
Ending Family Homelessness Symposium: Final Project Report

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Disclaimer

The research and recommendations are the responsibility of the authors of the report and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Homelessness Partnering Secretariat, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC).

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Executive Summary

(le français suit)

Context and Objectives

Family homelessness is a growing phenomenon in Ontario, but to date, there has been little Canadian research to identify its causes, effects, and solutions, or to describe the diversity of the populations affected by it. Organizations working with homeless families may be found across the province, but they have limited opportunities to exchange knowledge, identify solutions, and take action together. Because family homelessness is so often “hidden,” families experiencing homelessness may not come into contact with services focused on homelessness.

This project proposed to develop and deliver a two-day Symposium on Family Homelessness, with a focus on Ontario’s Golden Horseshoe. The project’s objectives included:

- To bring together the various groups, agencies and individuals who often work apart from each other, and lack sufficient opportunities share research, policy options and effective practices.
- To help facilitate information exchange, increase awareness, and mobilize action around the prevention and reduction of family homelessness.
- To offer a program designed by and for a partnership of research groups in the community, community-based organizations and social agencies, relevant government departments at all three levels, and university researchers.

These objectives were realized through the Ending Family Homelessness Symposium held November 6 and 7, 2008 at University of Toronto. Participants invited to the Symposium included representatives of Aboriginal organizations, family shelters, housing help centres, grassroots self-advocacy groups, immigrant serving agencies, health organizations, municipal social services departments, family violence organizations, legal clinics, provincial government ministries, and federal programs, as well as individuals with lived experience of homelessness, from every region in Ontario’s Golden Horseshoe. More than 100 people attended from a wide range of sectors and regions.

Methodology

The Symposium content and program were informed by extensive consultations with stakeholders, including key informants working with family homelessness throughout Southern Ontario, an Advisory Committee of Toronto agencies, and an Advisory Group of mothers who have experienced homelessness. These consultations revealed that stakeholders did not want to attend an event if it would be “just more talk.” Accordingly, the Symposium program focused on innovative solutions, sharing knowledge, making connections, and planning action.

Invitations were sent to organizations and individuals across Southern Ontario from a wide range of sectors, with particular attention to substantive representation of persons with lived experience of

homelessness, Aboriginal organizations, and organizations serving immigrants and refugees. Many of the organizations invited work with families who are experiencing “hidden” homelessness or at high risk of homelessness, thereby providing a broader picture of the nature and extent of family homelessness.

The Symposium partnered with two other events: *homeless2home*, a knowledge exchange on homelessness and housing; and *Home Safe Calgary*, a feature documentary on homelessness. Both events offered Symposium participants additional opportunities for learning and dialogue.

The leadership and representation of people who have experienced homelessness were promoted throughout the Symposium. Opening and closing plenaries featured panelists with both lived and professional expertise, who shared innovative solutions. Breakout sessions focused on specific policy and practice areas, with an emphasis on change. Instead of featuring presentations by “experts,” these sessions were co-convened by invited Symposium participants, and allowed for active dialogue among all members.

Key Findings

Plenaries and breakout sessions yielded perspectives and recommendations on a range of policy areas implicated in family homelessness, including Human Rights, Income Supports, Housing, Child Welfare, Immigration, and Violence Against Women. Other sessions provided practical information on Arts Approaches, Improving Shelter Services, Participatory Research, Aboriginal Responses, and Self-Advocacy.

Several cross-cutting themes emerged throughout the plenaries and breakout sessions:

First, participants emphasized the **importance of respecting and including people who have been homeless** in all responses to family homelessness. All too often, the expertise of people who have been homeless goes unrecognized. This exclusion goes hand in hand with the pervasive disrespect and stereotyping homeless people often experience in services, government policies, everyday interactions, and mainstream media. Discriminatory treatment of people who are homeless is unacceptable and must be challenged at all levels.

Secondly, **adequate incomes and affordable decent housing are necessary prerequisites for ending family homelessness**. Inadequate income support programs, low wages, precarious employment, lack of access to childcare, high rents, and poor housing conditions condemn many families to visible and hidden homelessness, and make it very difficult to re-establish stable housing. These factors also place many mothers in the impossible dilemma of choosing between abuse and homelessness.

Thirdly, **insufficient funding has a negative impact on all policy and practice areas**, and the costs of these impacts are high. **Provincial and federal investments are urgently needed** in all sectors: most importantly, income supports and housing, but also family violence and homelessness services, child protection, immigrant serving agencies and Aboriginal organizations. Without sufficient funding, organizations are struggling to keep up with their basic roles, and lack the extra energy required to improve services, engage and include clients, partner and network across sectors, and develop innovative solutions.

Fourthly, **program rules and structures often get in the way instead of helping families.** The regulations and procedures of income support programs, immigration, child protection services, and shelters, for example, can be contradictory and frustrating, making it more difficult for people to negotiate difficult situations. These regulations and structures must be reviewed with input from the people they are intended to serve.

Finally, **housing and services for Aboriginal communities both on and off reserve must be under Aboriginal control.** Governments must honour treaties and agreements with First Nations, and fulfill obligations to Aboriginal people living in urban areas, in order to address the high rate of Aboriginal homelessness.

Conclusions, Dissemination and Follow-Up

Overall, participants who completed evaluations agreed that the day contributed to addressing the systemic causes of homelessness, and that they acquired new ideas to improve their work on this issue. There was also agreement that the event promoted dialogue across sectors and constituencies. Participants emphasized that the findings of the day need to be brought to the attention of policy makers.

Complete summaries of all plenaries and sessions will be disseminated through the Homeless Hub at www.homelesshub.ca when it re-launches in April 2009. With its new networking capabilities, the Ending Family Homelessness Network on the Homeless Hub will offer Symposium participants and others the opportunity to read the proceedings of the Symposium, view and respond to comments, post their own related reports, create links to other relevant literature and websites, network with other participants, and plan future activities together.

Sommaire exécutif

Contexte et objectifs

L'itinérance des familles est un phénomène qui prend de l'ampleur en Ontario mais, à ce jour, peu de recherches ont été faites au Canada pour en identifier les causes et les incidences, y trouver des solutions ou décrire la diversité des populations affectées. On trouve dans toute la province des organisations qui travaillent avec les familles sans abri, mais elles n'ont que peu d'occasions de mettre leurs connaissances en commun et conjuguer leurs efforts pour cerner des solutions et prendre des mesures. Du fait que l'itinérance des familles est souvent « cachée », les familles concernées n'entrent pas toujours en contact avec des services consacrés à l'itinérance.

Le présent projet avait pour objet de préparer et présenter un Symposium de deux jours sur l'itinérance des familles, en particulier dans le Golden Horseshoe, en Ontario. Les objectifs du projet étaient les suivants :

- Réunir les différents groupes, organismes et particuliers qui travaillent souvent coupés les uns des autres et n'ont pas assez d'occasions de mettre en commun leurs recherches, les politiques envisageables et les pratiques efficaces.
- Aider à promouvoir l'échange d'information, à sensibiliser les gens et à les mobiliser à passer à intervenir pour prévenir et réduire l'itinérance des familles.
- Offrir un programme conçu par et pour un partenariat de groupes de recherche dans la communauté, d'organismes communautaires sociaux et autres, de ministères concernés des trois paliers de gouvernement et de chercheurs universitaires.

Ces objectifs ont été atteints avec le Symposium Ending Family Homelessness (Mettre un terme à l'itinérance des familles) qui a eu lieu les 6 et 7 novembre 2008 à l'Université de Toronto. Étaient entre autres invités à participer au Symposium des représentants d'organisations autochtones, de refuges pour les familles, de centres d'aide pour le logement, de groupes communautaires pour l'autonomie sociale, de services d'entraide et d'organismes d'aide aux immigrants, d'organisations de santé, de services sociaux municipaux, de cliniques d'aide juridique, de ministères du gouvernement provincial et de programmes fédéraux, ainsi que des personnes ayant l'expérience de l'itinérance et provenant de toutes les régions du Golden Horseshoe en Ontario. Plus de 100 personnes ont participé, de nombreux secteurs et régions.

Méthodologie

Le contenu et l'organisation du Symposium ont été déterminés suite à des consultations poussées avec les parties concernées, y compris des répondants clés travaillant dans le domaine de l'itinérance des familles dans tout le Sud de l'Ontario, un comité consultatif d'organismes de Toronto et un groupe consultatif de mères de famille ayant fait l'expérience de l'itinérance. Il est ressorti de ces consultations que cela n'intéressait pas les parties concernées de participer à un Symposium qui ne serait que

« vaines paroles ». Le programme du Symposium a donc été axé sur les solutions novatrices, le partage des connaissances et la planification de mesures concrètes.

Des invitations ont été envoyées aux organisations et aux particuliers du Sud de l'Ontario dans un vaste éventail de secteurs, en veillant tout particulièrement à ce que soient bien représentés les personnes ayant une expérience personnelle de l'itinérance, les organisations autochtones et les organismes de service et d'aide aux immigrants et aux réfugiés. Beaucoup des organisations invitées travaillent avec des familles qui connaissent l'itinérance « cachée » ou sont à risque de se retrouver sans abri, ce qui a permis d'avoir un tableau plus complet de la nature et de l'étendue de l'itinérance.

Le Symposium a été organisé en partenariat avec deux autres manifestations : *homeless2home*, un échange de connaissances sur l'itinérance et le logement, et *Home Safe Calgary*, un film documentaire sur l'itinérance. Ces deux activités ont offert aux participants d'autres occasions d'apprentissage et de dialogue

Tout au long du Symposium, on a promu le leadership et la représentation des personnes ayant fait l'expérience de l'itinérance. Participaient aux tribunes d'experts des séances plénières d'ouverture et de clôture des experts ayant une expérience personnelle ou professionnelle de la question, qui ont parlé des solutions novatrices qu'ils connaissaient. Dans les séances de travail en groupes, l'accent a été mis sur le changement, dans des domaines spécifiques des politiques et des pratiques. Au lieu d'être des exposés présentés par des « experts », ces séances étaient animées conjointement par des participants au Symposium et elles ont permis un dialogue entre toutes les personnes présentes.

Principales conclusions

Il est ressorti des séances plénières et des séances de travail en groupes un certain nombre de points de vue et de recommandations au sujet de divers domaines des politiques en rapport avec l'itinérance des familles, y compris les droits de la personne, les soutiens du revenu, le logement, la protection de l'enfance, l'immigration et la violence contre les femmes. D'autres séances ont fourni des renseignements pratiques sur les approches passant par l'art, l'amélioration des services offerts par les refuges, la recherche participative, les solutions autochtones et l'autonomie sociale.

Plusieurs thèmes transversaux se sont dégagés lors des séances plénières et des séances de travail en groupes :

Premièrement, les participants ont souligné **l'importance de respecter et d'inclure les personnes qui ont fait l'expérience de l'itinérance** dans toutes les réponses à l'itinérance des familles. Trop souvent, l'expérience des gens qui ont été sans abri n'est pas reconnue. Cette exclusion va de pair avec le manque général de respect pour les sans abris et les stéréotypes à leur sujet, trop fréquents dans les services, les politiques gouvernementales, les interactions au jour le jour et les médias grand public. La discrimination contre les personnes qui sont sans abri est inacceptable et doit être combattue à tous les niveaux.

Deuxièmement, **des revenus corrects et des logements décents et abordables sont des conditions nécessaires si l'on veut mettre un terme à l'itinérance des familles**. L'insuffisance des programmes de

soutien au revenu, la faiblesse des salaires, la précarité des emplois, l'inaccessibilité des services de garde d'enfants, le prix élevé des loyers et l'inadéquation des conditions de logement condamnent de nombreuses familles à l'itinérance, visible ou cachée, et font qu'il leur est très difficile de retrouver un logement stable. Ces facteurs mettent par ailleurs de nombreuses mères face à l'impossible dilemme de devoir choisir entre être victime de violence et être sans abri.

Troisièmement, **l'insuffisance du financement a une incidence négative sur tous les domaines des politiques et des pratiques** et le coût de ces impacts est élevé. **Il faut de toute urgence des investissements provinciaux et fédéraux** dans tous les secteurs, en priorité dans le domaine des soutiens du revenu et du logement, mais aussi dans les services pour la violence familiale et l'itinérance, la protection de l'enfance, les organismes d'aide aux immigrants et les organisations autochtones. Lorsqu'elles n'ont pas un financement suffisant, les organisations ont du mal à s'acquitter de leurs rôles de base et n'ont pas le surcroît d'énergie nécessaire pour améliorer leurs services, éveiller l'intérêt de leurs clients, leurs partenaires et leurs réseaux dans tous les secteurs, et les faire participer et concevoir des solutions novatrices.

Quatrièmement, **les règles et les structures des programmes compliquent souvent l'aide aux familles**. Les réglementations et les formalités pour les programmes de soutien du revenu, l'immigration, les services de protection de l'enfance et les refuges, pour ne citer que ces exemples, sont souvent contradictoires et frustrantes, compliquant la tâche de ceux qui doivent se sortir des situations difficiles. Ces règles et ces structures doivent être revues à la lumière des commentaires des personnes que l'on cherche à servir par leur entremise.

Pour finir, **les logements et les services pour les collectivités autochtones doivent être sous contrôle autochtone**. Les gouvernements doivent respecter les traités et les accords avec les Premières nations et s'acquitter de leurs obligations envers les Autochtones vivant en milieu urbain afin de tenter de remédier aux taux d'itinérance élevés chez les Autochtones.

Conclusions, diffusion et suivi

Dans l'ensemble, les participants qui ont rempli les évaluations se sont entendus pour dire que la journée avait aidé à identifier les causes systémiques de l'itinérance et qu'elle leur avait donné de nouvelles idées pour améliorer leur travail sur la question. Ils ont aussi estimé que le Symposium avait favorisé le dialogue entre les différents secteurs et paliers de gouvernement. Ils ont insisté sur la nécessité de porter les conclusions du Symposium à l'attention des responsables de l'élaboration des politiques.

Des résumés complets de toutes les séances plénières et des séances de travail en groupes seront fournis sur le Homeless Hub à www.homelesshub.ca lorsque celui-ci sera relancé en avril 2009. Avec ses nouvelles capacités de réseautage, sur le Homeless Hub, le Ending Family Homelessness Network permettra aux participants et aux autres de lire le compte rendu du Symposium, de voir les commentaires et d'y répondre, d'afficher leurs rapports sur le sujet, de créer des liens vers d'autres documents et sites Web d'intérêt, de communiquer avec les autres participants et de planifier des activités futures avec eux.

Section 1: Introduction

1.1 Ending Family Homelessness

This project proposed to develop and deliver a two-day Symposium on Family Homelessness, with a focus on Ontario's Golden Horseshoe. The project's goals included:

- To bring together the various groups, agencies and individuals who often work apart from each other, and lack sufficient opportunities share research, policy options and effective practices.
- To help widely disseminate research, information and experience beyond the organization or the individual networks in which they were created to communities, service providers, researchers, policy makers, volunteer organizations and the private sector.
- To encourage various stakeholders to identify best practices and knowledge gaps to help inform policy options and future research.
- To help facilitate information exchange, increase awareness, and mobilize action around the prevention and reduction of family homelessness.
- To offer a program designed by and for a partnership of research groups in the community, community-based organizations and social agencies, relevant government departments at all three levels, and university researchers.

These objectives were realized through the Ending Family Homelessness Symposium held November 6 and 7, 2008. Participants invited to the Symposium included representatives of Aboriginal organizations, family shelters, housing help centres, grassroots self-advocacy groups, immigrant serving agencies, health organizations, municipal social services departments, family violence organizations, legal clinics, and provincial government ministries, as well as individuals with lived experience of homelessness, from every region in Ontario's Golden Horseshoe. More than 100 people attended from a wide range of sectors and regions.

1.2 Literature Review

Family homelessness is a growing phenomenon in Ontario, but to date, there has been little Canadian research to identify its causes, effects, and solutions, or to describe the diversity of the populations affected by it. Agencies serving homeless families may now be found across the country, but service providers have limited opportunities to exchange knowledge and identify best practices.

A hidden phenomenon

The homeless population in Canada has recently been estimated to be 150,000 individuals (Laird, 2007). However, for a number of reasons, families are undercounted in this number. Counts of family

homelessness can only be approximated through reports on stays in family shelters (Kauppi, 2003), but many rural and northern jurisdictions lack shelters for homeless families altogether. Ontario research has noted that, even where shelters are available, many homeless parents will live temporarily in the homes of family members or friends, or look for any other alternative, before entering a shelter with their children (Callaghan, 1999). As a result, family homelessness is especially likely to be “hidden,” with many families living in vehicles, couch-surfing, remaining in or returning to family violence, or residing in housing that is substandard or dangerous. U.S. research shows that families in a housing crisis also may separate, with parents staying in shelters for “single” adults, while children are housed with family members or placed in foster care (Culhane et al, 2007).

In addition, most counts of homelessness among families exclude women with children who are housed in emergency shelters for women fleeing domestic violence. On one day in 2004, there were more than 6000 women and children in these shelters across Canada (Statistics Canada, 2005). Finally, families in YMCA or YWCA facilities, or the many families housed temporarily in motels in city and rural areas - because of the overflow of family shelter capacity, the non-existence of family shelters in rural communities, or the presence of a male child over a certain age (Wingward, McCormack & Neigh, 2003) – were excluded from the census count of homeless individuals in 2001 (Yourk, 2002; Bailey, 2002).

With the exception of some recent studies focused on family homelessness (Aubry, Klodawsky, Nemiroff, Birnie, & Bonetta, 2007; Decter, 2007; Hulchanski, Novac, Murdie & Paradis, 2007), much of the information available on family homelessness is embedded in regional reports on homelessness, or in studies that focus on homelessness and housing among women, Aboriginal people, immigrants and refugees, racialized groups, and other specific populations. The only information readily available for many Ontario regions comes from the Community Plans prepared at the outset of the Supporting Communities Partnerships Initiative (SCPI) in 1998. There is a need for more current information.

Family homelessness is a problem across Ontario

Family homelessness is defined in different ways. Most studies define a homeless family as homeless adult(s) accompanied by one or more children (City of Toronto, 2003; Alliance to End Homelessness, Ottawa, 2005), but in some cases couples without children are included in counts of homeless families. The majority of homeless families are headed by a lone woman, though some are headed by two parents (Schiff, 2007).

There is extensive documentation to prove that family homelessness has been a problem throughout Ontario for the past decade, and that its incidence is on the increase. In Toronto in 2005, 3 282 families accessed emergency shelter or emergency housing supports through Central Family Intake. Of the 32 700 people using emergency shelters in Toronto in 2003, 4 600 (14%) were children (City of Toronto, 2006 June). During the 1990s, families with children were the fastest-growing group of shelter users in Toronto (Decter, 2007). Though the number of families in Toronto shelters declined after 2001 following changes to immigration laws (ibid.), it has increased by almost 25% in the past year (Shapcott, 2007). Toronto’s social housing wait list stood at 66, 556 households in 2006 (City of Toronto, 2006 June).

In 1999, York Region had four emergency shelters: two were for women, one for men, and one for families. Many women escaping family violence with their children entered into one of the two shelters for women (Crosslinks, 1999). When the family shelter was at capacity, many families were housed temporarily in a local hotel. In 1998, the women's shelters served over 800 women and children, and had to turn away 383 people because there was no available space for them (York Region Homelessness Task Force, 2000).

In Peel Region in 1998, 689 individuals stayed at one of the 15 available units for families (six for homeless families with children, and nine for women and children escaping family violence). When these beds were full, families were sent to an Inn used by the Family Life Resource Centre in Brampton. The length of stay tripled from 1997 to 1998, from 595 to 1,670 bed days (Peel Region Task Force on Homelessness, 1999).

In Waterloo Region in 1998, 27 people using emergency shelters were single parents with at least one dependent child, and 17 individuals seeking emergency shelters were part of a two-parent family with at least one child (Dietrich, et. al, 1999).

In 1998, there were 219 admissions of women and children into the emergency domestic violence shelter in Muskoka. The average length of stay was 21 days. As of 1999, there were no emergency shelters in the region for singles, youth, or families. Individuals in Muskoka in need of emergency shelter had to go to Parry Sound where there is a 10 bed facility. This facility admitted 117 women and 75 children in 1998: 32% requiring shelter because of a housing crisis; 43% because of abuse; and 25% for other reasons (including teen pregnancies). In the District of Nipissing, there is a 14 bed emergency shelter for women fleeing abuse, a 19 bed shelter for homeless individuals and families, and 3 Family Resource Centres for women and children, each with a 10 bed capacity (Callaghan, 1999).

In 1998 the number of families being housed in emergency motels by the City of Hamilton was 5; in 1999, it was 95; in 2000, it peaked at 378; and in 2002, it declined to 226. In 2000, 77% of the families housed in motels were single parents with a male child over the age of 12, ineligible to stay in family violence shelters. Between 2000 and 2003, 28 families were housed at a SCPI-funded shelter; 148 accessed emergency motel accommodations and other supports from the Supporting Families in Transition Program; 192 families received support from the Young Parent WRAP for homelessness prevention; 41 received emergency supports from CAS for prevention; and 900 women-headed families received vouchers from the Native Women's Shelter in order to prevent homelessness (Wingward, McCormack, & Neigh, 2003).

In 2005, there were 260 shelter beds for families in Ottawa. There were three family shelters in the city, and during times of overflow, families were sheltered in the YMCA, the YWCA, or in motel rooms. In 2004, 631 families with 1,092 children and 997 adults were sheltered in the City of Ottawa. The average length of stay for families was 45 days, which is much longer than that for individuals. There are 5000 families on Ottawa's Social Housing Waiting List (Alliance to End Homelessness, 2005). In 1998, 375 families were sheltered in the region of Ottawa-Carleton (Rooney, 1999).

Family violence causes family homelessness

Homelessness among families is related in many and complex ways to violence in the family. Many homeless individuals and families have histories of family violence and the need for emergency shelter (visible and hidden) is often directly preceded by an incident of domestic violence (Canada, 2006). In a study of families in homeless shelters in Toronto, one-third of the families had left their most recent home due to violence by a family member, cohabitant, or landlord; others had left home at some time in the previous two years for this reason (Paradis et al, 2008). In Toronto, family violence is the most common reason for which families seek emergency shelter (City of Toronto, 2006 July). Women and children who have become homeless because of violence and trauma may require different types of housing, security and mental health supports than other homeless populations (Bassuk, 2007). Family violence and homelessness also often interact and intersect with race and immigration, and are often made more difficult because of the differences in provincial and regional resources for homeless families fleeing domestic violence (Canada, 2006; Du Mont and Miller, 2000; YWCA, 2007; McLaren, Marquardt, and Patterson, 2005; Prokop and Sanderson, 2005).

Aboriginal, racialized and immigrant families are at higher risk

Aboriginal women are more likely to live in poverty, be precariously housed, or be at risk of becoming homeless than non-Aboriginal women or Aboriginal men (Miko and Thompson, 2004). Issues of family violence, restricted access to emergency shelters and discrimination in remote communities often compound and reinforce the negative impact of homelessness for Aboriginal women in particular (YWCA, 2007; Prokop and Sanderson, 2005). Individuals that self-identify as Aboriginal are over-represented in many counts of visible homelessness in Canada's cities: they made up 16% of all people captured in the Street Needs Assessment in Toronto (City of Toronto, 2006); and 17% in Ottawa (Alliance to End Homelessness, 2005). Data on family homelessness and Aboriginal identity were not cross-tabulated in these studies, however. One Toronto study reports that up to 10% of families in shelters have First Nations status (Decter, 2007).

Studies in Toronto suggest that racialized groups are more likely than non-racialized groups to be poor, live in substandard housing, face discrimination from landlords, and become homeless (Colour of Poverty Campaign, 2007). Immigrants and refugees are also at high risk of homelessness and hidden homelessness (Access Alliance, 2003). Almost one-quarter of families in Toronto shelters are headed by refugee claimants (Colour of Poverty Campaign).

Studies also suggest that hidden homelessness is prevalent among Aboriginal, racialized, immigrant and refugee communities in Canada's urban centres (Access Alliance, 2003; Chan, 2005; Distasio, Sylvestre & Mulligan, 2005; Fielder, Schuurman & Hyndman, 2006).

The effects of family homelessness on children and parents

Homelessness negatively affects the health, education, and behaviour of children in shelters and these negative effects are often compounded by the occurrence of family violence prior to the

experience of homelessness. Negative effects on the sense of safety, security, self-esteem, behaviour, and school performance, and social skills have been evidenced in children in homeless families (Decter, 2007). Other reports indicate the increased likelihood of experiencing mental health issues, particularly depression and aggression, among homeless children and parents (Karim et al, 2006). The physical effects of homelessness on children can include sleep disorders, slow development in speech and language capacities, and malnutrition (Decter, 2007).

Homelessness among pregnant women is associated with malnutrition, substance abuse, and exposure to violence (Little et al, 2005). In Toronto, 300 babies are born to homeless mothers each year (Ontario Women's Health Council, 2002). A recent Toronto study found that women living in family shelters reported high rates of physical symptoms of stress, and that rates for these symptoms declined once women were housed (Paradis et al, 2008).

Most Canadian research on health impacts of homelessness focuses on adults not accompanied by children, however. Toronto's recent Street Health Report found that people who are homeless have a significantly greater incidence than those in the general population of serious and chronic health problems such as cardiac and respiratory diseases, cancer, epilepsy, and arthritis (Khandor & Mason, 2007). Other common health problems among people who are homeless include malnutrition, sleep deprivation, and diseases of the feet and skin (Ontario Women's Health Council). Homeless individuals often do not have access to health care (Frankish, Hwang, and Quantz, 2003).

The economic cost of family homelessness

A recent analysis suggests that homelessness costs Canada between \$4.5 and \$6 billion dollars per year. It suggests that this high cost results in part from the provision of a range of high-intensity services—such as emergency and inpatient health care, emergency shelters, and keeping children in state care—instead of interventions which cost less, such as supportive and affordable housing. A recent U.S. study concludes that only a small percentage of homeless families require the costly, high-intensity interventions that characterize homelessness services (Culhane et al, 2007). An Ottawa study notes that very different families with diverse needs are grouped together in family shelters; many of these might be more appropriately served in other ways (Klodawsky, 2006).

Section 2: Methodology

2.1 Project Activities

This knowledge exchange and development project comprised a number of activities, all with the goal of sharing knowledge on family homelessness, creating networks of stakeholders, and promoting innovative solutions for the prevention and reduction of family homelessness.

Launch of “Better off in a Shelter?” Report

The Family Homelessness Symposium project emerged from Cities Centre’s recently-completed SSHRC-funded project, “Immigrants, discrimination, and homelessness: A longitudinal study of homeless immigrant families in Toronto.” The study—the first of its kind in Canada—followed 91 mothers in homeless shelters over the course of one year as they coped with homelessness and sought new homes for their families. The study’s results reveal the complex causes and effects of homelessness for families with children, and the ways in which these differ between women who are Canadian-born, immigrant women with status, and migrant women without status.

The study’s final report, *Better Off in a Shelter? A Year of Homelessness and Housing for Status Immigrant, Non-Status Migrant, and Canadian-Born Mothers* was launched July 24, 2008, with a half-day event hosted by YWCA Toronto. More than 80 participants attended from a wide range of sectors, including shelters, immigrant serving agencies, Aboriginal organizations, and advocacy groups from across the Greater Toronto Area. Following a presentation of the study’s findings by Principal Investigator David Hulchanski and the research team, a panel of experts discussed the ramifications of the study. Panelists included Soheila Pashang, Rights of Non-Status Women Network; Bernitta Hawkins, Red Door Shelters; and two of the mothers who had participated in the study. All of the panelists discussed the study’s findings in light of their own professional and personal experiences, and strongly recommended actions to develop concrete, lasting solutions to family homelessness.

People who attended this event were informed of plans for the Symposium, and the attendance list became the foundation for our extensive list of organizations to consult and invite to the Symposium.

Partnerships

The Ending Family Homelessness Symposium partnered with two events in order to extend its resources and attendance: homeless2home, a knowledge exchange event hosted on November 6 by the Institute for Life Course and Aging at University of Toronto (ILCA) and the National Institute for the Care of the Elderly (NICE); and the November 6 Toronto premiere of a feature documentary on family homelessness, *Home Safe Calgary*, produced by SkyWorks Foundation. Among other collaborations,

participants with lived expertise on homelessness conducted a session at homeless2home gathering shelter users' recommendations for improving shelter services, and brought information from this session into the Shelter Provider-Resident Dialogue held at the Ending Family Homelessness Symposium. Likewise, Symposium participants were invited to the reception and premiere of *Home Safe Calgary*, held the evening of November 6. This stimulating evening event provided a perfect setting for informal networking, and raised a number of questions to start the next day's discussions. Two of the film's participant-facilitators were featured on the Symposium's closing panel.

Research on Organizations Working with Homeless Families in Southern Ontario

In preparation for the Symposium, we conducted extensive research to identify agencies, municipal departments, grassroots organizations, and other groups working on issues related to family homelessness throughout the Golden Horseshoe region. An extensive list of hundreds of organizations and individuals was compiled, with representation from a very wide range of sectors, including family violence shelters, legal clinics, settlement services, health centres, municipal social service programs, Aboriginal community organizations, immigrant serving organizations, child protection societies, self-advocacy groups, housing help centres, anti-poverty advocates, and others. Many of these organizations work with families who are experiencing "hidden" homelessness or at high risk of homelessness, thereby providing a broader picture of the nature and extent of family homelessness than possible in consulting only with shelters for homeless families.

Key Informant Interviews and Advisory Meetings

The Symposium program was developed through consultations with an extensive network of organizations and individuals. Key informant interviews were conducted by telephone with experts working within each region of the Golden Horseshoe. These key informants described the nature and scope of family homelessness in their region, proposed topics for the Symposium, and acted as "hub" contacts to facilitate dissemination of Symposium information to members of their communities. Further input on the Symposium was provided by an Advisory Committee made up of Toronto organizations from a range of sectors. (See Appendix A for a listing of Key Informants and Advisory Committee members). Finally, an Advisory Group of people with lived experience of family homelessness were consulted about the Symposium program, location, and content. With the contributions of these three important stakeholder groups, we were confident that the Symposium would address the concerns of all participants.

Ending Family Homelessness Symposium

The Ending Family Homelessness Symposium took place November 6 and 7, 2008.

On the afternoon of November 6, Symposium participants had the opportunity to attend site visits at Robertson House, a family shelter operated by the City of Toronto, or 1001 Sheppard, a new

transitional supportive housing program for young mothers. In addition, the Wellesley Institute offered a workshop called Advocacy 101 which offered practical skills to equip participants to advocate for changes to policies causing family homelessness. On the evening of November 6, participants were invited to attend the premiere screening of *Home Safe Calgary*, which featured an opening reception and a panel discussion with the subjects and creators of the film.

On November 7, from 9am to 5pm, about 100 participants from diverse sectors and regions throughout Southern Ontario gathered at Hart House on University of Toronto's downtown campus, to take part in plenary panels and concurrent sessions exploring policy and practice changes needed to end family homelessness. (See Appendix B for a list of attendees)

Follow-Up and Dissemination

A number of follow-up activities have clarified and extended the results of the Symposium:

- An evaluation form was distributed to all attendees, and a follow-up email invited all participants to provide feedback. Twenty-four evaluations were received.
- Shortly after the Symposium, a focus group was held with some attendees with lived experience of homelessness, in order to assess the accessibility and usefulness of the Symposium for them, and to gather recommendations for continued work in this area.
- Symposium organizers held a follow-up meeting with a representative of Children's Aid Society of Toronto to identify further opportunities for disseminating and implementing recommendations on child protection practice arising from the Symposium.
- The Cities Centre's research and activities on family homelessness were presented in February 2009 at the national conference, *Growing Home: Housing and Homelessness in Canada*.

Complete summaries of all plenary and breakout sessions (see Appendix D) will be disseminated through the newly-designed Homeless Hub website at www.homelesshub.ca, developed by York University and the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN), when it re-launches in April 2009. With its new networking capabilities, the Ending Family Homelessness Network on the Homeless Hub will offer Symposium participants and others the opportunity to read the proceedings of the Symposium, view and respond to comments, post their own related reports, create links to other relevant literature and websites, network with other participants, and plan future activities together.

2.2 Symposium Methodology

Regional and Cross-Sectoral Participation

As noted above, this event aimed to bring together expertise on family homelessness from many different sectors and from regions across Southern Ontario. We believed that this would allow for a range of benefits:

- Building connections between organizations that normally work in isolation;

- Incorporating knowledge about family homelessness within specific constituencies, including Aboriginal and immigrant and refugee communities;
- Representing the range and scope of family homelessness, including hidden homelessness; and
- Bringing new perspectives to discussions of policy and practice.

Representation of People with Lived Expertise on Homelessness

The voices and knowledge of people who have been homeless were central to the Symposium. Lasting solutions to homelessness can only be developed with the input of people who have first-hand experience. Symposium participants with lived expertise included representatives of grassroots self-advocacy organizations, interested individuals, and members / clients of invited agencies.

We ensured equitable representation of persons with lived expertise on homelessness through a number of measures:

- Values of respect, equity, and recognition of lived expertise informed all aspects of the Symposium.
- An Advisory Group of mothers who have experienced homelessness were consulted on the structure and content of the Symposium.
- Grassroots, self-advocacy, and anti-poverty groups were systematically sought out in our research to identify organizations working with homelessness across Southern Ontario.
- Persons with lived experience were invited to take leadership roles at the Symposium, as plenary panellists and breakout session convenors.
- Travel costs were covered for persons with lived experience and representatives of unfunded self-advocacy organizations.
- Honoraria were paid to all Symposium participants who were not paid by their organizations to attend (such as individuals with lived experience, agency members / clients, and representatives of unfunded organizations).
- The structure of the breakout sessions encouraged horizontal knowledge exchange and shared expertise, instead of emphasizing only traditional understandings of “expert” knowledge (see below for more information on the breakout sessions).
- An afternoon breakout session, “Direct Action and Self-Advocacy,” offered a forum for small self-advocacy organizations to network with each other.
- Postings for event staff positions were circulated to networks of persons with lived experience of homelessness and some event staff came with this experience. All staff were welcomed to attend the entire Symposium program of events, and to contribute their expertise in breakout sessions.
- After the Symposium, a focus group was held with Advisory Group members and others with direct experience of homelessness, in order to assess the accessibility and effectiveness of the event for them, and to gather recommendations for future activities.

“Not Just More Talk”: A Focus on Ending Family Homelessness

Throughout our consultations in preparation for the Symposium, we heard one message over and over again: no one wanted to attend an event that would be “just more talk.” Organizations and individuals working on issues of family homelessness are stretched to the limit. Their time and energy are precious. Key informants and advisory committee members agreed that the roots of family homelessness are well-established: low incomes, inadequate income supports, lack of adequate affordable housing, and family violence are the primary causes. Moreover, simply coming together to share “best practices” was deemed to take the focus away from the imperative of ending family homelessness. Participants wanted, instead, a day that would focus on solutions and change.

Accordingly, the program for the day focused on changes to policy and practice needed to end family homelessness (see Appendix C for the Symposium program). The opening and closing plenaries featured speakers with both professional and personal expertise, who recounted their experiences with innovative solutions. The morning breakout sessions were under the theme of “Changing Policies.” Each session focused on a distinct policy area, and participants were invited to identify things that need to change, explore leverage points and opportunities, and discuss options for action. Afternoon sessions explored “Changing Practices,” with each session focused on an innovative practice in services, research, or advocacy. Experienced practitioners were invited to share their challenges and successes, and others interested in learning about the practice were invited to bring their questions.

“Open Space” Structure

Though the Symposium’s program was planned in advance, some elements of “open space” facilitation were incorporated into the day’s structure. Instead of inviting “experts” to present service practices or research findings in concurrent sessions, several Symposium participants were invited in advance to “convene” each of the breakouts. Co-convenors chosen for each session represented the range of regions and sectors present at the event, as well as a balance between lived and professional expertise. Their role, as participants knowledgeable in the topic area of the session, was to invite and facilitate discussion among all participants on the topic at hand. This method yielded lively sessions in which multiple perspectives and ideas were shared, and in which participants developed connections with others working on similar issues.

Section 3: Discussion

3.1 Session Themes

The day's program was divided into sessions focusing on policy change, and sessions focused on innovative practices in research, services, and advocacy. Sessions were attended by a range of ten to thirty people, with direct professional and personal experience in the policy and practice areas under discussion. The notes of the sessions (see Appendix D) therefore represent the distillation of considerable knowledge and expertise.

In response to the question, "What needs to change?" participants in the policy-oriented breakout sessions made the following key points about specific policy areas:

Income Supports

- Income support rates are inadequate, regulations exclude some groups, and unfair requirements force people to relinquish all assets in order to qualify.
- Student loans are considered income under social assistance policies, even though they aren't enough to live on. This policy endangers the income support entitlements of students and their parents.
- The shelter system is underfunded, and lack of affordable housing is causing longer shelter stays, making it even harder for families to reintegrate into the community.
- Perceptions of people experiencing poverty and homelessness are often negative and discriminatory, and people are mistreated as a result of these perceptions.
- Homelessness can happen suddenly, and its consequences for people's well being are long-lasting. Most people who haven't been homeless—including service providers and the general public—don't understand this.
- Poverty forces some women to choose between abuse and homelessness.

Child Welfare

- The voices of people with lived experience of homelessness are not reaching the system.
- Child and family services lack resources for prevention and supporting families.
- Workers who challenge discriminatory and unfair practices face deterrents.
- Stereotypes and negative perceptions of parents are part of the culture of child protection; this needs to change.
- Supports for youth in care are inadequate and this contributes to homelessness.
- Poverty and inadequate housing are the context in which families are separated.
- The pain and hardship caused by current practices and policies must be addressed.

Housing

- Research on “best practices” is redundant; action is what’s needed.
- Services operate in silos, and don’t include advocacy on their agenda.
- In rural settings, housing and homelessness are related to low employment rates, lack of rental housing, and high prices; yet there are few rural services.
- Policies and practices do not always reflect a commitment to the human right to housing.
- There are insufficient enforcement mechanisms to ensure the private sector’s responsibility for housing.

Immigration

- Women with precarious status—including those without status, refugee claimants, and those sponsored by spouses—are made more vulnerable to poverty, homelessness, denial of status, abuse, and human trafficking, because of policy-mandated restrictions on their access to employment and services.
- Foreign-trained professionals have inequitable access to employment opportunities, due to the policies of governments and regulatory bodies, as well as discrimination in the labour market. The stress and poverty that result from underemployment place immigrant families at risk of homelessness and family breakdown.
- Family sponsorship and reunification take much too long, resulting in stress, family breakdown, and losses to the Canadian economy when earnings are used to support families in countries of origin.
- Affordable and social housing to which immigrant families have access is often inadequate, infested, and unsafe.
- Research has confirmed that immigrants face discrimination in employment and housing based on colour, race, gender, background and family status.

Violence against Women

- Homelessness is intertwined with violence and discrimination on the basis of gender, race, class, and ability.
- Homelessness and poverty are also forms of gender-based violence, because women-led families are disproportionately affected.
- Systemic barriers and discrimination trap women and girls in dead-end jobs, inadequate housing, and violent relationships.
- Women lack access to services they need.
- Policy makers need to be educated and better in touch with communities and service providers.

Family Shelters

- Shelter staff and administrators lack opportunities to hear residents' input about changes that are needed.
- Family shelters lack funding to provide supports beyond food and lodging.

Meanwhile, practice-oriented sessions yielded the following information about innovative practices:

Arts Responses to Family Homelessness

- Art is an important resource for addressing family homelessness because it is accessible to a broad audience and an effective vehicle to promote a national housing strategy.
- Art can improve well being, communicate new ideas, and give voice to people who are usually excluded from the decision-making process.
- Funding for arts-based programs on homelessness is inadequate.
- Some successful projects have included a magazine by and for young mothers, photography projects, and art displays at drop-ins.

Participatory and Community-Based Research

- Participatory and community-based approaches ensure that research asks the right questions, in the right way.
- Engaging in community-based research involves questioning who benefits when poor people's information is used in research projects.
- Community-based research promotes the empowerment of poor communities, their ownership of the research, and capacity-building for both professional and peer researchers.
- When research is initiated out of a desire to "help," it is important to address the process of helping and ask if this is really community-based research.
- There are barriers to research funding for community organizations, for the process of relationship-building, and for the kinds of projects community members may wish to undertake.

Aboriginal Responses to Family Homelessness

- Aboriginal family homelessness must be viewed in context: economic inequalities, overrepresentation on the streets and in shelters, high rate of involvement of young pregnant Aboriginal women in the court system, increasing rate of violent assault by police, and lack of First Nations women representation in provincial and territorial governments.
- Homeownership has been overlooked in most programs for Aboriginal housing both on reserve and for those who emigrate from reserves. Where homeownership programs do exist, they are successful. Many Aboriginal people living in rental and co-op housing could pay a mortgage instead.

Direct Action and Self-Advocacy

- Working through service organizations can provide access to funding, space, and other resources; at the same time, the need to maintain charitable status can interfere with advocacy work, and sometimes service providers and board members may “get in the way” of self-advocacy. Resources, support and structures can be both limited and limiting.

3.2 Cross-Cutting Themes

Several cross-cutting themes emerged throughout the plenaries and breakout sessions:

First, participants emphasized the **importance of respecting and including people who have been homeless** in all responses to family homelessness. All too often, the expertise of people who have been homeless goes unrecognized and their knowledge is left out of decisions about policies and programs. This exclusion goes hand in hand with the pervasive disrespect and stereotyping homeless people often experience in services, government policies, everyday interactions, and mainstream media. Discriminatory treatment of people who are homeless is unacceptable and must be challenged at all levels.

Secondly, **adequate incomes and affordable decent housing are necessary prerequisites for ending family homelessness**. Inadequate income support programs, low wages, precarious employment, lack of access to childcare, high rents, and poor housing conditions condemn many families to visible and hidden homelessness, and make it very difficult to re-establish stable housing. These factors also place many mothers in the impossible dilemma of choosing between abuse and homelessness. **Canada needs a national housing policy** that incorporates an analysis of gender, poverty, race, immigration, and other factors that affect access to adequate housing.

Thirdly, **insufficient funding has a negative impact on all policy and practice areas**, and the costs of these impacts are high. **Provincial and federal investments are urgently needed** in all sectors: most importantly, income supports and housing, but also family violence and homelessness services, child protection, immigrant serving agencies and Aboriginal organizations. Without sufficient funding, organizations are struggling to keep up with their basic roles, and lack the extra energy required to improve services, engage and include clients, partner and network across sectors, and develop innovative solutions.

Fourthly, **program rules and structures often get in the way instead of helping families**. The regulations and procedures of income support programs, immigration, child protection services, and shelters, for example, can be contradictory and frustrating, making it more difficult for people to negotiate difficult situations. These regulations and structures must be reviewed with input from the people they are intended to serve.

Finally, **housing and services for Aboriginal communities both on and off reserve must be under Aboriginal control**. Governments must honour treaties and agreements with First Nations, and fulfill obligations to Aboriginal people living in urban areas, in order to address the high rate of Aboriginal homelessness.

3.3 Linkages and Partnerships Resulting from this Project

Cities Centre initiated and deepened partnerships with many organizations through the Symposium, including our Advisory Committee and Group members, the agencies represented by regional key informants, and our event partners. The Symposium itself provided numerous groups the opportunity to network and strategize across regions and sectors. Some particular sessions—notably, those on Child Welfare, Improving Shelter Services, and Self-Advocacy—ended with a commitment by some of those present to continue dialogue and action together. Finally, panelists from other provinces expanded the networks of the Symposium even further.

Local, regional, national and global networking will be further facilitated among attendees and others when the Ending Family Homelessness Network is launched on the Homeless Hub website in April 2009. Visitors to the site will be able to read all session and plenary summaries, post their comments on the issues raised in these documents, and find contact information for all Symposium participants.

3.4 Evaluations

Symposium evaluations were collected via a form included in participants' registration packages, as well as by telephone and email. Twenty-four participants, including seven with lived experience of homelessness, contributed evaluations and comments.

Overall, evaluation respondents felt that the day contributed in some way to addressing the systemic causes of homelessness and most replied that they acquired ideas about how to improve their work on this issue. While some did make connections with other organizations and individuals some did not. Many strongly agreed that the event valued and represented the expertise of both people with lived experience of homelessness, and people with professional experience. There was also agreement that the event promoted dialogue across sectors and constituencies.

Criticisms of the event included uneven time allocation to panelists at the closing plenary, and a loss of focus on change oriented strategies. Several commented that addressing the location and experiences of social workers and service users needed more attention on the day as well as an important direction for future action. As far as next steps, several would like the notes from the day to be circulated among attendees, people working on this issue and policy makers.

3.5 Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

This project met its goal of promoting dialogue across regions and sectors on issues of homelessness. This accomplishment is owed to the substantial time and resources dedicated to research, outreach, and interviews with diverse organizations across Southern Ontario.

As well, the objective of meaningful representation of the knowledge, skills and leadership of persons with lived experience of homelessness was achieved. Summaries from the sessions and plenaries reveal the strong influence of the voices of persons with lived experience, and demonstrate the unique perspectives and innovative solutions that result when dialogues include and respect lived expertise. Providing honoraria to individuals and unfunded groups, and doing outreach to small grassroots organizations, were both successful strategies for meeting this objective.

Though the Symposium also reflected strong contributions from Aboriginal community organizations and advocates, as plenary panelists, session convenors, and participants, the goal of establishing a partnership with a Toronto Aboriginal organization to co-host the Symposium was not met. In the future efforts will be made to establish relationships and partnerships at the time that projects are first being proposed, in order to ensure truly equitable representation.

While the open discussion model for sessions was successful in promoting the participation of all present, some expressed concerns that sessions remained focused on problems and did not always yield concrete strategies and action plans. Prior preparation of the invited co-convenors might have helped them facilitate more solution-focused sessions.

As well, plenary discussions and breakout sessions sometimes became mired in common impasses. Some service providers and other professionals at times appeared to have trouble transcending the problem that "There is not enough funding," which impeded discussion of creative solutions and ways to increase resources. Some persons with lived experience and their allies at times expressed hopelessness that service providers and other professionals could ever work in solidarity with people experiencing homelessness, and this despair sometimes stopped the group from exploring the tensions, complexities and possibilities beyond the positions of "worker" and "client." These impasses are common at the early stages of any dialogue that seeks to go beyond common assumptions and roles. Naming them as such, and encouraging people to imagine a different way to approach them, can help groups develop creative solutions. And inviting those present to take responsibility for power inequities can help groups find the trust required to work together for change.

The Symposium promoted networking among individuals and organizations from very different locations; however, there has been less success supporting and building on those initial links. While some follow-up work has been possible, this has been limited by time and funding constraints. Organizations and individuals working on issues of family homelessness would benefit from dedicated resources for ongoing information-sharing and strategizing.

Section 4: Recommendations

4.1 Recommendations from Plenaries and Sessions

Plenaries and sessions yielded numerous recommendations for policy and practice.

Human Rights

- Human rights advocacy is an effective tool in work to end family homelessness.
- Canada and the provinces must bring all programs and policies into compliance with international human rights treaties signed by Canada.
- Advocates and other professionals must “get out of the way” so that women in poverty can take their rightful place as leaders in the struggle for human rights.
- Policy makers and advocates must understand that the right to housing and dignity is bound up with Indigenous rights to self-determination.

Income Supports

- Increase benefits, supports, and access for Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program.
- Improve access to education and allow students to keep student loans and income supports.
- Allow OW recipients to maintain full benefits, with no earnings clawback, for the first three months of employment. Don't penalize people for working.
- Foreground the expertise of people with lived experience of homelessness in organizations that work on homelessness.
- Change public perceptions of homelessness.
- Explore prevention and multi-service strategies to get at the roots of homelessness and poverty.
- Ensure the availability of Aboriginal and culturally-specific programs and services.
- Draw on all assets and allies in the community when building alliances to end homelessness.

Child Welfare

- Human rights litigation and advocacy can be effective strategies to challenge discriminatory child protection policies, particularly for Aboriginal communities.
- Child protection societies must demonstrate a high level of commitment to Bill 93, new legislation that mandates Ombudsman oversight on child protection matters.
- Financial resources currently put into running the child protection system should be used to support families.

- Parents and workers should be aware of, and have access to, all resources and supports that are already available.
- Child protection must work in a coordinated and transparent manner with families.
- Policy makers, child protection managers and workers, and other decision makers must listen to people with lived experience. Families must have voice, choice, and ownership over their own lives.

Housing

- Build coalitions, networks, and strategic plans to end homelessness.
- Involve people experiencing poverty in the policy development process.
- Avoid the “blame game”: identify goals and engage all levels of government and the private sector in taking responsibility for homelessness.
- Respect the unique and common lived experiences of homelessness.
- Aboriginal homeownership and transitional housing models are exemplary and provide an example for non-Aboriginal services.
- Establish a comprehensive housing policy at Provincial and Federal levels that includes the allocation of resources to ensure implementation.
- Provide individualized supports, not just warehousing, to families experiencing homelessness; at the same time, recognize that families know how to manage their own lives and that the key issues to tackle are homelessness and poverty.

Immigration

- Improve accreditation, acknowledgement of credentials, and access to employment opportunities (for example, in government positions) for newcomers.
- Develop policy on settlement rights for women, addressing issues of abuse, for women who are sponsored or living without status in Canada.
- Develop a national housing policy, provide safe adequate affordable and transitional housing, and take action to prevent housing discrimination.
- Provide adequate income supports.
- Ensure that people who have experienced immigration problems are involved in policy development.
- Promote equity and cultural understanding through worker training, schools, and media.
- Ensure that people have equal access to services regardless of status.

Violence against Women

- Engage legal and human rights advocacy to fight for affordable housing.
- Systems and services—such as childcare, income supports, health care, and legal supports—must use an integrated approach.
- Poverty reduction plans must account for issues of discrimination based on race, class, disability, etc.

- Changing violence against women requires broad-based policy change including a minimum living wage, immigrants' and workers' rights, a national housing strategy, and affordable permanent housing.
- Policy and planning must be user-led.

Family Shelters

- Shelters should provide personalized, individual support that is directed by the resident. This service should not be mandatory or a condition of residence.
- Provide safe, affordable housing and adequate income supports so that families do not need to go to shelters.

Arts Responses to Family Homelessness

- Employ arts-based strategies to educate politicians and policy-makers.
- Improve funding to arts-based projects.

Participatory and Community-Based Research

- Change social assistance policies so that community members doing paid research work are not penalized.
- Participatory research should contribute to transformation and political action that leaves communities better off as a result.
- Shift the focus from problems to solutions.
- Funders should expand funding criteria to include community organizations, peer-driven definitions of the research, and research embedded in advocacy.

Aboriginal Responses to Family Homelessness

- Shelters, transitional housing, and housing programs must be culturally appropriate and reflect Aboriginal values. Supports provided in an Aboriginal environment can contribute to cultural knowledge, and be instrumental in healing from abuse and homelessness.

Direct Action and Self-Advocacy

- Self-advocacy must be driven by people with lived experience, based in anti-oppression frameworks, and charged with a mandate for social justice and change.
- Employ multiple strategies—including embarrassing politicians, building trust and rapport with them, education of service users and the public, fundraising, and using the media—while staying cognizant of the risks and benefits of each method.

Beyond “Worker” and “Client”

- Service providers, researchers, and other professionals working on issues of homelessness and poverty must engage in self-care strategies, respect the perspectives and abilities of people with lived experience, remain humble, and use their power and influence to effect change.
- Responses to family homelessness must be planned by and with those experiencing it. When this is done, the resulting programs transcend limited models to engage all participants in an empowering way, providing mentorship and skill building. New strategies such as social enterprise can support communities in becoming self-determining.

4.2 Recommendations for Processes to Identify Solutions to Family Homelessness

The planning and execution of the Symposium have yielded valuable lessons of use to other events that seek to foster dialogue on strategies to end homelessness.

Ensure meaningful representation and leadership of people with lived experience of homelessness

- Involve people with lived expertise in the planning, execution, and debriefing of the event.
- Pay people for their contributions. Do not expect some people to spend a day at a conference without paying them, while others are there as part of their job.
- Ensure the presence of people who are homeless in visible leadership roles.
- Prepare all participants to listen to and respect the challenges people who have been homeless pose.
- Invite grassroots self-advocacy organizations. Allow ample time for locating and contacting them as they are generally small and unfunded.

Keep the focus on solutions

- Invite community members to facilitate sessions; prepare them to lead a productive discussion.
- Allow some time for identifying problems and expressing feelings of frustration, but move discussion to strategies and plans.
- Promote open dialogue and knowledge-sharing.
- Identify impasses and the reasons behind them, and invite participants to think in new ways.

Maintain contact and momentum

- Plan in advance for follow-up dialogues and events.
- Retain a portion of the project budget for follow-up and for ensuring the event’s results reach decision-makers.

- Use web-based strategies, and also use dissemination methods accessible to people without internet access.

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Appendix A: Key Informants & Advisory Committee Members

Regional Key Informants

Clarington

Shelly Lawrence – Clarington Housing Outreach, John Howard Society, Housing and Eviction Prevention.

Durham

Mike Anton – Housing Manager, Housing Help Durham.

Ben Earl – Researcher, Housing Help Durham.

Halton

Sally Pincock – SCPI coordinator, Regional Municipality of Halton.

Hamilton

Vernon Nawagesic – Salvation Army Family Services and Hamilton Regional Social and Public Health.

Rosemarie Chapman – Campaign for Adequate Welfare and Disability Benefits, and Social Action Committee.

London

Darlene Ritchie, At Iohsa Native Family Health Centre, Southwold.

Niagara

Dave Pelette – Director of Housing Niagara Region.

Norfolk

Merv Hughes – Manager of Social Housing.

Peel

Patty Ramsingh – Family Services Peel Region.

Cindy Callum – Interim Place, Peel.

Edna Toth – Peel Poverty Action Group.

Peterborough

Christine Post – Affordable Housing Health Promoter, Peterborough Public Health Unit.

John Martyn – Affordable Housing Action Committee to Peterborough City Council.

Simcoe

Vicki Howard – Family Services Manager.

Maureen Callahan – Muskoka Community Services, and National Working Group on Women and Housing.

Waterloo

Lynn Macauly – Homelessness and Housing Umbrella Group (HHUG), Waterloo.

Trudy Bone – Social Planning Council Kitchener Waterloo.

York

Sylvia Patterson – Director of Housing Services, York Region.

Carolyn Mooi – Community Development Coordinator, York Region Alliance to End Homelessness.

Toronto Advisory Committee Members and Key Informants

Paula Carrie – Aisling Discoveries Child and Family Centre, Scarborough.

Ruth Marie Wilson – Access Alliance Multicultural Community Health Centre.

Wendy Komotis – METRAC (Metropolitan Toronto Action Committee on Violence against Women.)

Linsey McPhee – Community Action Resource Centre.

Frances Sanderson – Executive Director, Nishnawbe Homes.

Andrea Chrisjohn – President, Toronto Council Fire.

John Fraser – Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation.

Michael Shapcott – Wellesley Institute.

Ann Fitzpatrick – Children’s Aid Society of Toronto and Housing Action Now.

Julie Maher – Young Parents No Fixed Address Network.

Diane Dyson – WoodGreen Community Services.

Appendix B: Symposium Attendees

	First Name	Last Name	Organization
1	Van	Vilaysinh	Region of Waterloo
2	Mai	Ngo	Event staff
3	Bernitta	Hawkins	Red Door Shelter, Toronto
4	Paula	Giles	John Howard Society Housing Help Centre, Waterloo
5	Jo	Altilia	Literature for Life, Toronto
6	Katherine	Kalinowski	Good Shepherd Family Centres, Hamilton
7	Margarita	Mendez	Nellie's Second Stage Housing, Toronto
8	Larry	Huibers	Housing Help Centre for Hamilton
9	Emese	Kis	Birkdale Residence, Toronto
10	Eva	Dolhai	Good Shepherd Family Centre, Hamilton
11	Margaret	Murphy	Catholic Children's Aid Society, Toronto
12	Kathryn	LeBlanc	Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Toronto
13	Tom	Pearson	Poverty Action for Change Coalition, York Region
14	Yvonne	Gibbons	Anti-Poverty Activist, Mississauga
15	Ashley	Quinn	Diverse Family Homelessness Research, Cities Centre, University of Toronto
16	Charles	Hill	National Aboriginal Housing Association
17	Milly	Nalwanga	Event staff
18	Sherry	Bardy	Diverse Family Homelessness Research, Cities Centre, University of Toronto
19	Marcia	Jarman	Diverse Family Homelessness Research, Cities Centre, University of Toronto
20	Denise	Hutley	Diverse Family Homelessness Research, Cities Centre, University of Toronto
21	Kevin	Davis	York Region Alliance for Ending Homelessness
22	Julia	Janes	Homeless to Homes, Institute on Life Course and Aging, University of Toronto
23	Dave	Roulston	Salvation Army Housing Help, Haldimand-Norfolk

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	First Name	Last Name	Organization
24	Brenda	Elias	Mental Health Commission of Canada
25	Jackie	Anucha	York University
26	Matthew	Chin	University of Toronto, Solutions from lived experience from arts-informed research.
27	Delilah	Brown	Home Safe Calgary
28	Tasha	Brown	Home Safe Calgary
29	Rowan	Silverhorse	Home Safe Calgary
30	Penny	Irons	Aboriginal Mother's Centre Society, Vancouver
31	Jane	Wedlock	York Region Alliance to End Homelessness
32	Michael	Rosenburg	Homeless to Homes, Institute on Life Course and Aging, University of Toronto
33	Sheila	Batacharya	Cities Centre, University of Toronto
34	Aaron	Hussey	The HOPE Centre, Niagara
35	Ramsay	Kane	Aboriginal Homelessness Services, Homelessness Partnership Initiative, SSHA, City of Toronto
36	Laura	Kucenty	SHOUT Clinic, Toronto
37	Deborah	Connerty	Women's Habitat of Etobicoke
38	Cathy	Crowe	Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, Home Safe Calgary
39	Izumi	Sakamoto	University of Toronto, Faculty of Social Work
40	John	Fraser	Centre For Equality Rights in Accommodation, Toronto
41	Bob	Murdie	York University, Toronto, Dept. of Geography
42	Emily	Paradis	Cities Centre, University of Toronto
43	Lia	Grimanis	Up With Women, Toronto
44	Doreen	Silversmith	Haudenosaunee FORWARD, Six Nations / No More Silence Network, Toronto
45	Cindy	Cowan	Interim Place, Mississauga
46	Heather	Ibbott	Wraparound, Oolagen Community Services, Young Mums Committee, Toronto
47	Rene	Adams	Anti-Poverty Activist, Toronto
48	Michael/M icki	Ramdharry/Landa	The Housing Help Centre, Oakville
49	Daniela	Mergarten	FORWARD
50	V.	Reddy	Cities Centre, University of Toronto
51	P.S.	Reddy	Cities Centre, University of Toronto
52	Susan	Venditti	Start Me Up Niagara

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	First Name	Last Name	Organization
53	Loyd	Kibaara	Settlement and Integration Services Organization, Hamilton
54	Dahlia	Eagle-Ellis	Literature for Life, Toronto
55	Yolanda	Mcleod	Native Family and Child Services, Toronto
56	Amina	Ali	OCAP Women of Etobicoke
57	Jen	Silverhorse	Home Safe Calgary
58	Tatum	Wilson	Senior Policy Advisor, Poverty Reduction Strategy, Ontario Ministry of Children & Youth Services
59	Jill	Houlihan	Advocacy Centre for Tenants of Ontario, Toronto
60	Diane	Dyson	Woodgreen Community Services, Toronto
61	Christine	Lenze	Urban Native Homes, Hamilton
62	Alice	Gorman	Toronto Public Health
63	Rae	Bridgman	University of Manitoba
64	Patricia	Cummings-Diaz	FORWARD For Women's Autonomy, Rights and Dignity, Toronto
65	Anne	Longhair	Shelter, Support and Housing Services, City of Toronto
66	Michael	Kerr	Colour of Poverty Campaign, Toronto
67	Paula	Carrie	Aisling Discoveries Child and Family Centre, Scarborough
68	Alan	Nichol	Rosalie Hall, Scarborough
69	Jo-Anne	Absolon	Ojistoh House / Branftord Native Housing
70	Lynda	Muir	Women and Children's Shelter, Barrie
71	Judith	Stevens	People in Transition / My Sister's Place, Alliston
72	Lianne	Picot	Contact - South Simcoe Community Information Centre, Alliston
73	Maria-Luisa	Elias	Diverse Family Homelessness Research, Cities Centre, University of Toronto
74	Ann	Fitzpatrick	Children's Aid Society of Toronto / Housing Action Now (HAN)
75	Lada	Hirnyj	Robertson House, Toronto
76	Dave	Pellet	Regional Municipality of Niagara Community Services Homlessness Prevention Program
77	Kelly	Butcher	Pathways for Children, Youth and Families of York Region
78	Dr. Peter	Menzies	Centre for Addiction and Mental Health,

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	First Name	Last Name	Organization
			Toronto
79	Adonica	Huggins	Toronto Christian Resource Centre
80	Julie	Maher	Young Parents No Fixed Address Network, Toronto
81	Marsha	Brown	YWCA of Greater Toronto
82	Ruth Marie	Wilson	Access Alliance Multicultural Community Health Centre
83	Wendy	Komotis	METRAC, Toronto
84	Michael	Shapcott	Wellesley Institute, Toronto
85	Gary	Faris	Ontario Works, Community Programs, Human Services, Region of Peel
86	Jennifer	Sylvester	EYET Housing Help Centre, Toronto
87	Maureen	Callahan	Muskoka Community Services / National Working Group on Women and Housing
88	Julie	Hornick-Martyk	Homelessness and Housing Umbrella Group (HHUG), Waterloo
89	Vernon	Nawagesic	St. Mathew's House, Salvation Army Family Services, Public Health, Hamilton
90	Carolina	Gajardo	COSTI Immigrant Services, Toronto
91	Edna	Toth	Peel Poverty Action Group
92	Gabrielle	Hrynkiw	June Callwood Centre, Toronto (formerly Jessie's Centre for Teenagers)
93	Anna	Willats	George Brown College, Toronto
94	Angela	Morley	Housing Help Centre for Hamilton
95	Rosemarie	Chapman	Campaign for Adequate Welfare and Disability / Social Action Committee, Hamilton
96	Anita	Khanna	Diverse Family Homelessness Research, Cities Centre, University of Toronto
97	Bixi	Lobo Molnar	Event staff
98	MJ	Rwigema	Event staff
99	Melissa	Fong	Event staff
100	Adanna	Anucha	Event staff
101	Rosin	Douglas	Event staff
102	Salimatu	Tarawally	Event staff

Appendix C: Symposium Program & Session Guidelines

Program

8:30 – 9:00 *Registration and breakfast*

9:00 – 9:30 *Opening and introductions*

- University of Toronto Elder in Residence Grafton Antone
- Emily Paradis, Cities Centre, University of Toronto

9:30 – 11 *Opening plenary*

Family Homelessness in a Human Rights Framework

- Giving effect to the right to housing in First Nations and urban Aboriginal communities (Charles Hill, National Aboriginal Housing Association)
- Charter Challenge on the Right to Housing (Jill Houlihan, Advocacy Centre for Tenants of Ontario)
- How grassroots groups can use international human rights to fight homelessness (Patricia Cummings-Diaz, FORWARD For Women's Autonomy, Rights and Dignity)
- Professor David Hulchanski (Cities Centre, University of Toronto): Moderator - discussant

11 – 11:15 *Break*

11:15 – 12:45 *First Breakout Sessions: Changing Systems*

The purpose of these sessions is to discuss policy changes that are needed, identify leverage points and opportunities for action within each policy area, and make an action plan. Each session will be convened by invited organizations and individuals from throughout Southern Ontario. Convenors will help get discussion going, contribute their own expertise, and keep discussion on track.

1) *Changing Income Supports*

Co-convenors: Josephine Grey (Low Income Families Together), Edna Toth (Peel Poverty Action Group), Rosemarie Chapman (Housing Activist, Hamilton)

What changes to income supports such as Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Supports Program, National Child Benefit, and Employment Insurance can ensure an adequate standard of living for families? What are the opportunities for action, and what can organizations and individuals do?

2) *Changing Child Welfare*

Co-convenors: Ann Fitzpatrick (Children's Aid Society of Toronto), Patricia Cummings-Diaz (FORWARD), Ashley Quinn (PhD Student, Social Work, University of Toronto)

How do child welfare involvement, family separation, and homelessness intersect in the lives of families? What changes to child protection law and child welfare practice can help families stay safe, stay together and stay housed? What are the opportunities for action, and what can organizations and individuals do?

3) [Housing Solutions: Urban, Rural, Aboriginal](#)

Co-convenors: Amina Ali (OCAP Women of Etobicoke), Alice Gorman (Toronto Public Health), Maureen Callaghan (Muskoka Community Services and National Working Group on Women & Housing), Christine Lenze (Urban Native Homes, Hamilton)

Families have a right to housing that is safe, secure, adequate, affordable, dignified, close to needed amenities and services, and culturally appropriate. How can we pressure governments to develop housing? What have organizations done to create housing? What policy changes are needed to ensure access to adequate and affordable housing, without discrimination, in the private market? What are the opportunities for action, and what can organizations and individuals do?

4) [Changing Immigration Policies](#)

Co-convenors: Loyd Kibera, (Settlement and Immigration Services Organization, Hamilton), Carolina Gajardo (COSTI Immigrant Services Toronto), Rights of Non-Status Women Network (representative to be confirmed).

How do immigration policies affect families' safety, and their access to housing and income? What changes can help prevent and solve homelessness among immigrant, refugee, and non-status families? What are the opportunities for action, and what can organizations and individuals do?

5) [Ending Violence against Women](#)

Co-convenors: Marsha Brown (YWCA, Toronto), Wendy Komiotis (METRAC, Toronto), Cindy Cowan (Interim Place, Peel)

Violence against women and girls is a primary cause of family homelessness. What changes in policy and culture can prevent violence? What changes to income supports, housing provision, and other policy areas can ensure access to safe, adequate housing for families fleeing violence? What are the opportunities for action, and what can organizations and individuals do?

12:45 – 1:45 Lunch

1:45 – 3:15 Second Breakout Session: Changing Practices

These sessions offer an opportunity to share practices and knowledge, and identify concrete changes to improve services, research, and advocacy on family homelessness. Each session will be convened by invited organizations and individuals from throughout Southern Ontario. Convenors will help get discussion going, contribute their own expertise, and keep discussion on track.

1) [Arts Responses to Family Homelessness](#)

Co-convenors: Jo Altilia (Literature for Life, Toronto), Jane Wedlock (York Region Alliance to End Homelessness).

The arts – including visual art, filmmaking, writing, and new media – can provide a forum for voices too often silenced, raise public awareness, enrich research, and foster understanding. We will discuss how to bring arts-based approaches into research, services, advocacy, and organizing on family homelessness.

2) **Resident – Provider Dialogue on Improving Shelter Services**

Co-convenors: Denise Hutley & Sherry Bardy (Diverse Family Homelessness Research Project, University of Toronto), Yvonne Gibbons (Anti-Poverty Activist, Toronto), Emese Kis (Birkdale Residence, Toronto), Deborah Connerty, (Women’s Habitat, Etobicoke)

Families who have lived in shelters have valuable information about how shelter services work, and what changes are needed. Residents and former residents will discuss and present recommendations for changes to shelter policies and practices, and shelter providers will have an opportunity to listen and respond.

3) **Participatory and community-based research with homeless families**

Co-convenors: Marcia Jarman (Diverse Family Homelessness Research Project, University of Toronto), Diane Dyson (WoodGreen Community Services), Julie Hornyk-Martin (HHUG Homelessness and Housing Umbrella Group, Waterloo)

Participatory research transcends the boundaries between “researcher” and “researched,” bringing the priorities and understandings of people with lived experience to the centre of the research process. For homeless families, who have so often been objects of study, participatory research presents an opportunity to speak out, learn skills, and make change. We will discuss how to bring participatory approaches into research on family homelessness.

4) **Aboriginal responses to family homelessness**

Co-convenors: Andrea Chrisjohn (Toronto Council Fire, to be confirmed), Doreen Silversmith (Six Nations Confederacy and No More Silence Network), Jo-Anne Absolon (Ojistoh House and Brantford Native Homes)

Aboriginal families are over-represented among families facing homelessness. Responses must address the complex and intersecting causes of Aboriginal family homelessness, within a culturally grounded framework. We will share approaches to preventing and ending family homelessness within our communities.

5) **Direct Action and Self-Advocacy**

Co-convenors: Lia Grimanis (Up With Women, Toronto), Tom Pearson (Poverty Action for Change Coalition, York Region), Cathy Crowe (Toronto Disaster Relief Committee), Chalo Barrueta (Banyan Tree Community Initiatives, Toronto)

Family homelessness is a violation of human rights. People facing homelessness are standing up for their rights by speaking out and taking action. We will discuss how to organize and sustain action against homelessness that is led by and with people who have lived it.

3:15 – 3:30 Break

3:30 – 5 Closing Plenary

Beyond “Worker” and “Client”: Aboriginal, Participatory, & Grassroots Approaches

- Tasha Brown, HomeSafe Calgary
- Jen Silverhorse, HomeSafe Calgary
- Penny Irons, Aboriginal Mothers Centre Society of Vancouver
- Professor Izumi Sakamoto, (Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto) Moderator – discussant

5 – 5:30 Closing

Toronto Council Fire Drum

Session Guidelines

We hope this day will promote concrete action to end family homelessness, and improve practices in services, research, and advocacy. The knowledge, practices, expertise, and action plans shared in each session will inform a policy document that will be distributed to all participants after the Symposium. In order to make breakout sessions as productive as possible, we propose the following guidelines.

- Each session has at least two co-convenors. Co-convenors are NOT presenters. They are invited participants with some expertise in the area, who have agreed to attend the session, share their knowledge, and help get discussion going.
- Everyone in the session can share knowledge and help facilitate discussion.

Morning Breakout Sessions: Planning Action

The purpose of these sessions is to discuss policy changes that are needed, identify leverage points and opportunities for action within each policy area, and make an action plan. A note-taker will take detailed notes of each session for the Symposium proceedings.

- Spend approximately the first 30 minutes identifying problems, and which policies and practices need to change.
- Spend the middle 30 minutes identifying leverage points and opportunities for action.
- Spend the final 30 minutes creating an action plan on what individuals and organizations can do.
- Near the end of the session, create a single flipchart paper that summarizes your session’s key points, and post this in the Town Square in the Music Room so that other Symposium participants can read it.

Afternoon Breakout Sessions: Sharing Practices

These sessions offer an opportunity to share practices and knowledge, and identify concrete changes to improve services, research, and advocacy on family homelessness. A note-taker will take detailed notes of each session for the Symposium proceedings.

- It may be helpful to begin the session with a go-round in which each participant in turn identifies themselves, their experience with the approach (if applicable), and / or their learning goals for the session. Allow the first 30 minutes for this exchange.
- Refer to the program description for some questions that can guide discussion.
- Some other questions that may be helpful to guide discussion include:
 - What have been the benefits of this response / approach / practice for participants who have employed it?
 - What are the challenges of employing this response / approach / practice?
 - How is it done? What works? What doesn't? What advice can seasoned practitioners offer to participants who are newly considering this approach?
- Near the end of the session, create a single flipchart paper that summarizes your session's key points, and post this in the Town Square in the Music Room so that other Symposium participants can read it. Allow 15 minutes for this task.

Appendix D: Summaries of Plenaries and Sessions

Opening Plenary: Family Homelessness in a Human Rights Framework

Opening and introductions

- University of Toronto Elder in Residence Grafton Antone
- Emily Paradis, Cities Centre, University of Toronto

Speakers

- Charles Hill (National Aboriginal Housing Association) ~ Giving effect to the right to housing in First Nations and urban Aboriginal communities.”
- Jill Houlihan (Advocacy Centre for Tenants of Ontario) ~ Charter Challenge on the Right to Housing
- Patricia Cummings-Diaz (FORWARD: For Women’s Autonomy, Rights and Dignity) ~ How grassroots groups can use international human rights to fight homelessness
- Moderator: Professor David Hulchanski (Cities Centre, University of Toronto), *regrets*.

Presentations

Elder Grafton Antone welcomed symposium participants and thanked everyone for coming together to work on issue of family homelessness in a good way. He then conducted a smudge ceremony and shared a story about the importance of calling upon spiritual resources to help us in our work.

Following this, Emily Paradis introduced the morning plenary. She thanked those involved in organizing the event and when acknowledging the support of, the Homelessness Knowledge Development Program of Human Resources and Development Canada, she called on the federal government to “take heed of what they have funded us to come and say today.” She encouraged everyone at the symposium to use the day as a place to think about ways to end family homelessness. She also called upon participants with lived experience of homelessness to take their rightful place as experts in this discussion and challenged everyone to think critically about the binary positions of worker/client and researcher/subject.

The first panelist to speak was Charles Hill from the National Aboriginal Housing Association. He addressed the plenary about the right to housing in First Nations and urban Aboriginal communities. Commenting on the cultural differences between Aboriginals and newcomers, Charles detailed the history of colonization, its devastating effects, and present day legacies. He spoke about the 1613 Haudenosaunee Two Row Wampum Treaty that depicts an Aboriginal vessel and a European vessel traveling side by side on the river of life. This treaty recognizes mutual sovereignty and a commitment to partnership in which neither vessel attempts to steer the other. Aboriginal people make up greatest

percentage of homeless and they have the right to determine their own affairs, the right to shelter, the right to dignity and economic wellbeing and the base of all this is housing. Charles commented that it is important to address homelessness in a partnership aimed at policy change. Housing is a right and homelessness and housing are not separate issues. The government must accept that affordable, adequate and suitable housing will alleviate homelessness.

Next, Jill Houlihan, representing the Advocacy Centre for Tenants of Ontario (ACTO), spoke about the Charter Challenge on the Right to Housing, a challenge that defines homelessness as a violation of charter rights. The challenge is the product of broad consultations that produced the current working group. The claimants are individuals who have experienced homelessness. The challenge argues that housing is defined as more than just shelter (a roof over ones head) and that it must be adequate, suitable, and affordable (less than 30% of pre-tax income). It is based on the right to life liberty, security, equality rights and the right to live free of discrimination. The Charter Challenge is also part of a broader strategy to mobilize groups, media, and incite public imagination to speak about the right to housing. Jill commented that the political climate is shifting and there are positive indicators that courts might be willing to move in the direction of acknowledging housing as a right. Scotland, France and South Africa have identified a right to housing and it is time for Canada to step up to the plate.

Patricia Cummings-Diaz representing FORWARD (For Women's Autonomy, Rights and Dignity) addressed how grassroots groups can use international human rights laws and agreements to fight homelessness. FORWARD began as a human rights education program at Sistering, a Toronto drop-in centre for women who are homeless and socially isolated. Members of FORWARD traveled to the United Nations (UN) in Geneva in March 2006 to deliver a report about the violations of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in Canada. Personal stories made a significant impact at the UN because they have an emotional impact and further contextualize the research and statistics on homelessness in Canada. Patricia commented that FORWARD members returned to the UN again in October 2008, this time to address the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) with "the hope of making a dent." To their surprise FORWARD was advised to pursue a complaint under the Optional Protocol, a voluntary enforcement mechanism of CEDAW.

Patricia spoke to the symposium participants about how it is "awful to live at the bottom." She commented that the last 13 years represents a brutal attack on the poor initiated by the infamous provincial policies of Mike Harris. "There is a hierarchy of OW recipients and I am privileged in that hierarchy as widow and white. I had been on OW for 20 years and when Mike Harris came into office, within 2 months there was no food in the house," she said. Patricia detailed how social service policies and practices are punitive and hinder rather than facilitate community building and individual potential. In other words, most social policies are not helpful at all. These policies get in the way and to this Patricia exclaimed, "Get out of my way!" Grassroots organizations have members with experiences to help advocates and service providers. However, it is important to recognize that social services are colonial in structure and practices that are parallel to punitive anti-poor colonial English laws. FORWARD will report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child coming up in September 2009 and needs support and as many stories as possible. In closing Patricia stated, "Until Aboriginal women get rights we are not going to get anything. Taking land has been issue for a long time with the Canadian government and this issue is central to homelessness."

Questions, Comments & Discussion

A symposium participant and Patricia Diaz-Cummings exchanged comments about the fact that shelters are not meant for women to live in. They are a transition residences often used by women who have been in situations of abuse. Furthermore, housing tribunals are not helpful because they are set up to benefit homeowners. They also noted that older women are overrepresented in drop in centres many of whom are over-drugged and pay more for medication costs than rent and other expenses.

Aboriginal control over aboriginal housing is imperative, commented Charles Hill. He offered the example of establishing lodges for seniors and elders who can't function on their own as something that people in the Aboriginal community can push for.

Managers of non profit housing providers are always searching for ways to find funding and run programs for our clients commented a symposium participant. Addressing Jill Houlihan, she said **"I liked what you had to say. It is a right to have housing and as an Aboriginal woman, we are not homeless. We are in our homeland. We are shelterless not homeless."**

Regarding Canada's compliance in housing issues, a participant from the audience addressed Jill Houlihan and stated, **"We have fiscal capacity to do this, money is no excuse."** She asked what can be done to build on the momentum of the Charter Challenge and the report to the UN. Jill replied that the UN reporting further strengthens the charter challenge.

Another audience member underlined that it's important to make sure governments do not ignore UN reports. **"There is an expression at the UN," he said. "If you ignore human rights they will go away."** He commented that another opportunity for policy change is private members bills in Parliament that seek to include housing in provincial legislation. He asked Charles Hill to describe the success of the case in Winnipeg regarding Aboriginal housing providers taking the province to court. Charles replied that there was no success. The court challenge dragged out for 5 years to no avail. It wore the claimant to the point that nothing was accomplished.

Jill Houlihan commented that the bylaw quashed in Victoria regarding sleeping in public parks represents an important victory. The fact that the Victoria bylaw was stricken bodes well for other cases around the country. However, echoing Charles Hill, Jill said court proceedings are very costly and usually the claimants run out of money.

A service provider working in Alliston, ON thanked Patricia for the "get out of my way" comment explaining that it resonated with her. Service providers feel vulnerable and end up fighting for scraps of funding. She asked, "How can we work together when we are fighting each other?" Service providers are concerned about "biting the hand that feeds us" rather than heeding "get out of my way" as a call for action, she said.

Patricia replied that FORWARD has considered creating business to fund the groups' activities. Important issues to address internally include differences within the group and the need for self-care because of the tremendous toll poverty takes on health. She recommended the mindfulness and meditation program at St. Joseph's Hospital. Patricia closed the plenary with encouraging words.

“Remember who you are, get an image of a higher self and go with it. We are strong resilient and determined. We do have the power to do these things we can do it.”

Morning Breakout Session 1: Changing Income Supports

Co-convenors: Edna Toth (Peel Poverty Action Group); Rosemarie Chapman (Housing Activist, Hamilton); Josephine Grey (Low Income Families Together) *regrets*.

Session Questions: What changes to income supports such as Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Supports Program, National Child Benefit, and Employment Insurance can ensure an adequate standard of living for families? What are the opportunities for action, and what can organizations and individuals do?

Session Participants: This session included representation from municipal hostels; grassroots and advocacy groups; community centres; housing help centres; people with lived experience of homelessness; Aboriginal organizations; and, hospital services.

Identifying the problems: policies and practices that need to change

Income supports:

- People do not qualify for Ontario Works (OW) until they have exhausted their savings.
- **“On Ontario Works you can’t have life insurance, not a cash value one. You can’t have anything. I sold my vehicle. My daughter and I seem to be on a hopeless road.”**
- Low income people routinely face housing crises, eviction and barriers to income (regardless of the type of income).
- Barriers to income include: access to employment, a living wage, employment insurance when you need it (currently there is a six week gap between making a claim and receipt of benefits), identification, transportation, and start up money for employment.
- **“I couldn’t get start up for boots, and thus couldn’t get the job.”**
- Refugee claimants are not able to access income supports. Furthermore, their documents are often lost by the authorities and this delays access to citizenship status and resources.
- Inadequate childcare and income support makes caring for children difficult.
- **“Bus fare is going up and it is hard to take kids on the bus. Food banks don’t have good food and when you don’t feed kids properly the Children Aid Society takes them.”**

Education:

- Disability reductions penalize families with children who have taken loans from the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP).
- OSAP loans should not be considered income. Students should not be prohibited from attending school because loans affect their or their parents’ income supports.
- The current OW and ODSP policies regarding OSAP loans perpetuate the cycle of poverty by creating barriers to education.
- OSAP loans cover tuition and some school expenses but it is not enough for housing and living expenses.

- When students take OSAP loans to pay for high tuition costs, they incur huge debt. This is a deterrent to higher education.

Shelter system:

- Toronto shelters operate differently than other cities. In many communities people must be welfare eligible to stay in a shelter. In Toronto this is not the case. Each city and municipality does things differently. What can be learned from each other?
- Women may be financially better off in a shelter (in the short term). The structure of income supports need to be improved.
- Funding for shelters is inadequate. Some shelters must rely on food banks to provide for residents.
- Lack of affordable housing results in longer shelter stays and puts pressure on limited resources.
- Opportunities for women and their families to positively integrate into the community are limited.

Perceptions of people experiencing poverty and homelessness:

- Poverty and homelessness are an industry and people with lived experience are labeled as pathological. Communities and agencies need to rethink and address the punitive system that people experiencing poverty contend with.
- **“I’m not proud of the way we are going as communities and agencies. The perception of poor people as leeches and parasites needs to be changed.”**
- Often social workers do not have a sense of what people are going through and how something unexpected like an accident or illness can propel families into poverty.
- **“In a matter of minutes your life can change. I was in the hospital and then ended up in the shelter. I had a job. My house got taken away. This started a downward trend. I spent more than 1 year in a shelter. Coming from owning my own home, I couldn’t get adjusted to it.”**
- The effect of poverty is poor health and psychological, emotional, and physical trauma.
- **“People think that it’s just a matter of healing, but it’s not that easy. I went back to work and was laid off. My performance was not the same.”**
- Social workers make all the decisions and people have no input. This creates a feeling of helplessness.
- **“The demeaning way you are treated creates dependency and repeated victimization.”**

Violence against women:

- A lack of affordable housing significantly affects women and their families fleeing violence.
- In some cases, women return to abusive relationships because it is a source of housing and income support.
- Some women do not qualify for priority housing because they did not reside with their abuser at the time their family became homeless.
- Finding housing independently is difficult.
- Women returning to school need income and housing support when fleeing violence.
- Women living with abuse who take OSAP loans are vulnerable to financial as well as other kinds of abuse.

Leverage points and opportunities for action

- 25/5 Poverty Reduction Plan.
- Speed up the uploading of social services to the province.

Action plans: what individuals and what organizations can do and are doing

Changes needed for OW and ODSP:

- Improve access to all levels of education for families in receipt of OW and ODSP benefits.
- Integrate OSAP and OW policies and delivery.
- **“Don’t force people off assistance if they want to go to school.”**
- OSAP is not enough to live off. Children in school should be categorized as dependants and their income should not be clawed back from OW and ODSP benefits.
- Provide special supports for children with specific needs and reimbursements for extra school costs in order to help stabilize children in schools when their family is experiencing homelessness.
- Challenge OW earning exemptions. Allow for no “claw back” for three months so that people can get ahead and benefit from rather than be penalized by taking employment.
- Rationalize income supports and create a rate review board made up of service users. Increase OW/ODSP rates to reflect the cost of living.
- Remove barriers pertaining to identification and citizenship documents. Implement support and protocols that help people acquire the documentation they need so they can access the system when they need it.

Foreground the expertise of people with lived experience of homelessness:

- Implement an open door policy that encourages volunteer and paid positions for those who have lived experience of homelessness.
- Train social workers about attitudes, regulations, sensitivity, and consistency so that they can be better allies for people experiencing homelessness.
- Give people access to self sustaining resources – i.e. “A hand up instead of a hand out.”
- Provide opportunities to positively integrate with the community. Some successful initiatives include community meals, video projects addressing how people are treated in public spaces, and publications such as newspapers and poetry anthologies.
- **“In the shelter I got a flyer about doing community work if you have lived experience of homelessness. Now I’m so involved in so many organizations including the research team for today’s event.”**
- Use the media and other electronic mediums as a way for low income people to have their voices heard without fear of reprisal.

Change public perceptions of homelessness:

- The public needs to understand that homelessness can happen to anyone at anytime.
- **“Stop treating people like they are trying to cheat the system. Instead of making people prove things, give them what they need.”**

Prevention and multi-service strategies:

- Establish emergency loan program for housing and rent bank.
- Increase transitional supports such as housing allowances and portable housing supplements.
- Increase voter participation among people experiencing homelessness.
- Develop an information bank so that agencies can find out about each other and hopefully collaborate.
- **“Get away from the ghettoization of poverty.”**
- Integrate organizations and services and press for policy change that dismantles the “revolving door system” that currently exists.
- **“There are lots of Aboriginal resources in Brantford. I’ve been there for more than a year. They are actually very helpful people. I received counseling, geared to income rent, and resources for residents. I went back to school again. It is lucky that I’m in an Aboriginal place run by an Aboriginal group.”**

Draw on assets and hold people accountable:

- Acknowledge and draw on assets inside communities by connecting to different sectors (not only government bodies and politicians).
- **“We got a doctor involved, next thing you know we got the chamber of commerce.”**
- Develop a report card to monitor politicians on their progress.
- Establish a province wide quality assurance review that includes client satisfaction in order to evaluate social service delivery.

Morning Breakout Session 2: Changing Child Welfare

Co-convenors: Ann Fitzpatrick (Children’s Aid Society of Toronto, CAS), Patricia Cummings-Diaz (FORWARD), Ashley Quinn (PhD Student, Social Work, University of Toronto)

Session Questions: How do child welfare involvement, family separation, and homelessness intersect in the lives of families? What changes to child protection law and child welfare practice can help families stay safe, stay together and stay housed? What are the opportunities for action, and what can organizations and individuals do? What is being done within the child welfare system to make change happen? How well are social workers engaging with clients?

Session Participants: This session included approximately 20 participants representing people with lived experience of homelessness and apprehension by the crown as children, involvement with child protection as mothers, child protection workers, child advocates and researchers.

Identifying the problems: policies and practices that need to change

The voices of people with lived experience of homeless are not reaching the system:

- People with lived experience have knowledge and advocacy expertise that is often ignored.
- **“Nobody listens to what I have to say. We have things to say. Being here makes me want to stand up taller, stand up for my rights.” (17 year old participant)**

A lack of resources and deterrents to challenging the status quo:

- Currently, the triage for homelessness is emergency shelters, CAS, and welfare.
- Child welfare organizations work in silos. There needs to be more resource sharing.
- Agency partnerships are challenging.
- Child protection supervisors “working under the Harris way” are not fighting the current legislation that limits prevention strategies.
- Social workers are able to make change, however, they are often are penalized for doing so.

The culture of child protection needs to change:

- “Why do we have to owe gratitude to anyone when it comes to basic human rights?”
- The system is patriarchal.
- Women’s capacity to learn and get out of the system is hampered by the system.
- Fundamentally, cultural issues need to change because the system is set up to keep a segment of the population at a certain place.
- “We need to talk about the real things such as the failure of our welfare system and its think dirty policy. We pretend we see the negative parts of our clients even though we don’t. Even good social workers have to “think dirty” to work well within the system.” (Social Worker)
- There is an assumption that young parents cannot parent. Stigmas and stereotypes about young pregnant mothers exist within CAS and the larger society.

- Apprehension of children and the entire foster care system need to be revamped. Mothers and children should be taken into care together and supported as a family.

Criminalization of young people and apprehension of children from young parents:

- Many youths are victims of crime and abuse, but they lack access to victim support services.
- Homeless youth are transient and have been abandoned by their families and the school system.
- Attention to youth in the welfare system is inadequate considering many have unresolved trauma.
- Homelessness entails a long term family cycle and stigma.

Keep the focus on poverty because this is the context in which families are separated:

- Housing issues affect one in five children in care. However, inadequate housing and shelters are not the only reason children are getting apprehended.
- An emphasis on not having adequate housing takes the focus away from poverty as an overarching issue.
- Homelessness is an issue of poverty. Reallocate funds directed to putting a child in care to income support for the family.
- A participant once heard a social worker say “I’m a child protection worker. I don’t deal with poverty.”
- Homelessness cannot be spoken about in isolation without addressing the child welfare system.

The system is cruel:

- When children come into care, mothers are not treated with dignity.
- The trauma of child apprehension, the exclusion of parents from decision making, and secretive dealing with families creates significant long term problems.
- **“My mother was institutionalized in and out after her child was taken away.” (Session participant)**
- Under the guise of teaching attachment exercises to mothers and children, child protection workers in fact prepare children to say goodbye to their mothers.
- **“What happens to the children of these mothers when they become crown wards and grow up thinking their parents didn’t love them?” (Session participant)**
- Asking for help regarding drugs and alcohol use is used against the mother by CAS.
- **“I was told that if at 16 I got pregnant I would lose CAS privileges. The system is cruel.” (Former crown ward and woman with lived experience of homelessness)**
- The rights of the child and mother are violated when they are taken away from their culture.
- In the last 25 years the situation has become worse. Social workers are breaking human right laws when they apprehend children.

Leverage points and opportunities for action

Human rights litigation and advocacy:

- The Ministry of Child and Family Development of British Columbia has 25 000 Aboriginal children in care; 15 000 of whom are living in a home of a relative. The best legislation in Canada is in BC.
- Address the high rates of child apprehension as a human rights violation and not as problem intrinsic to Aboriginal communities.
- The system will not change until individuals and communities litigate. For example, the Haida are pursuing their own legislation and forcing the government to fund it.
- **“Yes, we need to go to the United Nations but what about communication between organizations so there is collaboration and effective partnerships?” (Session participant)**
- Initiate a public campaign to facilitate ways that CAS can support families.

Policy change:

- Bill 93 “amends the Ombudsman Act to allow the Ombudsman to investigate any decision or recommendation made or any act done or omitted in the course of the administration of a children's aid society” (Government of Ontario website). This increases the accountability of child protection workers. CAS needs to demonstrate a high level of commitment to this policy change.
- The money used to run the system needs to be used to support families. The development of a national housing policy and the Poverty Reduction Strategy are two important opportunities.

Action plans: what individuals and what organizations can do and are doing

Changing Child Welfare:

- There are possibilities today that did not exist 10 years ago. Accountability has increased.
- Currently, CAS addresses issues of representation of people with lived experience of homelessness and involvement with child protection through anti racist and anti oppression policy and the inclusion of foster parents on the board of directors.
- CAS needs more employees who are low income women with lived experience of family homelessness and involvement with child protection.
- CAS has prevention funds but it is up to the worker’s and supervisor’s discretion to determine how they will be used. For example, there is a diversion from foster care program in Toronto. Parents need to know it exists so they can ask for it.
- Youth in the system can have access to housing through CAS, but workers must facilitate access to this resource.
- Child welfare must work in a coordinated transparent manner with families. Third party oversight (Bill 93, Ombudsman) is important for the evaluation of CAS procedures.
- Workers are afraid and/or resistant to make change. However, they must be held legally and morally responsible for upholding policies.
- System change needs to occur in CAS as well as in terms of government policy. Policy standards must be tightened so that social workers have a framework in which to work in the best interests of the family and children.
- Protocols must change to enable mothers and infants to stay together.

- Recognize that the cost to keep mothers and children together is less than the cost of designating a child as a crown ward.
- Culture needs to be respected. Develop culture and values assessments that can be monitored.
- Use the BC model as best practice and do not repeat the same mistakes!

Listen to People with Lived Experience:

- Support new and existing programs such as family circles, wrap around services, community councils, and Aboriginal protocols.
- Recognize lived experience and projects such as Young People with No Fixed Address in Toronto.
- Listen to parents involved with CAS and those who have been involved as children and youth.
- **“I’ve sacrificed everything to get my PhD and I want to bring my knowledge to the United Nations.” (Participant with lived experience of family homelessness).**
- Bring together stakeholders and community workers to develop solutions.
- Families must voice choice and ownership over their own lives.

Morning Breakout Session 3: Housing Solutions: Urban, Rural, Aboriginal

Co-convenors: Amina Ali (OCAP Women of Etobicoke), Alice Gorman (Toronto Public Health), Maureen Callaghan (Muskoka Community Services and National Working Group on Women & Housing), Christine Lenze (Urban Native Homes, Hamilton).

Session Questions: Families have a right to housing that is safe, secure, adequate, affordable, dignified, close to needed amenities and services, and culturally appropriate. How can we pressure governments to develop housing? What have organizations done to create housing? What policy changes are needed to ensure access to adequate and affordable housing, without discrimination, in the private market? What are the opportunities for action, and what can organizations and individuals do?

Session Participants: This session was attended by approximately 30 people representing Aboriginal organizations, community Centers, the City of Toronto, and grass roots organizations.

Identifying the problems: policies and practices that need to change

Do we really need to research best practices?

- A lack of knowledge about what people need is not the problem, but how to make people listen and take action is.
- An over emphasis on best practices often leads to more talk and less action.
- Good ideas are important but the fundamental problem is political will.
- “We haven’t forgotten how to build houses.”
- The downloading of responsibility results in every level of government blaming the other.
- A framework for action is needed.
- Service provision:
- There is a need for more transitional housing and programming.
- Where people go after living in a shelter is not tracked and analysed.
- Creating silos of services with the hope that they will be effective is unrealistic.
- Services must be accompanied by advocacy.

Rural issues:

- Rural areas have been especially challenged because they are under serviced and often do not have family shelters.
- In rural areas employment is low, housing prices are high, and rented options are few.
- The definition of “family” must be more inclusive. For example, multigenerational issues are often missed.

Advocacy:

- Policies and practices do not always evidence a commitment to the idea that families have a right to housing.

- Anti-poverty workers work in isolation.
- An enforcement mechanism to ensure that the private sector takes responsibility for housing is needed.

Leverage points and opportunities for action.

Existing networks and policy organizing:

- Develop the capacity of the Homelessness Advisory Committee by engaging MPP and MPs. When they are part of the process and they will engage more fully.
- Poverty reduction 25 in 5 <http://www.25in5.ca/> The 25 in 5 Campaign is a good place to start organizing because it provides measures and documents that can be understood by everyone.
- Make sure poverty isn't turned into an expert-led space. Engage citizens.
- Housing is an asset, not a liability. Address asset building in housing policy.

Politicians and the private sector:

- Meet face to face with politicians who are willing to discuss poverty.
- Create and attend public forums in order to keep politicians accountable (embarrassment works well).
- Tell real stories about poverty and engage people with lived experience of poverty.
- "It is one thing to see it on paper but quite another to meet somebody who has experienced poverty."
- Use a community by community approach of engaging your MP.
- Keep local politicians accountable to their community and engage them with real issues once you have their attention.
- Create regionally based tables of participation that include people with lived experience of homelessness, community stakeholders, and policy decision makers.
- Engage the private sector and ensure responsibility is taken regarding inclusive zoning and bylaws to make affordable housing.

Grassroots and direct action:

- Grassroots International <http://www.grassrootsonline.org/> (Organization at World Urban forum 2006). Housing problems is a global problem. Solidarity is important.
- The OCAP Women of Etobicoke work to prevent people from becoming homeless by organizing, making repairs unit by unit, demonstrations and advocacy. The combination of direct action protests and case work in subsidized and rental housing is effective.

Action plans: what individuals and organizations can do and are doing.

Build coalitions, networks and strategic plans:

- Recognize that people with experience should be designing solutions. Use bottom up strategies and recognize the value of lived experience. Be inclusive.

- Identify best practices locally and globally and develop a lobby for consensus building (e.g. Housing first philosophy: pilot projects on housing first).
- Develop a central repository of information, create networks and help organize anti-poverty organizations.
- Ensure advocacy initiatives are practical, understandable and not a space just for experts.
- “Policy is for all of us. The recipients of poverty are the ones that matter. They should know what is happening and make decisions. Don’t say that it is too complex. If its too complex it isn’t good.”

Avoid the “Blame Game”:

- “Let us move beyond the blame game and provide solutions that reengage all levels of government and civil society.” (Session Participant)
- Challenge the government with a plan created by the people who engage in this work everyday.
- Develop solutions and provide succinct and realistic solutions to politicians. Don’t just blame them for the problems because “when we just blame them they point the finger in a different direction.” (Session Participant)
- “The truth is everybody must get back into the game of housing and we need to work together and recognize that all players can do better.” (Session Participant)
- Homelessness is everyone’s problem. Reframe the problem of homelessness as a social problem, not just the problem of those who have experienced homelessness.

Respect the unique and common lived experiences of homelessness:

- Create a comprehensive housing policy at all levels of government that takes into account the full scope of homelessness and an understanding of overlapping vulnerabilities (e.g. mental health, single people, aging).
- Homelessness is an experience shared by many, however, each person has a distinct experience of it.
- Housing should be safe, ensure privacy and promote dignity and empowerment because people need a sense of control in their lives.

Housing strategies:

- In order to support families it is important to know where they go every step of the way when they experience homelessness. Develop ways to track how people move in and out of homelessness.
- Develop home owner strategies along with shelters, and transitional housing. Look at Aboriginal models.
- Establish a comprehensive housing policy at Provincial and Federal levels that include the allocation of resources to ensure implementation.
- Ensure that developers are required to build affordable units in the development of housing policies and strategies.
- Shift away from warehousing families to the practice of supporting one person at a time.
- Rural approaches attempt to reframe the problem by focusing on prevention and not just reacting to the problem.

- Develop strategies to engage other sectors and encourage an integrated approach in multi servicing.
- People know how to manage their lives. Shift the approach to tackle the issues that create homelessness and poverty.
- Rural areas are unique because they are so under serviced. Responses include attempting to skill people on a very individual basis, especially for parents and youth.

Morning Breakout Session 4: Changing Immigration Policies

Co-convenors: Loyd Kibaara, Settlement and Intergration Services Organisation (SISO), Marcia Jarman, Diverse Families Researcher (Cities Centre), Carolina Garjardo, COSTI Immigrant services.

Session Questions: How do immigration policies affect families' safety, and their access to housing and income? What changes can help prevent and solve homelessness among immigrant, refugee, and non-status families? What are the opportunities for action, and what can organizations and individuals do?

Session Participants: This session was attended by approximately 11 people representing people with lived experience of homelessness, shelters, service providers, educators, researchers, advocates and housing help centres.

Identifying the problems: policies and practices that need to change

Women without status:

- Women without status are expected to work in order to prove themselves as productive members of society. However, they don't have work permits. They don't have child care because they don't have employment. So they are stuck at home taking care of their children and later denied immigration status because they have not been participating in the labour market.
- A woman who is sponsored by her husband cannot access housing to leave an abusive relationship.
- The immigration process puts people in a vulnerable position. The safety of immigrants and fair opportunity to participate in society must be improved. This requires a reduction in the processing time for refugees because the longer they wait, the greater their vulnerability to abuse, poverty and other forms of victimization.
- There is a need for access to secure income as a means of preventing underground exploitation such as human trafficking. Women and youth are often forced into drug dealing and other criminalized activities when they can not find employment.

Foreign trained professionals:

- A lack of employment opportunities and failure to accredit of foreign trained professionals must be remedied.
- People who move here are usually not prepared to encounter so many barriers. They become stuck in the system. Immigrants who come to Canada are very experienced and they arrive in Canada with high expectations.
- The Government body responsible for trades and professions must change policies in order to address the barriers that newcomers face.
- Highly skilled people are invited to Canada with a promise of employment but then they are not hired because they don't have Canadian experience.

- The government is spending money on bridging programmes that do not help newcomers transition to their new country.
- Immigrant professionals work in menial jobs that do not provide adequate income to sustain their families. This produces vulnerability to homelessness and divorce.
- Some professions require a length of residency in Canada before a person is eligible to practice their profession. This is discriminatory.
- There are systemic issues that need to be addressed such as a lack of social capital and networks that are difficult to access.

Family sponsorship and reunification:

- Family sponsorship and reunification in Canada is complicated. Families often remain separated resulting in suffering for women and children who can not join their husbands/fathers in Canada.
- The money sent outside Canada to support families that are not able to immigrate is a loss to the Canadian economy. Furthermore, those who are in Canada without the company and support of family may experience depression and unemployment. This increases costs to health care and social services.

Affordable, safe, decent housing:

- Affordable housing may have insects like bedbugs and roaches. This is a serious health issue for immigrants who have children.
- The Government is not providing enough affordable, safe, and accessible housing for people who come to Canada.
- **“It takes away people’s dignity to live in inadequate accommodations that are located outside of the community.”**

Discrimination in employment and housing:

- Research confirms discrimination in employment and housing based on colour, race and gender. A Toronto study indicates that that landlords profile individuals based on their background. Another study revealed discrimination against single mothers.
- Landlords scrutinise potential tenants based on race and gender. Some ask for a co-signer on the lease.
- Living in affordable housing can make it difficult to secure employment. Non-discrimination employment policies are needed to protect people who live in affordable housing.
- Service providers need education about discrimination.
- In schools, students are not taught about equity. This topic has been slashed from the curriculum and educators committed to equity education are marginalized.
- Cultural competencies overlap with peoples’ personal attitudes.

Leverage points and opportunities for action

Accreditation and acknowledgement of credentials:

- The government should provide more employment avenues for newcomers in government positions.

- Recognize internationally trained professionals and facilitate entry into the work force.
- Develop information exchanges among universities regarding professional standards and accommodating people who are educated overseas.
- Evaluating bodies like World Education Services continues to fail immigrants in their pursuit of further education because of poor communication with corresponding universities. It should be supervised by the government to avoid exploitation of immigrants (e.g. companies that charge immigrants for transcripts).

Abuse prevention:

- Develop policy on settlement rights for women. Immigrant women who are forced to depend on the government (income support) and their male spouses (citizenship status) are vulnerable to abuse, especially sexual abuse. This is even more pronounced for non status women.
- Non status women do not want to be exposed to the law because of the threat of deportation. Press for policies to protect women who are abused as well as develop protocols to give women information they need.

Access to housing and income supports:

- Develop a national housing policy and increase accessible housing using a non-discrimination and equity lens.
- Hold landlords accountable to human rights law.
- Develop a policy to protect tenants who are new to Canada.
- **“For most Immigrants, Canada is home. But a home without a house is not a home.”**
- Provide adequate income supports.
- Establish transitional housing support so people are able to navigate the system. There is a need for descent transitional homes not shelters.
- Housing must meet standards. It should be affordable, safe, and accessible.
- Develop adequate affordable housing so that families can stay together rather than being forced to live in shelters.

Health, safety and transportation:

- Pressure the provincial government to develop policy regarding bedbugs.
- Establish access to health services for people without status and improve services to all immigrants.
- Provide better access to transportation (especially in the 905 area).

Action plans: what individuals and organizations can do and are doing

Programs and policy:

- “Without voice there is no CHOICE.”
- Ensure that people who have experienced immigration problems are involved in policy development.

- Policy makers and service providers must be educated about the practical issues and problems affecting new immigrants, refugees and people without status. This is the main issue!
- Implement programs to help women who are stuck in the shelter system by increasing access to humanitarian and housing support.
- Immigration status must be addressed in a non-discriminatory manner in any type of policy discourse. Stakeholders need to be part of this process.
- Equity issues must be addressed in education curriculum.
- Promote education about multiculturalism and foster a cultural understanding of immigrants' experiences.
- Develop housing and property standards, a universal housing allowance and inclusionary zoning.
- Establish a national housing program that everyone can benefit from.

Access to employment, services, education, income and housing:

- Ensure people have equal access to services regardless of status.
- Provide universal access to interpretation services when accessing essential services along with adequate income and education supports.
- Facilitate newcomers' access to decent safe housing so they are not be forced to take poor housing.
- Challenge labour market discrimination based on where people live.

Morning Breakout Session 5: Ending Violence against Women

Co-convenors: Marsha Brown (YWCA, Toronto), Wendy Komiotis (METRAC, Toronto), Cindy Cowan (Interim Place, Peel).

Session Questions: Violence against women and girls is a primary cause of family homelessness. What changes in policy and culture can prevent violence? What changes to income supports, housing provision, and other policy areas can ensure access to safe, adequate housing for families fleeing violence? What are the opportunities for action, and what can organizations and individuals do?

Identifying the problems: policies and practices that need to change

Clarify and define the issue:

- Violence against women along with gender, class, race, and ability discrimination are factors in homelessness.
- Homelessness is caused by interconnected factors such as social economic (childcare, education, equality, housing/shelter) and political issues (justice, barriers, discrimination, access, power inequities).
- Gender violence includes the disproportionate level of poverty and homelessness experienced by women led families.
- Women face multiple oppressions and violence must be understood in a broad way.
- Address women experiencing homelessness as one group of women in order to challenge government practices of dividing them.
- Recognize that it is predominantly single, mother-led and working poor women who are living in over priced and rotten housing.

Systemic issues:

- Systemic barriers and discrimination trap women and girls. For example, women are stuck in jobs that do not realize their potential.
- “Liveable” by the standards of Toronto housing is a problematic criterion because it is driven by racism and classism.

Access to services and education:

- Young women that have experienced rape rarely disclose their experiences of violence or seek support.
- Policy makers need to be educated and better in touch with communities and service providers.
- Public education is a missing component in policy development.

Leverage points and opportunities for action

Legal advocacy:

- Pressure the state for affordable housing.
- “We have a right to housing and the state has a responsibility to provide it.”
- Support legal challenges.

Integrate strategies:

- Use integrated strategies to address the systems and services that impact women’s lives.
- Acknowledge interconnections between child care, income supports, health care supports and the impacts of violence and homelessness on physical and mental health.
- Legal Aid is an example of positive change that makes services more accessible. Women friendly changes improve access.
- Promote positive change or it will go away.
- Develop income and poverty reduction plans based on an integrated approach that accounts for discrimination (class, race and disability etc.).
- Commit to improvements to child care, workers rights, immigration reform, and mental and physical health care. This commitment must be national, provincial and local.
- Support a national women’s health strategy that addresses homelessness and addresses racism and oppression.
- Develop solidarity with Aboriginal women regarding violence against women strategies that recognize the need for Aboriginal women specific policy.
- Address urban and rural specific needs.

Labour market and housing strategies:

- Develop a labour market strategy including reforms to monitor wages that are being paid.
- Press for a minimum living wage, immigrants and workers rights, a national housing strategy, and affordable permanent housing.
- Develop income security strategies addressing homeless women as a group.
- Challenge Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation market rent definitions and ask: Do women want to live there? It is important to ensure that choice is consumer driven.
- Consider aspects that affect consumer choice (eg. apartments or homes, number of bedrooms needed, co-ops, rural or urban location, accessibility for people with disabilities, supportive housing, transportation for children, gardens, parks and schools).
- Improve labour rights legislation regarding pay equity. Increase the minimum wage, pension rates, disability support rates, and employment insurance rates.
- Challenge social support systems that are punitive (e.g. maternity benefits are only 55% from 80% of your salary).

Action plans: what individuals and organizations can do and are doing

Political solidarity:

- Focus efforts to support the high proportion of mother-led families.
- Examine the laws that categorize and separate women and strategize about improvements to income and cultural support.

- Build housing for women that acknowledges their social identities.

User led policy and planning:

- Communities must determine housing standards for themselves and housing must be built in consultation with those communities.
- 50% of the housing built must be social housing.
- Women's needs must be reflected in policy, planning and strategy.
- Address social conditions as well as economic conditions.
- Develop housing that supports beauty, encourages physical activity and fosters community as opposed to reinforcing the message that low income women and their families are less deserving.
- Self determination by communities is crucial. People have a right to housing. Counter the stigma and oppression faced by communities experiencing homelessness and poor housing.

Afternoon Breakout Session 1: Arts Responses to Family Homelessness

- **Co-convenors:** Jo Altilia (Literature for Life, Toronto), Jane Wedlock (York Region Alliance to End Homelessness).
- **Session Description:** The arts – including visual art, filmmaking, writing, and new media – can provide a forum for voices too often silenced, raise public awareness, enrich research, and foster understanding. This session addresses how to bring arts-based approaches into research, services, advocacy, and organizing on family homelessness.

Sharing practices and knowledge: Opportunities and Challenges

Expressing lived experience of homeless:

- Art is an important resource for addressing family homelessness because it is accessible to a broad audience and an effective vehicle to promote a national housing strategy.
- Art can be used as a wellness strategy.
- The Niagara region conducted a project with homeless men called “Men Without Voices.” They started a poetry group that helped people speak from the heart. Street poets have also received appreciation and support for their work. A music component helped people connect to networks and join other groups.
- **“People want to express themselves, but they assume that they will not be taken seriously.”**
- People are struggling to fight homelessness.
- There is need for a new dialogue and new ideas.
- People with lived experience of homelessness are not engaged in making decisions.
- Art partnerships that are restricted maintain the status quo.
- There are few people at the table who have a voice.

Advocacy and leadership:

- Poverty encompasses issues such as homelessness and drug use.
- The Government and its agencies are not paying attention to the issue of homelessness.
- Leadership to strategize how to create new housing is needed.
- Politicians do not understand the issue and do not know how to respond to people who are experiencing homelessness.
- The government is resistant to the provision of new social housing.
- Communities are under resourced and often don’t know how to advocate.
- A national housing policy is needed.

Funding:

- There is no government funding for arts based programs to address homelessness.

- Most of the agencies that fund homelessness related programs including the United Way have decreased funds to allocate.

How to use arts-based approaches:

- At this session magazines were distributed to demonstrate that they can be used in advocacy on family homelessness.
- Use photography to engage people in a dialogue where they can dream.
- Facilitate new opportunities for people who have experienced homelessness.
- Develop more outreach programs and use art displays at drop in centres so people can learn about arts-based research and advocacy.
- There is a disconnection between the politicians who have influence and homeless people. One way politicians can be educated is through art.
- We need to advocate and pressure the government to fund arts-based programs. Sit with policy makers and tell them how necessary it is to fund arts-based approaches.
- Appeal to the Government for more funding.
- Support a national network that includes funders and foundations in order to increase attention to housing issues.
- Build networks for arts-based approaches and increase volunteer participation.
- Research must be followed by action.

Afternoon Breakout Session 2: Resident – Provider Dialogue on Improving Shelter Services

Co-convenors: Denise Hutley & Sherry Bardy (Diverse Family Homelessness Research Project, University of Toronto), Yvonne Gibbons (Anti-Poverty Activist, Toronto), Emese Kis (Birkdale Residence, Toronto), Deborah Connerty, (Women’s Habitat, Etobicoke).

Session Description: Families who have lived in shelters have valuable information about how shelter services work, and what changes are needed. Residents and former residents will discuss and present recommendations for changes to shelter policies and practices, and shelter providers will have an opportunity to listen and respond.

Sharing practices and knowledge: Opportunities and Challenges

Shelter service provision:

- Staff need more training that includes an exchange with residents.
- “Acknowledge the survival skills and knowledge of people with lived experience of homelessness. People with lived experience know what they need.” (Session Participant)
- Resident-provider exchanges must be an equal one with no assumptions on either side.
- Women who experience violence need to provide documentation to prove their case and qualify for priority housing. There are issues of privacy and protection that accompany disclosure of abuse.
- In rural locations there is often no family shelter. However there may be a shelter for women and their children who are fleeing violence.
- Cutbacks in federal funding has reduced staffing budgets. There is no new Housing Partnership Initiative (HPI) money.
- There is no assessment of individual needs for shelter and housing.
- “You can’t just house people without supports.” (Session Participant)
- Family shelters need to focus on building families and the impact of homelessness on individual families.
- Some shelters are unsafe predatory environments.

Housing:

- Affordable housing for large families is needed in both urban and smaller communities. Discrimination against larger families is a problem.
- Market rents are very high. Bring back the program for people on the social housing list that offers the option of subsidized rent for up to 5 years.
- Youth leaving care don’t move up on priority list. They should.
- There are not enough housing allowances available. There are 1300 available allowances but 500 of these are not used because they are being diverted. Where is the accountability for this money?

How to Improve Shelter Services

Lobby the all levels of government:

- Demand safe housing for families.
- Demand mainstream mixed housing.
- Use networks to pressure the government to fund social housing and “raise voices to get it.” (Session participant)
- Child care support is critical. Demand increase in access to childcare.
- The government should buy up vacant units in condos.
- Co-ops and subsidies are drying up: enhance subsidies to rebalance mix.

Policy changes:

- Raise the personal needs assessment and welfare rates so that families can direct their own resources.
- Design a more flexible housing benefit program so that families are not forced to move.
- Improve bureaucratic processes because excessive paperwork is a barrier to access.

Partnerships and advocacy:

- Partner with the community and raise consciousness about homelessness.
- Use union funds and pension funds to advocate for housing.
- The National Housing and Homelessness Network (NHHN) has conferences and is part of national advocacy network. Use this resource.
- Challenge the government on “bafflegab” (confusing bureaucratic language used to avoid addressing and issue directly).

Shelter services:

- Provide personalized individual support that is directed by the resident. It should not be mandatory nor a condition of housing.
- Set goals and support women in achieving them.
- Develop in-house supports (e.g. counseling, individual partnerships and transition supports).
- Start dialogue aimed at finding out what people need.
- Transitional housing must be holistic and include wrap-around supports.
- Families should have direct access to subsidies rather than be forced to go through shelter staff.
- Get rid of silos in government departments and agencies (i.e. – the “not my department” excuse and way of thinking).

Afternoon Breakout Session 3: Participatory and Community-Based Research with Homeless Families

Co-convenors: Marcia Jarman (Diverse Family Homelessness Research Project, University of Toronto), Diane Dyson (WoodGreen Community Services), Julie Hornyk-Martin (HHUG - Homelessness and Housing Umbrella Group, Waterloo)

Session Description: Participatory research transcends the boundaries between “researcher” and “researched,” bringing the priorities and understandings of people with lived experience to the centre of the research process. For homeless families, who have so often been objects of study, participatory research presents an opportunity to speak out, learn skills, and make change. We will discuss how to bring participatory approaches into research on family homelessness.

Session Participants: This session was attended by 22 participants representing people with lived experience of family homelessness, service providers, researchers, and advocates.

Sharing practices and knowledge: Opportunities and Challenges

Asking the right questions in the right way:

- What does it mean to do community research? How do we know we’re asking the right questions? Who are we asking?
- Community based research is peer research that acknowledges power differences. It is important to recognize that if professionals talk to people with lived experience of poverty and homelessness in a demeaning manner, they will not want to participate.
- “People get intimidated when there is a power differential. If you have lived experience you can be empathetic and the participants want to speak with you.”
- Professional approaches and academic vocabulary can be insulting and inappropriate. This creates barriers to participation and can be very intimidating.

Who benefits from research?

- A lot of people make a good living in poverty research. Engaging in community-based research involves questioning who benefits when poor peoples information is used in research projects. Ethical considerations are important in community-based research.
- How can we create community ownership and facilitate taking and making power for people with lived experience of homelessness? Ownership and empowerment for poor is an important research consideration.
- Community-based research explores how peers from the community can be paired with professionals for the purpose of skill development and capacity building.
- “The poor have been used in research for decades. The problem is the rich and it is they that should be studied. We have framed and named the problem wrongly.”

What do we mean by “community”?

- Community-based research asks who is going to initiate and be included in the research.
- It is important to recognize community representation (e.g. geographical space, political community, etc.).
- Community-based research questions the construction of a “target group.”
- It is a legitimate undertaking to want to help poor people. However, community-based research questions the process by which a decision is made to first define and then decide to help a specific “group.”
- It is the powers above saying that they “want to help.” It is important to address the process of helping and ask if this is actually community-based research.
- The “political community” is being replaced by ideological solutions. There is no real discussion about the public.

How to engage in an ethical way:

- Community-based research is concerned about creating community not divisions.
- Funders won’t fund relationship building and there is pressure to conform and meet the funder’s agenda.
- It is important to spend time with people and listen to them. You have to build relationships first and then let people set the agenda before you look for money.
- People of privilege should be able to speak too (e.g. People of colour shouldn’t bear sole responsibility for challenging racism. White people of privilege should be an ally).
- Both quantitative and qualitative research methods are valid. In fact, personal stories brought attention to homelessness at the United Nations, not just statistics.
- It is important to look at how social difference is addressed. Equality is not the same thing as equity.
- People should be as honest as possible. Everyone has something to bring to the table. Build on people’s skills and strengths.
- Community members may know the issues better but they may not be able to do the research. How do we shift power to people when the money and finding goes towards academics?
- The community must always partner with universities to do research. It is important to find ways to give money directly to the people who are being researched.

How to do community-based research

Political change:

- It is important to look at research successes and failures.
- Change will happen through political pressure, not only by doing research.
- Bureaucratic funding structures don’t fit community needs. Press for inclusive government funding and research criteria.
- Change OW and ODSP policies restricting income and honorariums for research work.
- Distinguish between community based and participatory research (not necessarily the same thing):

- Ask what will the end product contribute to transformation or political action.
- What is the “knowledge transfer”?
- Academics are the “producers” of knowledge and the “consumers of knowledge” are supposed to affect change. Academics are in the business of problems and not necessarily solutions.
- Legitimize counter narratives and offer grassroots solutions.
- A measurement of good research is to see how better off are those you are trying to affect.
- Respect for participants is paramount.

Funding and priorities for research:

- While funding is important, money is not always necessary to do good research.
- Ask who sets the research agenda, the community or funders?
- Educate funders about community-based research.
- Explore the research area before applying for funding.
- After accepting funding from the government remember that the agenda must be moved and determined by the peer researchers.
- Funding can take time and value away from the actual project. Sometimes it is better to forget about the funding.

Find ways for communities to fund their own agendas.

- As researchers we should use our skills and strengths but let others take the lead in terms of setting the research agenda.
- Evaluate the ethics and integrity of a research project. Participants should be involved in the project design and not in a tokenistic manner. Think about who does the research, who writes it and who analyzes it.
- Acknowledge the resiliency and the stories of survivors. Believe in the people to do the work.
- Build community networks and groups.
- Consider what qualifies as community-based research. Is there a standard or guideline? Or is it just language. Whose name is actually on the report?
- Honour the people who are doing good research.
- Don't get in the business of research without advocacy.
- Embed research in policy, advocacy and community development.
- Research should be more about community organizing.
- Press for less emphasis on evidence-based research and more on building community.
- Use language that is familiar to participants. Use peer researchers in the conduct of interviews.
- Include everyone in the decision making and use everyone's strengths. Make sure participants feel they have power in the research process. Provide opportunities for participants to give feedback and be heard.

Afternoon Breakout Session 4: Aboriginal Responses to Family Homelessness

Co-convenors: Doreen Silversmith (Six Nations Confederacy and No More Silence Network), Jo-Anne Absolon (Ojistoh House and Brantford Native Homes)

Session Description: Aboriginal families are over-represented among families facing homelessness. Responses must address the complex and intersecting causes of Aboriginal family homelessness, within a culturally grounded framework. We will share approaches to preventing and ending family homelessness within our communities.

Session Participants: This session was attended by Aboriginal delegates, people with lived experience of homelessness, mothers, service providers, activists and researchers. Approximately fifteen people attended this session.

Sharing practices and knowledge: Opportunities and Challenges

Understanding the Context of Aboriginal Homelessness

- 40% of people on the street are Aboriginal.
- A lot of youth who are pregnant deal with court issues.
- Economic inequalities affect First Nations women and they are highly overrepresented on the streets and shelters.
- There is a lack of First Nations women representation in provincial and territorial governments.

Targeted for violence:

- “They want us to be afraid, to shut up and go home, but that’s not going to happen.” (Session Participant)
- Violent assault by police is increasingly common.
- **“Since 1492 we have been fighting terrorism.” (Session Participant)**
- **“Canada cancelled the Kelowna Accord in 2006. In June 2008 the government made apology about residential schools, however, many feel that the message was insincere.” (Session Participant)**

On and off reserve housing:

- It is important to examine the benefits of transitional housing projects that facilitate home ownership for low income individuals.
- **“We are shelter less, not homeless.”**
- Traditionally, indigenous people lived communally. Property accumulation did not exist.
- The public education system has failed to properly educate students on First Nations/Inuit culture.
- Leaving the reserve is not viewed as emigrating, however, it should be.

- Home ownership is geared towards the mainstream. Advocacy for Aboriginal home ownership programs “has fallen on deaf ears.” (Session Participant)
- A member of the Shelter Support Housing and Administration commented that the home ownership initiative is beyond the reserve market housing program.
- First Nations have been excluded from participating in the economy for a long time. There is little incentive for Aboriginal people to move to town and buy a house.
- Houses on reserves are subject to different rules and regulations than houses off reserve. On reserves monopolies are developing.

Action to End Aboriginal Family Homelessness

Policy change and activism:

- Address land claims, extreme poverty, poor housing (some houses do not have water or electricity) and a lack of resources on the reserves (most of the money goes to administration costs).
- The home ownership program was put in place on the reserve by the federal government. In response, Six Nations has started its own internal home ownership program.
- In British Columbia there is a home ownership program offered through credit unions to work with Aboriginal people.
- There have been so many people who have lived in Aboriginal housing co-ops who could pay a mortgage and work towards home ownership.
- **“Canada is built on the backs of the poor.” (Session Participant)**
- In 2006 at Committee of Social Economic and Cultural Rights at the United Nations, Canada was criticized for failing to ensure the equal enjoyment of rights among Canadians. The participant who shared this information commented that “voicing criticism of the state is important.”
- In British Columbia immigrant women work in solidarity with Aboriginal women because there is a mutual understanding of families.

Shelters and transitional housing:

- **“Women can stay for 1 year and then up to 3 years. We work from “12 seasons to independence” model because it takes longer than 6 weeks to rehabilitate someone.” (Aboriginal Shelter Provider)**
- It is important to be culturally sensitive and facilitate transitions from homelessness to transitional housing to adequate housing.
- Women need holistic services and support (e.g. nutrition counselling and gardening).
- **“In order to deal with the effects of colonization and residential school on individuals and communities, a decolonization program has been developed. It involves learning more about arts, using a four directional mode and the Great Law of Peace. We also developed partnerships with agencies and organizations.”**

Facilitate Access to support:

- A session participant shared the experience of homeless, alcohol addiction, defending against attempted rapes and other violence, and attending a treatment center. She

- commented: "It was difficult moving from a reserve to Toronto. One day I said to myself that I am tired of abusing myself so I got off the alcohol." This participant also commented that two of her female cousins were murdered.
- A participant who entered a shelter because of a violent situation explained that child protection involvement was helpful to her because her worker was culturally sensitive and supported her at the shelter. She explained "They are approachable and they don't judge you."
 - A participant commented that prior to living at the shelter she felt lacking in cultural awareness as a result of residential school experiences.
 - **"I may be homeless now but I'm gonna be walking out of it. I didn't know the cultural component of who I am and where native people have come from. Even at my age I didn't know that either." (Aboriginal Mother)**
 - A participant who entered a shelter with her mother shared experiences of drug addiction arising from dealing with bereavement (family member and pet). However, moving into the shelter helped with addiction withdrawal. She shared that her goal is to pursue a career in social services. At the shelter she learned how to cook and "native ways" (e.g., how to work with medicines) commenting that "this brought a new perspective to my life."

Afternoon Breakout Session 5: Direct Action and Self-Advocacy

Co-convenors: Lia Grimanis (Up With Women, Toronto), Tom Pearson (Poverty Action for Change Coalition, York Region), Cathy Crowe (Toronto Disaster Relief Committee), Chalo Barrueta (Banyan Tree Community Initiatives), *regrets*.

Session Description: Family homelessness is a violation of human rights. People facing homelessness are standing up for their rights by speaking out and taking action. This session addressed how to organize and sustain action against homelessness that is led by and with people who have lived it. Participants discussed self-advocacy and creative ways to get issues into the media and out to people. Additionally, session attendees expressed interest in sharing ideas about how to work together.

Session Participants: Approximately 11 people attended this session representing people with lived experience of homelessness, grassroots advocacy groups, service providers and researchers.

Sharing practices and knowledge: Opportunities and Challenges

Working through service organizations:

- Find the audiences and pockets of people who want to engage.
- One of the challenges in advocacy is the limitations of an organization having a 'charity number'. This hinders grassroots organizing and reprimands charitable organizations for doing any advocacy work.
- Provide a support system between grassroots groups and organizations.
- Funnel funding to grassroots groups.
- Acknowledge the resources (space, voice, etc.) that organizations can contribute to grassroots mobilizing.
- Recognize that service providers sometimes get in the way instead of help.
- Understanding the systemic tensions in our position as advocates and/or social service providers who make a living because of the existence of poverty.
- Hold social service agencies accountable for the work that they do.
- Resources, support and structures can be both limited and limiting.
- Within organizations, the change of board members is a challenge. There are constant rotations. The public needs to get on boards and support grassroots movements.
- Sometimes service providers and people with lived experience are too burnt out to engage in advocacy.

Shelters and schools:

- Advocate for young people. Terminology like "slow learners" should not be acceptable. Demand programs at school for children and talk to schools about practices that exclude and label students.

- Abuses and violence are experienced in the shelter system. Residents are frustrated and tired of being ignored. They want someone who will listen to them.

If advocacy worked, what would advocacy look like?

- Develop a mandate for social justice and change.
- Provide resources to people impacted by an issue so they can better access support systems.
- Work collaboratively and inclusively with the people who we're working for and who the advocacy will most affect.
- Use everyone's strengths and explore different approaches.
- Develop a policy built using an anti-oppression framework.
- Avoid competition generated by limited funding opportunities and pressures to separate and rank issues.
- "Find things that we agree on so that we can reach common ground and say, 'this needs to change.'" (Session Participant)

How to Do Direct Action and Advocacy

Understand what advocacy is:

- Embarrass politicians into action while building rapport and trust. Afterwards, other politicians will follow.
- Have people in the community do their own advocacy.
- Understand the differences between individual vs. systemic advocacy, self advocacy vs. social service and community advocacy.
- Advocacy must be informed and driven by people with lived experience.
- Advocacy is about the values of equity and justice.
- Have a planned goal and focus on actionable items to create change.
- Have a strategy and know how to manipulate the system.
- Educating service users about the system is important.
- For any significant change to occur, whether individual, community, or systemic, advocacy must penetrate the political system.
- Address bureaucrats who make policy recommendations and change.

Strategies and responsibilities for service agencies:

- It is important for people to have their own voice and not depend on agencies where boards and funding may change unexpectedly.
- Have respect for the vulnerability of those who are impacted by poverty.
- Address different systems (e.g. public sector, government, businesses, etc.) and work towards incrementally systemic shifts.
- Fundraising is an important part of effective advocacy. Start programs within communities such as sports competitions and seek sponsorship within the private sector.

The role of media and its challenges:

- Be critical of the misrepresentation of marginalized people in the media.
- Encourage self-advocacy and self-representation.
- “Be careful who ‘represents’ you.” (Session Participant)
- Provide training for marginalized groups to engage with the media.
- Recognize when the media may not be a useful tool for advocacy. The media can be powerful, but alone may not be enough.
- Be clear on whose minds you are trying to change. Know your audience and strategize accordingly.

Closing Plenary: Beyond “Worker” and “Client”: Aboriginal, Participatory, & Grassroots Approaches

Speakers

Tasha Brown (HomeSafe Calgary)
Jan Silverhorse (HomeSafe Calgary)
Penny Irons (Aboriginal Mothers Centre Society, Vancouver)
Moderator: Izumi Sakamoto (Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto)

Presentations

Tasha Brown began by introducing herself as a single mother of 5 children who has lived experience of family homelessness. She works at CUPS (Calgary Urban Project Social Health Centre) in the family resource centre and writes an advice column in *Street Talk*.

Tasha explained that in the first couple of years social workers have passion. As time passes and workers see their clients again they become frustrated, discouraged and burn out. Clients sense this and feel like they are just a number. Tasha suggested that social workers need support and engage in “fun stuff” that helps them reconnect as co-workers so they can give 100% to clients.

In an emotional description of her visit to the place where Tent City once existed in Toronto, Tasha asked why did the 140 people who lived there not want to access social services. Why did they choose to live outside? She concluded that the likely reason is the poor treatment of homeless people in shelters.

Jen Silverhorse is a community care nurse and single parent of an “entertaining” young man who she has chosen to home school. Jen has the experience of being on ‘the other side of the desk’ as a health care provider and as a consumer of services, the later often being a demoralizing experience as parent and human being.

Jen described how she was treated by system as an experience of being told what her life should be like. For example, a principle at her son’s school told her that children who are home-schooled become homeless. It took her a long time to get to a good place and to feel confident about her decision to home-school her child especially in the face of service providers that are convinced “that you’re not going to pull that off.” The question she posed to the plenary is: how do we as professionals understand, helping *versus* enabling? How can we respect and help people help themselves?

Penny Irons introduced herself using her Aboriginal name that means story teller. She thanked the traditional people of the territory where the symposium is being held and for allowing her to be here.

In speaking broadly about the treatment of Aboriginal people's social situation in Canada she stated that Aboriginal mothers are the most discriminated and poorest. They make up the largest ethnic population in prison and their children represent that highest number in care. Aboriginal people experience the high rates of physical and emotional abuse. They also have the highest rates of residence in transitional housing. Aboriginal women and children have the highest rates of murder and their human rights are violated on a daily basis.

Penny then stated, "But we're survivors and we will overcome." She explained that, Aboriginal women come from a tradition of a matriarchal society, but the Indian Act is a patriarchal system that allows for the above mentioned injustices to occur.

Penny's life experience includes being a young mother at 16 and having 3 kids by age 23. Her marriage ended and she decided to go to school. The education system caused her to develop of an inferiority complex, however, she attended University and began to speak out in her classes and became involved in student council. She was offered a job with Canadian Development for Foreign Policy and in this work she engaged in a spiritual journey of learning. She realized that through her experiences working in the Arctic that everything comes back to the people and children. Her daughter became pregnant and Penny realized that there are no mother's centres in Canada. She decided to start a mother's centre.

The Aboriginal Mother Centre (AMC) is the only mother's center in Canada. It is located in East Vancouver. The centre operates using an empowerment approach (not social worker approach) that sets out to fix problems together. Micro enterprise is an important aspect of self-reliance and women are referred to as participants not clients. The experts are not social workers but rather the mothers. Women who have been involved in the centre move into management positions then they move onto other employment. Penny summed up the approach to mentoring women by saying, "You find out what you're good at and you teach 5 more people." This increases self-esteem.

The AMC is about women claiming space. This is a difficult task when government funding gets cut because women speak out about inequality and injustices. The AMC had core-funding being cut by half a million when Penny spoke out about the inequities Aboriginal mothers face. The AMC is a house. It includes a public living centre, a kitchen table, and a place for kids. When the women were evicted from AMC house they garnered attention from media and received a cheque to cover their rent.

Builders without Borders, an international organization along with other supporters began to design a building the size of a city block that would provide services and support to women at risk of losing their children to the government. Transitional housing, early development programs and the opportunity to engage in social enterprise are all included in the plans for the new centre. So far \$ 7.2 million for redevelopment has been secured but there is a need for funding to cover operational funds. The government must provide this funding. This is only Phase One. Phase Two plans involve partnering with Luma Aboriginal Housing to build 40 units of affordable housing.

The key to the success of the AMC is the mentorship among mothers and organizations. The AMC has created a model that can be used by any organization or initiative. The AMC provides free space for activities and supports sports groups, traditional grandma groups, mothers of justice, etc. There is also a program to pay volunteers to maintain the organization (i.e. cleaning place, crafting, etc.). The AMC has

received powerful letters of support. **Penny concluded by saying “I believe that in 10 years time, I hope there will be one-hundred mother’s centres across the country funded by the federal government. That’s why I want to run for government. To make sure mother’s centres stays grassroots.”**

Questions, Comments & Discussion

Izumi Sakamoto commented that she felt humbled by the stories each speaker shared. She thanked them for their generosity and summarized their contributions to the plenary. Izumi recalled Tasha’s challenge to social workers to think about how they treat clients and how they take care of themselves so they can give 100%. She noted Jen’s comments about the difference between helping and enabling as a social worker and the importance of self-advocacy and “putting your foot down” as a service user. Izumi highlighted Penny’s call to direct action and creative ways of fighting injustice that calls attention to the difference between an empowerment approach versus a social work approach. Speaking from her own position she noted the importance of acknowledging that participants are experts and professionals should be allies.

A participant commented, **“I would like to encourage all to walk through this world being proud of who you are. If our creator didn’t mean us to be here, we wouldn’t be here.”**

A participant thanked the panelists for sharing their experiences and asked: What would you suggest to educational institutions with regards to addressing issues of respect, equity and justice? Tasha replied that social workers should follow-up with families they’ve worked with to see how they’ve helped. She also recognized the pressures on social workers who cannot bring in their ‘bad’ day to the office, while clients do. Jen commented that service providers do not seem to understand how they’ve dehumanized another individual. She suggested sensitivity training and an outside evaluation process for social workers. Currently there is no mechanism whereby someone who’s being victimized, can hold a worker accountable. A third party is needed to avoid a conflict of interest.

Penny added that while social workers are being burnt with case overload, there is also an issue regarding power and social workers who have personal issues before beginning their career. Many are also paid low wages and on the brink of poverty themselves.

Social workers should recognize the gap that exists between classes and other positions of power and believes that should make social workers humble, Izumi said.

A symposium participant who is a student in social work program at York stated that it’s not easy to work within agencies that are structured and scripted. She believes that there has to be a two-way understanding of where both parties are coming from. Both parties should help each other and educate each other to gain common ground.

Jen commented that some social workers represent the status quo. She refers to them as “social worker Barbie” meaning they come from a white privileged background and are more likely to feel disconnected with realities of service users.

A symposium participant warned that once you start working at an organization, you are forced to work in one of two ways. You either play the game with co-workers taking care to do the smallest amount of work like everyone else. Or, you risk being ostracized by co-workers for trying to do things differently.

After Izumi concluded the plenary and thanked the speakers, the Council Fire Drum closed the symposium with a song composed about resistance and coming together to make change.