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**HOMELESSNESS AND EMPLOYMENT:  
A CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE**



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## I. Introduction

Employment is widely recognized as one of the critical pathways out of housing crisis and homelessness for individuals and families. The stream of income from steady employment can provide stability to families, and offer critical supports and skills to individuals. Employment provides a context for socialization and a locale for promoting self-esteem. Regardless of whether a homeless person is European or Canadian, meaningful employment works as a tool that can assist individuals in moving towards self-sufficiency. Employment is also recognized as a preventative tool that can keep many individuals from falling into homelessness. This dual dimension of employment makes it an important policy response in addressing the challenges of homelessness.

## II. Barriers to Employment Facing the Homeless Population

Research shows that, in general, homeless people in Canada strongly desire mainstream employment (Lethby, 2006). Canada therefore approaches homelessness policy with an understanding that homeless people are motivated to work and can indeed maintain mainstream employment if given the appropriate supports. Much of European homelessness and employment programming reflect this same understanding.

The federal government recognizes two broad categories within the Canadian homeless population: the chronic homeless and the situational homeless. The chronic homeless face multiple barriers and need ongoing care and support to stay off the streets. The situational homeless are those that have faced a serious downturn in financial, employment and/or family stability, but are well positioned to permanently escape homelessness if given the proper supports. Employment programming can be especially effective when targeted at this section of the homeless population because in many instances lack of employment is the single barrier preventing them from escaping homelessness.

For the chronic homeless, on the other hand, there are multiple barriers preventing them from attaining employment and escaping homelessness. Although barriers to employment differ from country to country, city to city, and even from individual to individual, what is evident across Europe and Canada is that it is often the multiple and concurrent nature of these barriers (to employment) that prove to be the most difficult to overcome. Some of these barriers include: lack of a permanent and secure residence; physical or mental health issues; addictions; criminal involvement; lack of transportation; and irregular employment histories.

For those with limited skills, experience or education, opportunities for jobs that pay a living wage are very limited. In a competitive environment, the difficulties of

job seeking as a homeless person can be an almost insurmountable barrier to employment. Many authors have cited under-employment, lack of training, and insufficient social assistance as causes of homelessness (e.g., Charette, 1991; Falvo, 2003). It is common to find references to low levels of education and high unemployment in most surveys of homeless people (Aubry et al., 2003; Norman et al., 1993; Raising the Roof, 2001).

### III. Labour Market Mobility

Labour market mobility also plays an important role in employment and homelessness. Canadians often migrate from one part of the nation to another, in hopes of accessing the higher paying employment opportunities afforded by booming economies. Upon arriving in a new province or city, however, workers discover that while employment wages are higher in their new place of residence, so too are the costs of living.

For example, in Canadian cities such as Vancouver, the median wage for workers is \$58,000 a year; however, the median price of housing is \$449,000 (Demographia, 2007). That's just under half a million dollars for a home, making Vancouver Canada's least affordable place to live. In booming cities such as Edmonton and Calgary in the province of Alberta, and in other metropolitan centres such as Toronto, Ontario, similar statistics appear. Labour market mobility can thus lead many Canadians into homelessness, despite their attainment of skills, work experience, and sometimes even steady employment.

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions has noted that the problem of working poverty is increasingly pressing in EU nations as well, given the higher average incidence of the phenomenon in new Member States.

Despite their high level of education, recent immigrants to Canada often face a job market that is not as welcoming as they might had hoped before coming to the country. Research reveals that 70.3% of new arrivals to Canada found it extremely difficult to enter the labour market and were thus struggling to pay rent and buy food (Statistics Canada).

In Europe, the issue of geography and labour market mobility has risen to the top of EU policy agenda for similar reasons. Given the close proximity of many EU nations to areas of conflict, such as Bosnia, Africa and the Middle East, and to the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc communist satellite nations, many EU nations are experiencing an increase in the number of refugees and immigrants among their homeless populations (Toro, 2007). The close geographical proximity of nations and the ease of travel from one nation to another make mobility issues especially prevalent in Europe. There are both costs and benefits to the social trend of labour-based migration, and it is an issue tied closely to homelessness and employment. Too little mobility could lead to a

reduction in adaptability and competitiveness, whereas too much mobility could distort national labour markets. For both the receiving and sending regions, a high level of mobility is a continuous challenge to social cohesion and economic performance (EFILWC, 2005).

The challenges faced by people moving from province to province within Canada are thus mirrored by those moving from one nation to another within Europe. Geographical location and cost of living must also be counted among the list of the barriers faced by people looking to secure both work and housing.

#### IV. Holistic Approach

Homelessness is a multifaceted problem. Difficulties with education, employment, and income support can be related to difficulties with health, mental health, and addictions, and all of these factors both affect and are affected by homelessness. The homeless population therefore needs access to a range of services and supports (such as mental health counselling, substance abuse programs, child care, transportation, etc.) to become job ready. This has been recognized as a best practice by FEANTSA, and enacted in many EU nations, as well as in Canada.

Homeless people need more services and support than traditional job training programs offer. Experience shows that successful job training programs for homeless people should include: comprehensive assessment; ongoing case management; housing; supportive services; job training and job placement services; and follow-up. Programs that include these components are as successful in placing homeless people into jobs as more traditional employment programs are in placing non-homeless people.

Regardless of geographic location, homeless people often experience a high rate of labour exploitation, both intentional and circumstantial. Homeless people usually work in marginal occupations characterized by low wages, no benefits, no opportunities for advancement, and face regular lay-offs and work stoppages. An appropriate mechanism including effective labour laws and regulations must be a part of the overall infrastructure to ensure that the homeless population is not exploited.

With globalization touching each of the EU nations, and the shift towards knowledge-based global economies, quality education is key to individual success in the labour market and overall productivity and wealth generation. As in Europe, Canadian data show that there is a clear connection between levels of education and skills and success in the labour market. Individuals with higher levels of education and skills are more likely to be employed, earn higher wages and thus maintain housing. It is therefore essential that the homeless population have access to education, skills development and training.

In tight housing markets, the working poor are highly susceptible to losing a place of residency. The nexus between the housing market and the labour market can thus allow the issues to feed into one another in ways that prolong unemployment and homelessness, but it can also be harnessed as a tool for preventing both. Without integration, a fragmented policy approach and service delivery response, which fails to provide the holistic services needed at both the individual and systemic levels, results in poor outcomes.

A holistic approach would entail cooperation and coordination among social service agencies, employers, and governments at different levels, and across departments. Generally speaking, fostering these types of linkages and coordination is relatively easier for smaller countries than the large ones. This is due to the fact that the socioeconomic policy agendas of larger nations are much more complex and therefore the linkages between key policies are not easily put into effect. This challenge is compounded when a nation is characterized by several tiers of jurisdictions (e.g., federal, regional, municipal). Even if each level of government focuses on addressing homelessness, their approaches often differ and lack of coordination impedes the progress that can be made through greater collaboration.

The United Kingdom's Business Action on Homelessness, which works closely with local homelessness organizations to identify people who are 'ready for work', has been successful in developing the sorts of linkages necessary to assist homeless people attain employment, and is now operating in 22 cities across the UK and Ireland while working with more than 350 companies. These are the sorts of collaborative networks needed.

#### V. Canada's Homelessness Partnering Strategy

Canada's response to homelessness takes the form of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) which took effect on April 1, 2007. The HPS puts in place partnerships and structures, including longer-term housing solutions, and supports homeless individuals to move towards greater self-sufficiency.

The HPS is designed to build and improve upon the work of the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI), which was launched in 1999, renewed for three years in 2003, and extended for one year in 2005. Over the years, the NHI helped build capacity in communities across Canada by providing them with the tools to develop a range of interventions to address the challenges faced by homeless individuals and families.

The HPS is predicated on the following, intended to lead to better outcomes for homeless persons and those at risk of homelessness:

- Partnership: foster partnerships with all levels of government, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector to maximize outcomes;

- Housing-first: recognize that housing stability is a precondition to enhancing the successful outcomes of other interventions;
- Community-based: build on local efforts and established networks in addressing locally identified priorities;
- Accountability: ensure tangible results through rigorous measurement of progress; and
- Targeted: federal funding is mainly targeted at preventative and longer-term housing solutions.

The goal of the new HPS is to prevent and reduce homelessness in Canada and includes three initiatives:

- The Homelessness Partnership Initiative – addresses the needs of designated, outreach, and Aboriginal communities (whether in cities or rural areas);
- The Surplus Federal Real Property for Homelessness Initiative – makes surplus federal property and land available to communities for projects to alleviate homelessness; and
- The Homelessness Accountability Network – strengthens program accountability, develops knowledge, and reinforces the importance of community networks and sharing of best practices.

Employability interventions are supported under the HPS as both preventative and transitional measures. The Strategy funds employment development services such as education, life and social skills training, as well as employability skills enhancement training and education upgrading.

#### *Partnerships under the HPS*

A key feature of the HPS is the strong relationship between the federal government and communities, and new efforts to enhance partnerships - particularly between the federal government and the provinces and territories - to ensure effective solutions to addressing homelessness. In Canada, many of the social programs and services such as: health, education and training fall within provincial jurisdiction. The HPS therefore strives to align its capital investment with provincial and territorial social programs and services. Successful employment and training programs in addition to secured housing could help homeless persons overcome barriers to employment.

The HPS further recognizes that although employment and training programs geared to homeless people could be instrumental in helping homeless persons obtain work, successful completion of an employment program by a homeless person does not necessarily end their homelessness. One needs to find gainful employment that can pay enough to match the affordability of their accommodation and other needs. It is therefore important to promote greater private sector participation to ensure sufficient meaningful employment opportunities for the homeless individuals.

### *Housing-first approach of the HPS*

The HPS adopts a "housing-first" approach which recognizes that housing stability is a precondition to enhancing the successful outcomes of other interventions such as education, employment training, life skills development and treatment for substance abuse or mental health challenges. The Strategy promotes the concept of improved partnering to bring all of the necessary investments and resources together to ensure that both housing and essential supports (such as employment) will be available, helping the homeless population move towards self-sufficiency and fuller participation in society.

In Canada, it has been found that issues pertaining to quality of life often need to be improved before homeless people can maintain employment. As a major social determinant for quality of life, housing can thus play an extremely important role in employment issues. Many people are, quite understandably, unable to maintain work while living on the streets or in overcrowded and unstable living conditions. There is often a need for the provision of housing to precede the pursuit of employment. In fact, in both Canada and Europe, there is a general need for the better integration of housing and homelessness services with labour market assistance programs on the whole.

### VI. Best Practice Examples/Linkages to Employment

Stella Burry Community Services (SBCS) in St. John's, Newfoundland, is one best practice example of a leading Canadian social service agency utilizing integrated programming to provide a holistic suite of education and employment services alongside counselling, supportive housing and affordable housing assistance for vulnerable Canadians. SBCS runs a residential treatment facility and an emergency shelter; provides intensive service supports and homecare; as well as owns and manages a number of rental and rent-to-own properties. The key element of SBCS's work, however, is their education, peer support, training and work experience programs that enable clients to discover talents and create opportunities for employment that is both meaningful and sustainable. SBCS clearly recognizes the benefits of integrated programming and a social enterprise approach, as well as the important role that housing and employment issues play in the development of programs and policies that promote social inclusion for all persons.

In Toronto, Ontario, Eva's Phoenix provides housing for 50 youth for up to a full year, as well as employment and pre-apprenticeship programs. Working with business, labour and community partners, Eva's Phoenix provides homeless and at-risk youth with the opportunities needed to develop life skills, build careers and live independently. Their program includes the Phoenix Print Shop, a training facility and commercial print shop that gives homeless and at-risk youth opportunities to learn the basic skills needed for long-term self-sufficiency in the graphic communications industry. This social enterprise was developed after Canada's graphic communications industry identified a critical need for hands-on training facilities and trained young people.

In 2006, the long-term vacancy rate for jobs in the small- and medium-sized enterprises market surpassed the 2004 and 2005 rates, triggering a rise in the number of unfilled positions in Canada's workforce. A 2005 survey found that 27% of Canadian business owners had at least one position available (CFIB). By focusing on the problems and needs of homeless people and providing packages of support and guidance, organizations such as Eva's Phoenix help to address particular skills and employment shortages in the labour market. Canadian employers tapping into the workforce-potential of homeless and traditionally underrepresented populations is reflected by some of our EU counterparts. For example, in the UK, recent skill shortages combined with high employment rates have resulted in employment programs targeted at homeless people.

Another best practice is the Street Youth Job Action (SYJA), a social enterprise initiative of Directions Youth Services Centre that provides mentoring and development opportunities for homeless youth in Vancouver, British Columbia. The project gives youth an opportunity to learn a set of skills and behaviours to prepare them for the workforce. Community partners hire SYJA youth to perform services such as street beautification, including street garbage and graffiti removal. The program focuses on the development of soft skills, such as teamwork, punctuality, communication, work ethic, and community involvement, necessary to succeed in today's labour market.

In Toronto, another success story is Homeward Bound, an innovative program designed to help women and their children transition from shelter life to economic self-sufficiency. Homeward Bound provides supports through employment training, transitional housing, on-site child care, one-on-one counselling for the mothers and their children, and many other vital services. The program's primary goal is to support 32 women and their children to move into independent housing and to have employment with family sustaining incomes within three years.

The program works closely with a private sector board, consisting of representatives from banking organizations who discuss their human resources (HR) needs (e.g., law clerks; HR personnel). Based on these current and/or future HR needs, the partners determine what career paths are eligible for support. The 32 women who are accepted into the program are housed in the apartments on-site, and choose which career identified by the board they would like to pursue. The participant then engages in a mix of college education, work placements and life skills training over, typically, a three-year period. A law firm, one of the program's major partners, covers the college tuition costs of the program participants. Following the completion of the program, graduates are then placed in positions for at least 18 months with the private sector partners.

Through these integrated, co-operative, and innovative programs, homeless individuals in Canada are entering the labour market and escaping homelessness.

## VII. Conclusion

Ending homelessness requires closing the gap between incomes and housing costs. In such an equation, jobs that pay a living wage are critical. The attainment of employment for homeless people and those at risk of homelessness can immediately lead to improved outcomes in the short term, and in the long term, result in productive, healthy, and socially engaged citizens experiencing a high quality of life and contributing to the betterment of their local economy, nation, and the world stage at large.

While examples of best practices linking homelessness and employment programs exist in Canada, the HPS is now working to fully integrate the theme of homelessness and employment into the overall thematic structure of the Strategy, as a policy imperative, so that meaningful employment can play an integral part in supporting people in their move out of homelessness and into self-sufficiency. From a Canadian perspective, FEANTSA's focus on this theme has been extremely helpful to our own policy development in Canada.

The lessons learned regarding how to best address employment and homelessness issues in Europe and Canada contribute to a shared body of knowledge, which when collectively drawn upon, will help to strengthen nation responses across the globe.

Citation

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