where our family is, where our support system originates and can be our soft place to land when we've had a bad day. But what if you didn't have a home, or a consistent place to call your own? What if your "soft place to land" was a cold park bench or a lonely corner under a city bridge? Every night in Calgary, over 3,400 people stay in shelters, under bridges, on the street and in their cars to take shelter from the elements.

The face and demographics of the homeless in Calgary have changed drastically in the last 10 years. Often seen as a tragic by-product of addiction, mental illness and domestic violence, a growing number of homeless are now women and children, youths and seniors. Did you know that about half of the homeless in Calgary are employed?

How did such a prosperous city as Calgary get into this horrifying position? Homelessness, either temporary or chronic, is not a new phenomenon, but an increase in migration to Calgary in the 1990s has seen the homeless situation intensify. Real earnings for those with low incomes have declined. Combine that fact with a growing scarcity of affordable housing and poverty is now the leading cause of homelessness. According to the [Calgary & Region Economic Outlook for 2008 - 2013](#), the total population of the City of Calgary is expected to grow to 1.1 million by 2011, up from 1.04 million in 2008. The dire homeless situation will only get worse if not addressed.

If the social ramification of this neglected portion of our population doesn't tug on the old heart strings, then the financial and economic costs and consequences of not acting are substantial enough to get even the most hardened of politicians' attention. After following 15 chronically homeless people for 18 months, a University of California study estimated that each homeless person consumed \$200,000 worth of public services. This amount far exceeds the cost of public services for an average citizen, but also exceeds the cost of providing affordable housing. If Calgary's current homelessness growth rate is allowed to continue, estimates indicate the number of people homeless on any given night in the next 10 years could reach 15,000 and cumulative spending could be more than \$9 billion.

But homelessness isn't just a numbers game. In addition to poverty, there are other real social issues which need to be addressed. According to Gordon Laird, a renowned journalist, author and media fellow at the Calgary-based [Sheldon Churmir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership](#), "The high cost of homelessness in Canada results from the role of homelessness as a proven multiplier of societal ills: malnutrition, unemployment, addiction, mental illness, family strife and lack of income security are all intensified when an individual or household becomes homeless."

We need to try something new

Currently, there are over 140 different non-profit agencies and government departments providing approximately 2,000 programs and services for the homeless in

Alberta¹. Each program is staffed by educated and dedicated assistance workers who are all working tirelessly to make a difference.

In January 2007, a new community-based initiative was launched called the [Calgary Committee to End Homelessness](#) and, like its name indicates, its goal is to end homelessness, not *manage* homelessness, but to eradicate it in 10 years. The premise of the plan is based on a bold and innovative campaign called [Housing First](#) which recognizes housing as a basic human right which should not be denied to anyone regardless of circumstances. Started in New York City, **Housing First** has been successfully implemented in a number of US cities to date. Calgary is the second Canadian city to adopt this plan.

*But how does the plan work? The rapid re-housing **Housing First** operating philosophy puts the highest priority on moving homeless people into permanent housing, not temporary shelters, with the support needed to sustain that housing regardless of any possible problems. Wait a minute ... this is contrary to what has been done in the past!*

*Oftentimes the homeless who may suffer from addiction or mental illness are told that if their situation improves, they can have housing. But their situation can't improve until they have housing. Homeless people are sometimes made to feel that they have to "earn" permanent housing. According to the "[Beyond Shelter](#)" web site and the **Housing First** initiative in Los Angeles, "the methodology is premised on the belief that vulnerable and at-risk homeless families are more responsive to interventions and social services support *after they are in their own housing*, rather than while living in temporary/transitional facilities or housing programs."*

Progress to date has been significant and seems to be on track. To name just a few milestones, within the first year, 100 chronically homeless Calgarians will be moved into permanent housing; the Alberta Solicitor General will launch a pilot project to re-house 50 previously homeless people about to be discharged from provincial corrections facilities and a case management pilot project to move 125 people out of shelters and into permanent housing will begin. In addition, 100 treatment beds for people experiencing mental illness and/or addictions will be under development, and 50 women or families in crisis will be moved from emergency or transitional shelter into housing with support.

How can you help?

*The Junior League of Calgary is pleased and proud to be a part of assisting a new local program, **Brenda's House**, which is under the umbrella of the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness. The JLC is organizing two DIADs at Brenda's House on 24 October from 10:00am - 11:30am and 3 November from 6:00pm to 7:30pm. If you'd like to join the team, please contact Louise Newburry (Louise.Newburry@Investorsgroup.com) for more information.*

*Started in 2009, **Brenda's House** is a family centre that welcomes families with children to come and live while receiving support in reaching their goal of moving into their own home. Currently they are located in the old Ronald McDonald House. The [Children's Cottage Society](#) is managing this program. They have partnered with The Brenda Strafford Foundation, CUPS Health Education Centres, Aspen, NeighbourLink, The Distress Centre and the Calgary Homeless Foundation.*

Brenda's House offers 14 private family rooms with bathrooms, childcare programs, meals, access to a housing locator and furnishings as well as counseling and referrals

to community resources. Brenda's House works to support families to secure new housing as quickly as possible, while ensuring that supports are in place to help each family successfully retain their housing while meeting their other goals for health, well-being and development.

It is difficult to know how to conclude this article as homelessness still exists in Calgary. However, it's encouraging and warming to know that we are watching plans to eradicate the situation unfold before our eyes. Within the Junior League of Calgary, we are following with great interest, support and enthusiasm the progress and successes of the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness. It makes sense, it works and it is certainly where our heart is.

Catharine Newton-Wowryk

Information sources for this article include: "Calgary's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness", Calgary Committee to End Homelessness, Jan. 2008, P. 3; *Ibid*, p. 8; *Ibid*, p. 14-15 and "Strong Voices Together - September" Newsletter, Governors for Children, September 14, 2009

Homelessness in Calgary by the Numbers:

l 3,400 Calgarians stay in shelters, under bridges, on the streets or in their cars every night.

l 145 families with Children will sleep in a homeless shelter on any given night in Calgary.

l 58,000 families are "one paycheque away" from homelessness.

l Homeless children are twice as likely to be sick, go hungry and have a learning disability as non-homeless children.

l Homelessness in Calgary has risen by 680% in the last decade.

l 1200 Calgarians have been homeless for over a year, 400 for over 5 years.

l Approximately one half of the homeless have jobs.

l Calgary has over 140 different non-profit agencies and government departments providing

