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# Plan to End Youth Homelessness in Calgary

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Calgary  
Homeless  
Foundation

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# Executive summary

## Q&A

### 1. What is youth homelessness and why develop a Plan to End Youth Homelessness in Calgary?

On the journey to end homelessness in Calgary, it became clear that young people (under the age of 24) require a plan tailored to their unique needs. Research and local consultations told us that most young people enter into homelessness largely as a result of difficulties in their families. Young people experiencing homelessness for the first time are likely leaving a setting in which their lives were governed by adult caregivers (i.e. parents, foster parents, group homes). The pathway into youth homelessness also often involves episodes of hidden homelessness (i.e. couch surfing, staying with friends).

Youth homelessness is unique because young people:

- are physically, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually and socially still developing – they are adults-in-progress with unique strengths and assets;
- enter into homelessness with little or no work experience;
- are often forced into leaving their education (i.e. junior high and high school) as a result of their homelessness;
- experience high levels of criminal victimization, including sexual exploitation; and
- often enter into homelessness without life skills such as cooking, money management and job searching.

Youth homelessness is also unique because young people (under the age of 18) have distinct legal entitlements and restrictions separate from those of adults. Attached to these separate legal entitlements and restrictions is a dedicated justice system, education system, child protection system and health services.

The accepted definition of youth homelessness in the Plan to End Youth Homelessness in Calgary (Youth Plan) is as follows: “A homeless youth is an unaccompanied person age 24 and under lacking a permanent night time residence. They can be living on the street, in shelters, couch surfing, in unsafe and insecure housing, and living in abusive situations. They may also be about to be discharged without the security of a regular residence from a care, correction, health, or any other facility,” (*Setting the Course: A Blueprint to End Youth Homelessness in Calgary*, 2009).

The updated 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness in Calgary (10 Year Plan) recognized a community call for action and the Youth Plan was built into Strategy One: Prevention and Rehousing.

## **2. How many young people are homeless in Calgary?**

According to the 2008 Biennial Homeless Count<sup>1</sup>, the homeless youth population is growing at an alarming rate. In 2006, the homeless youth group age 17 years and younger grew by 34% and the 18 to 24 age group grew by 41%. The 2008 count totaled 355 persons under the age of 18 and 327 youth were between the ages of 18 and 24. In total, youth homelessness represents approximately 20% of the total Calgary homeless population. These figures underestimate the magnitude of the homeless population; young people often engage in hidden homelessness activities (couch surfing with friends and/ or sleeping outside) and therefore do not show up in the above-noted statistics.

## **3. Why is youth homelessness a concern?**

A number of recent Canadian and local Calgary studies identified the extremely vulnerable circumstances young people experience while they are homeless. The recent 2010 *Surviving Crime and Violence: Street Youth and Victimization in Toronto* report revealed that street youth experience incredibly high rates of criminal victimization, “with over 76% reporting at least one instance [of criminal victimization] in the previous 12 months, with almost three quarters (72.8%) reporting multiple incidents of victimization,” (Gaetz et al, 2010). According to the same study, street youth have weak support networks and are less likely to reach out to persons in authority during times of crisis. “Only 16% reported telling their social workers or counselors about their worst recent experience of victimization, while around 20% alerted the police,” (Gaetz et al, 2010).

Without a commitment to addressing youth homelessness, the number of street-involved youth will continue to accelerate. Consequently, the associated health care, criminal justice, social services and emergency shelter costs will also continue to grow. Investing in youth homelessness goes beyond dollars and cents; it requires on-going research, as well as well-coordinated and innovative interventions to prevent and end youth homelessness. Ending youth homelessness requires a strategic plan.

## **4. What does an end to youth homelessness in Calgary look like?**

The Youth Plan is a plan driven by innovation, not invention. This means extracting value what we already know. What we know comes from the experience and feedback of young people,<sup>2</sup> service providers, the wider community and quality research. In essence, the Youth Plan builds on and adds value to the knowledge and structure of the current system.

## **5. What are the key milestones in the Youth Plan?**

- By January 29, 2018, reduce the maximum average stay in an emergency shelter to less than seven days. By that point, any young person in emergency shelter will be moved into stable, safe and appropriate homes.
- By 2014, complete an agreed upon Common Assessment Framework that is aligned with the overall 10 Year Plan Systems Planning Framework.

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), Calgary relied on information gathered through the Biennial Homeless Counts published by The City of Calgary to assess information about the numbers of homeless youth. Implementation of the HMIS started in January 2011 and will be able to gather more precise information about the actual number of homeless youth in Calgary on an on-going basis.

<sup>2</sup> A Youth Advisory Panel will help ensure dedicated involvement of young people as the Youth Plan is implemented and evaluated.

- By 2014, ensure Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)<sup>3</sup> implementation in 90% of homeless-serving agencies accessed by young people. All youth shelters should participate in HMIS by December 2012 to allow for the counting of homeless youth across the system of care.
- By 2015, ensure that no more than 10% of young people served by Housing First programs return to homelessness.
- By 2018, Aboriginal homeless young people will not be over represented in the homeless population. According to The City of Calgary 2008 Biennial Homeless Count, Aboriginal young people and children represent 28% of the homeless population under 24 years old. Census Canada 2006 data revealed that 2% of the Calgary population self-identify as Aboriginal.

The “seven-day average length of stay in emergency shelters” milestone is intended to ensure that *on average* young people are not experiencing prolonged periods of homelessness in shelters (past seven days). Emphasis needs to be placed on the word “average,” as it is not the intent of this milestone to set time limits on how long young people are eligible to stay in shelter spaces. The Calgary community and Calgary Homeless Foundation (Foundation) support a zero discharge into homelessness policy.

Young people, particularly those under the age of 18, need timely and appropriate assessments to ensure they are matched to correct services. At times, this assessment period may be longer than a seven-day period, particularly if family reunification or Children and Youth Services interventions are required. Innovation around shelter developments may be required for young people experiencing homelessness for the first time and youth who are particularly young (under 16 years old). This innovation may come in the form of rapid rehousing/family reunification services – an innovation preventing young people from becoming entrenched in street life and emergency shelter living arrangements.

According to The City of Calgary Biennial Homeless Count, young people under the age of 24 years old represent 20% of the total homeless population. Of that 20%, the majority of homeless young people are living in adult emergency shelters (approximately 88% of the total homeless youth population). The end to youth homelessness in Calgary will ensure young people do not become entrenched in adult shelter living.

## **6. What are the strategies to achieve the milestones in the Youth Plan?**

At the core of the Youth Plan are the following three broad strategies.

- a) Strategy 1 – Build a coordinated system to prevent and end youth homelessness in Calgary  
Keeping in line with Phase 2 of the updated 10 Year Plan, the Youth Plan involves a process to build a coordinated, youth homeless-serving system. This includes:
  - having a system of key components: emergency shelters, outreach, transitional housing and supports, permanent housing/homes with supports and rapid re-housing (or family reunification); and

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<sup>3</sup> HMIS is a web-based software application that will lead to a more coordinated system of care for Calgarians at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

- coordinating activities and tools that help link the key components through: 1) a common objective: “to end youth homelessness,” 2) collective support for Housing First policies and practice, 3) a shared understanding on quality standards of care, 4) collection and sharing of high-quality research, 5) a common assessment framework and central referral process, 6) shared tools and resources, such as the HMIS, and 7) system and program outcomes, and performance measurement.

The goals under Strategy 1 are to:

- build system initiatives to prevent youth homelessness;
- ensure zero discharge into youth homelessness;
- create innovative emergency shelter outreach services;
- develop services for youth who are chronically<sup>4</sup> and episodically<sup>5</sup> homeless; and
- encourage innovative, coordinated and targeted initiatives aimed at homeless or formerly homeless young people transitioning to independence.

- b) Strategy 2 – Develop an adequate number of housing units and supportive homes dedicated to youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness

The goals under Strategy 2 are to:

- add housing for youth who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness; and
- work with the government to create family-style homes.

- c) Strategy 3 – Improve data systems knowledge and influence public policy

Keeping in line with Strategy 4, Goal 1, of Calgary’s 10 Year Plan, the Foundation will keep its commitment to implement an HMIS. The HMIS system considers youth-specific needs and services. The goals in Strategy 3 are to:

- implement the HMIS;
- gain a detailed understanding of youth homelessness;
- advocate for a provincial effort to end youth homelessness;
- adopt an inclusive definition of youth homelessness;
- encourage more Children and Youth Services support for homeless youth under 18;
- build income supports for young people transitioning into independence; and
- provide more access to post-secondary education.

## 7. What is unique about the Youth Plan?

It is the first city-wide plan to end youth homelessness in Canada. Instead of an agency-led view of youth homelessness, the Youth Plan has a comprehensive systems view about young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Strategies developed in the Youth Plan are underpinned by consultations and quality research about what works and what doesn’t.

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<sup>4</sup> Chronic: Lengthy experience of continual homelessness. People experiencing this kind of homelessness are often long-term shelter users who possess additional factors, such as very high acuity (vulnerability related to serious physical and mental health issues; may include addictions), presence of a serious mental illness (untreated or not consistently treated), high use of resources and rough sleeping (sleeping outside). Further research is recommended in Strategy 4 to understand youth chronic homelessness.

<sup>5</sup> Episodic: Recurring episodes of homelessness throughout a lifetime, higher acuity (vulnerability related to poorer health, chronic health issues and behavioural issues) can indicate the presence of an addiction or substance misuse concern.

The Youth Plan places a special emphasis on preventing youth homelessness. Detecting young people at risk of homelessness and providing them with timely support and intervention services is critical and is a major focus in the Youth Plan. The Youth Plan system ensures young people in Calgary can enter through “no wrong door.”

The Youth Plan places specific emphasis on Aboriginal youth homelessness in Calgary. There is a special emphasis on increasing supports, awareness and services dedicated to Aboriginal young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness in Calgary.

## **8. Who created the Youth Plan?**

The Youth Plan was created by the community. The Youth Plan underwent consultations with a range of stakeholders. The core stakeholders in the consultation process were young people who experienced homelessness and the Youth Sector<sup>6</sup>, bringing young people and adults together to make decisions about a cohesive Youth Plan for Calgary.

Leading up to the development of the Youth Plan, a series of consultations were held with young people starting in 2007.

- More than 50 young people and community agencies at the Foundation “Youth and Homelessness Public Consultation” recommended system-wide changes to help end youth homelessness.
- At the Foundation’s Youth Summit (May 2009), about 25 young people participated in developing the agenda and planning the conference. More than 160 people attended, representing a wide range of young people, Calgary’s youth-serving sector and community organizations.

The Youth Plan was produced as a result of recommendations set out in the proceeding consultations and through on-going collaboration with the Youth Sector Committee (Committee)<sup>7</sup> and young people.

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<sup>6</sup> “The Youth Sector is comprised of a number of members, funders or participants from a range of youth-serving agencies in Calgary. The Youth Sector has a broad mandate that includes participation in the collaborative granting process of the Community Action Committee (CAC), community education, awareness raising, social policy political lobbying in support of issues related to youth homelessness, strategic planning for action and programming that addresses youth homelessness, information sharing and networking.” (Youth Sector Strategic Plan, 2009-12). The Youth Sector includes; Alberta Health Services (Mental Health & Addictions), The Alex Youth Health Centre, Calgary Sexual Health, Catholic Family Services (Louise Dean Centre), City of Calgary (Children and Youth Services, Community and Neighbourhood), The Calgary John Howard Society, McMan Youth, Family & Community Services, The Canadian Red Cross, The Boys and Girls Club of Calgary, United Way of Calgary, Calgary Police Service (Vulnerable Persons Unit), Calgary and Area Child and Family Service Authority, Woods Homes and the Youth Criminal Defense Office.

<sup>7</sup> This group included: Kari Welsh (Youth Criminal Defence Office), David Staines (Calgary John Howard Society), Jim Beaton (Calgary John Howard Society), Derek MacGregor (Calgary and Area Child and Family Services Authority), Janet Arnold (Hull Child and Family Services - Bridging the Program), and Darlene Petrie (McMan Youth, Family and Community Services Association). The Youth Alternative Housing Committee essentially merged with the Youth Sector.

# Background

## Youth Sector consultations

The Youth Sector is comprised of a number of members, funders and participants from a range of agencies in Calgary. “The Sector has a broad mandate that includes participation in the collaborative granting process of the Community Action Committee (CAC), community education, awareness raising, social policy political lobbying in support of issues related to youth homelessness, strategic planning for action and programming that addresses youth homelessness, information sharing and networking,” (Youth Sector Strategic Plan, 2009-12).

The Youth Plan is a *living plan*<sup>8</sup>. It identifies concrete strategies, milestones and key stakeholders, but it is also designed to respond to the changing needs of young people and service providers. A youth advisory panel will help provide input as the Youth Plan is implemented in Calgary. As well, wider community stakeholders will be brought into the fold of consultations and engagement, upon implementation.

## Introduction

### 1. Defining youth homelessness

Youth homelessness is not easily defined. According to a diverse range of governing bodies, research reports and youth-serving organizations, there is not firm agreement about what age groups constitute “youth” on the topic of youth homelessness. Age ranges that have been considered include people aged 12 to 29 years old.<sup>9</sup> This lack of consensus has a direct impact on data collection and service provision for young people. A literature review of youth homelessness reveals that the most consistent definition of youth includes young people ages 12 to 24 years old, inclusive (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006).

Homeless youth include: runaways, who have left home without parental permission; young people who have been forced to leave home by their parents; street youth who have spent at least some time living on the streets; and systems youth — i.e., young people who become homeless after aging out of foster care or exiting the juvenile justice system (Farrow et al. 1992; Toro, Dworsky & Fowler, 2007). Homeless youth include those in care who lack permanent housing.<sup>10</sup>

Youth homelessness exists within a broad and complex spectrum of circumstances. This includes young people who are precariously housed, couch surfing, sleeping in shelters (adult or youth shelters), sleeping rough (outside), and experiencing episodic and/or chronic homelessness.

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<sup>8</sup> A living plan: The community recognizes that the Youth Plan's implementation will adapt and evolve, responding to:

- shifting landscapes (macro-economics, funding, policy changes, political support and public opinion);
- what is learned from HMIS and research;
- evaluation and monitoring of rehousing with support programs;
- consultation with those at risk of or experiencing homelessness and homeless-serving agencies; and
- evolving “best practices” in ending homelessness.

<sup>9</sup> A legal minor in Alberta is any young person under the age of 18.

<sup>10</sup> Housing is permanent and/or services delivered result in ultimate outcome of permanent housing. Permanent housing may include reunification with family leading to long-term, stable housing outcomes for youth under the age of 18. Affordable housing with comprehensive supportive services (either on-site or available) is designed to serve episodic or chronically homeless/high resource-using persons to retain stable housing.

## 2. Youth homelessness is not new to Calgary

To identify the strategies and programs that will help end youth homelessness in Calgary, the issue needs to be viewed in a historical context. Youth homelessness is not a social concern that has happened in isolation of other events; single adult and family homelessness have also been increasing in Canada. Although accurate statistics on the homeless population are hard to gather, there is some general agreement amongst researchers that homelessness has been increasing considerably in Canada since the 1980s.<sup>11</sup>

It would be inaccurate to hold one single event or agent responsible for increased levels of youth and adult homelessness in Canada, but there are a few historical developments worth noting.

- In the mid-1980s, political leaders amongst several countries who are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) such as Canada, the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (U.K.) adopted an ideological view about how countries should or should not be governed. This definition sought to maximize the role of unregulated markets in the private sector and aimed to constrain government spending and public goods ownership. In light of this ideological shift, Canadian social policies, directly or indirectly related to homelessness, underwent reforms at the federal and provincial government levels.<sup>12</sup>
- In 1991, the federal government proposed constitutional changes that included a shifting of housing and Municipal – Urban Affairs responsibility from federal jurisdiction to provincial jurisdiction, stating that this area was “more properly the responsibility of the provinces,” (Canada, 1991:36-37).
- In 1996, the Canadian Federal Government revoked the Canada Assistance Plan Act, which ensured that all people in need were eligible to receive support that covered their basic necessities, including housing costs.

At a more provincial and local Calgary level, a number of reforms that were more directly related to youth homelessness were undertaken. In 1998, the Youth Sector Committee (Committee) was formed in Calgary by a group of practitioners to address the needs of non-status (young people without child intervention status) homeless youth.

The Committee saw an increase in youth homelessness in Calgary due to changes in policies, practices and perspectives (as stated in the Youth Sector Strategic Plan). These included:

- the end of the Alberta provincial government’s Joint Integrated Measures for Youth Program (JIMY)<sup>13</sup> in 1994. Cuts to JIMY left at-risk 16 and 17 year olds without comparable options;<sup>14</sup>
- misconceptions that youth were homeless by choice;

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<sup>11</sup> United Nations (2009). Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living and on the right to non-discrimination in this context by Miloon Kothari. Based on Mission to Canada October 9 to 22, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Since the mid-1980s, federal transfers of cash to the provinces and territories (funding that can be used for services such as education and welfare programs) declined as a percentage of GDP. In the mid-1980s, transfer payments were approximately 4.5% of GDP, but by the late 1990s they had dropped to approximately 2.5% of GDP.

<sup>13</sup> Joint Integrated Measures for Youth Program (JIMY) provided financial assistance to young people who faced homelessness.

<sup>14</sup> The JIMY program was deemed essential by the Minister of Social Services in the province of Alberta. Honourable John Oldring in June 1989, said, “We are concerned about making sure those essential services are being met. There are a number of programs in place in Calgary that are working very efficiently. Calgary Integrated Services, with their Calgary life improvement program; we’re still working with the Catholic Family Service bureau; we’re still working with the joint integrated measures for youth [JIMY Program]: a number of good programs that are meeting those needs. We’ll continue to meet those needs. We’ve done it in the past, and we will in the future.” (Alberta Hansard, Legislative Assembly, June 29, 1989) The JIMY Program was cancelled almost five years after this statement was made.

- Child Protection Services experiencing difficulty adequately meeting the needs of youth, especially those 15 to 17, who were not deemed as being in need of protection and who were homeless;
- the practice of housing youth, due to lack of other options, at the Calgary Young Offender Centre (CYOC) who otherwise would have been released; and
- gaps in service for youth, especially those not having child intervention status.

The Youth Sector formally came into existence with the creation of the Foundation and the associated CAC/Sector Council. The Youth Sector now exists as one of nine sector committees, each with a focus on different aspects of homelessness. The Youth Sector must contend with an entire spectrum of issues related to youth and homelessness, such as absolute and relative homelessness, addictions, mental health, domestic violence, Aboriginal populations and family homelessness.

## Guiding principles

The 10 Year Plan identifies the principles that should guide the community's plan to end all homelessness. In turn, these principles apply to the strategies and goals set out in the Youth Plan, but with a youth-specific focus.

- Ending youth homelessness is a collective responsibility; it is about young people and adults coming together to own the actions needed to end youth homelessness.
- Young people need homes, not just housing. The Youth Plan aims to ensure young people end up in positive, sustainable homes, wherever they may fit on the continuum from living in a safe and positive family home to living in a safe and positive home independently.
- Ending youth homelessness requires youth participation, whereby young people and adults share decision making.
- Young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness are not a homogeneous group. Like adults, young people have diverse, complex and unique identities that need to be recognized throughout implementation of the Youth Plan and service delivery. This would include the needs of youth with mental health and/or addictions issues, youth with developmental disabilities, Aboriginal youth, young people who are new to Calgary with cultural and religious needs and LGBTQTT<sup>15</sup> (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and two-spirited) youth.
- Resources will be concentrated on programs that offer measurable results.
- Funding for the Youth Plan must be diverse and sustainable.
- A supported, trained and adequately-funded non-profit sector is key to the success of the Youth Plan.
- All services dedicated to young people must take on a client-centered approach.
- Young people experiencing chronic homelessness must be prioritized.
- The objective of homeless-serving systems, agencies, programs and funding must be guided by a Housing First philosophy.
- All homes and affordable housing for young people are safe, decent and readily attainable. Housing that is diverse, integrated, located throughout the city, affordable and close to youth-friendly services is preferred.

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<sup>15</sup> LGBTQTT: An acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Transgendered, inter-sexed or trans-identified and Two-spirited (University of Calgary, <http://www.ucalgary.ca/positivespace/node/37>).

- All rights and responsibilities set out in the Children, Youth and Family Enhancement Act Alberta will be identified, upheld and brought forward.
- Homeless-serving systems, agencies, programs and funding should work to diminish the chance young people will experience homelessness as adults.

## Why invest in youth homelessness?

Some might argue that young people are at the start of their lives, full of energy and have a lifetime of opportunities. Understanding why the community should take action on youth homelessness requires a more profound understanding about the circumstances in which young people become homeless and the barriers that they face in attempting to exit homelessness. If young people are not successful in exiting homelessness in their early years, they become more susceptible to chronic and/or episodic homelessness as adults.

### 1. Youth are highly vulnerable

Findings from local Calgary research, *Calgary Youth, Health and the Street* (CYHSS) report (Worthington et al, 2009)<sup>16</sup>, and the *Seeking Sanctuary: An Exploration of the Realities of Youth Homelessness in Calgary* study (McLean, 2005)<sup>17 18</sup> support Toronto study findings that there are heightened levels of vulnerability in this population. In fact, 75% of those surveyed in the CYHSS reported being the victim of violence on the street and 62% reported they were violent towards others while on the street (Worthington et al., 2009). Young people also demonstrated higher levels of victimization compared with chronically homeless adults (135 chronic homeless adults reported a 69% rate of victimization) (Foundation, 2008).

### 2. Costs associated with youth homelessness

First and foremost, making a commitment to end youth homelessness should take place because it is the right thing to do. Beyond this obligation, there is also a cost associated with youth homelessness. Without a commitment to addressing youth homelessness, the number of street-involved youth will continue to accelerate. Consequently, the associated health care, criminal justice, social services and emergency shelter costs will also continue to grow. Investing in youth homelessness goes beyond dollars and cents; it requires ongoing research, as well as well-coordinated and innovative interventions to prevent and end youth homelessness.

## Facts on youth homelessness in Calgary

Beyond high rates of criminal victimization, homeless young people engage in street survival behavior that hinders their healthy development and well-being. These collective experiences have long-term effects on opportunities in the education system and workforce, and impact positive networks of informal supports.

<sup>16</sup> A comprehensive survey of street-involved youth under 25 years of age administered in 2005-06 (N=355) provided an up-to-date detailed picture of demographics, health and housing needs, homelessness experiences and causes, and systems interaction.

<sup>17</sup> Focused on Calgary youth ages 12 to 17 years without child intervention status with the Ministry of Children & Youth (N=354).

<sup>18</sup> Other important research on Calgary homeless youth includes the 2003 Youth Sector Report using data from the 2002 Calgary Homeless Study (Gardiner & Cairns, 2003).

### **1. Mental and physical health concerns**

- 43% reported a childhood mental illness diagnosis (Worthington et al., 2009). This rate is higher than that reported by chronic homeless adults surveyed using the Vulnerability Index (32%) (Foundation, 2008). This is confirmed by Canadian studies on homeless youth (Frankish, Hwang & Quantz, 2005).
- 57% reported having seriously thought about attempting suicide and 38% had attempted suicide (Worthington et al., 2009).
- 33% reported being diagnosed with a childhood physical condition (Worthington et al., 2009).
- 37% reported having a learning disability (Worthington et al., 2009).

### **2. Substance abuse**

Homeless youth have high levels of substance use, which started at early ages, and are engaged in risky activities.

- About one-third (29%) reported using alcohol or drugs prior to age 12; 57% started between ages 12 and 15, and 14% started after age 15 (Worthington et al., 2009).
- Most (94%) reported using a substance in the past two weeks. The substances included: 93% tobacco, 87% marijuana, 67% hash, 41% ecstasy, 41% crack, 40% cocaine, 32% LSD, 24% crystal meth, 15% heroin, and 13% glue/gas (Worthington et al., 2009). The rate of substance abuse is comparable with that of chronically homeless adults (95%) (Foundation, 2008).
- Of the 21% who reported using injection drugs, 29% shared needles or injection equipment (Worthington et al., 2009).

### **3. Sexual exploitation**

- About 20% of male youth and 33% of female youth reported being engaged in survival/obligatory sex.
- Sexual exploitation is a major problem that homeless youth deal with, as 13% of males and 45% of females are recorded as being forced into the sex trade (prostitution).
- About 10% of males and 19% of females were involved in recruiting for prostitution and 54% of both genders were involved in “spotting” (on the lookout for police) (Worthington et al., 2009).
- Approximately 56% of the young people surveyed about sexual exploitation stated that they were forced into the sex trade between the ages of 13 and 16, 20% were forced into the trade before age 13, and 24% were forced into the sex trade after age 16 (Worthington et al., 2009).
- These findings are consistent with street youth across Canada, with 22.6% reporting being exploited in the sex trade while homeless.

### **4. High levels of sexual activity, pregnancy rates and engagement in risky sexual activities**

- Most homeless youth reported having had sex; only 4% of males and 10% of females reported never having had sex (Worthington et al., 2009).
- About half (48%) of the homeless youth reported having been pregnant or having caused a pregnancy (Worthington et al., 2009).
- Only 26% reported using condoms for sexual intercourse all the time, 46% reported using condoms some/most of the time and 26% used them rarely/never (Worthington et al., 2009).

## 5. Shelter and housing

Many young people (16 to 24 years old) use adult shelters, despite considering this as an “option of last resort.” Statistics from 2008 include the:

- Calgary Drop-In Centre reporting 1,200 unique intakes for youth 16 to 24;
- Wood’s Homes Exit Youth Shelter housing 712 young people between the ages of 12 to 17 years; and
- Salvation Army Centre of Hope reporting 449 unique intakes of the 18 to 24 age group.

It is difficult to estimate the size of the homeless youth population, but this data indicates it could be as high as 2,000 individuals. In-depth interviews with street-involved youth in the CYHSS study suggested that accessing shelters was seen as a last resort by street-involved youth in Calgary; couch surfing, staying outside, living in group homes, pairing up with other street-involved youth and temporarily staying with family members were more common. Couch surfing was the preferred form of shelter by interview participants, as it provided the most privacy and freedom (Worthington et al, 2009).

Street-involved youth are precariously housed and relocate often. Of the 46% of street-involved youth who were currently living on the street in the CYHSS study, 45% spent the last night in a shelter, 20% slept outside and 17% were couch surfing. Of those currently not living on the streets, 64% had lived on the street in the past.

Homeless youth are also very mobile. About half (52%) of all the CYHSS participants spent time on the street in other cities (Worthington et al. 2009). Research from a study on youth without child intervention status between the ages of 12 and 17 showed that those who arrived in Calgary within the last six months came from rural and urban sites across Canada. Recent arrivals cited the search for work (66%) as the primary motivation for coming to Calgary, followed by receiving positive recommendations from other street youth about the city (18%), and trying to escape threats of harm in their previous locale (16%) (McLean, 2005).

Data consistently shows that the longer youth stay on the street without effective interventions, the more likely their entrenchment in homelessness (McLean 2005, Hoffart & Cairns, 2009).

## 6. Education, income and employment

The CHYSS (Worthington et al., 2009) reported the following findings.

Education – Among street-involved youth, 45% were kicked out of school, suspended or had dropped out, and 46% indicated they had been in special classes in school. Because of their early drop-out rates, youth lack the skills needed to compete for well-paid jobs. This impacts their capacity to exit homelessness and entrenches them in street-life further, as many rely on informal income generating activities.<sup>19</sup>

Income and Employment – Homeless youth make a living mostly by being employed and by receiving limited government income assistance; younger cohorts rely primarily on informal income sources.

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<sup>19</sup> Calgary data shows that youth who have mental or physical illnesses, who have lower education levels than average (in this case, lower than grade 10), and who are female are likely to face increased barriers to employment. Recent research has indicated that unemployment is highly correlated with incarceration. Further, higher levels of unemployment are correlated with increased risk of re-offense. However, it may be particularly difficult and, in some cases, virtually impossible for homeless youth who have been incarcerated to become employed without stable housing and support to find and maintain suitable work (Gardiner & Cairns 2003).

- Most youth in the Calgary CYHSS earned an income through employment (49%), government or family supports (14%), casual work (10%) and illegal activities (6%), while 13% noted no income source (Worthington et al., 2009).
- Approximately 14% of Calgary street-involved youth reported receiving social welfare, which is a significantly lower number compared to other street-involved youth across Canada (31% on average are receiving social welfare supports) (PHAC, 2006a).
- It is important to note that the 12 to 17 year olds without child intervention status reported their primary income generation/survival activities were from panhandling (46%), the drug trade (14%), and the sex trade (22%); as opposed to employment (McLean, 2005).

## 7. Support systems

Homeless youth rely heavily on informal supports in their home communities, particularly their friends, and tend to access formal services only after these other supports are exhausted. Youth and service providers identify a general 3X3 rule with respect to couch surfing with friends. That is, a young person can typically call upon support, in the form of a place to sleep, from three friends for approximately three weeks each (McLean, 2005).

When asked who they could really count on, street-involved youth in the CYHSS reported:

- 13% said “myself,” 43% said one or two people and 23% said there were no adults they could really trust (Worthington et al., 2009); and
- 49% said their friends on the street were employed full/part time, 30% said their friends attended school, 55% said their friends sell/run drugs, 47% said their friends panhandle, 41% said their friends steal/sell goods, 31% said their friends hustle/con/scam, and 22% said their friends dumpster dive (Worthington et al., 2009).

## 8. Youth interaction with and perspectives on street services

Youth reported frequently using the following services in the last three months:

- 48% shelters;
- 44% drop-in centres;
- 37% outreach services;
- 32% food banks;
- 25% employment services;
- 17% counseling services; and
- 11% none (Worthington et al, 2009).

Youth who participated in in-depth interviews in the CYHSS had differing perspectives on shelters and outreach based on their level of street involvement.<sup>20</sup> When asked about problems with each service type, the majority (51% to 64%) of youth who participated in the CYHSS survey said, “they have not had any problems,” and only 5% to 10% reported specific issues. Youth currently living on the street were more likely to report problems, such as:

- affordable housing – 67% described problems finding affordable housing;
- food banks – 11% were refused service;

<sup>20</sup> *No history on the street* – street-involved, but have not lived on the street; *history on street* – not currently living on the street, but have lived on the street in the past; *youth on street* – youth currently living on the street (Worthington et al. 2009).

- shelters – 18% claimed the staff was not helpful, 16% were refused service and 14% felt the rules are too strict;
- drop-in centers – 13% claimed the staff was not helpful and 13% felt the rules are too strict; and
- financial aid – 11% were refused service and 10% felt the rules are too strict (Worthington et al., 2009).

## **What does an end to youth homelessness look like in Calgary?**

The seven day average length of stay milestone is intended to ensure that, on *average*, young people are not experiencing prolonged periods of homelessness in shelters (past seven days). Emphasis is placed on the word ‘average’ because it is not the intent of this milestone to set time limits on how long young people are eligible to stay in shelter spaces. The Calgary community and Foundation support a zero discharge into homelessness policy.

Young people, particularly those under the age of 18, need timely and appropriate assessments to ensure they are matched to correct services. At times, this assessment period may be longer than a seven-day period, particularly if family reunification and/or Children Services interventions are required. Innovation around shelter developments may be required for young people experiencing homelessness for the first time and youth who are particularly young (under 16 years old). This innovation may come in the form of “rapid rehousing/family reunification” services – an innovation preventing young people from becoming entrenched in street life and emergency shelter living arrangements.

According to The City of Calgary Biennial Homeless Count, 20% of the total homeless population are young people under the age of 24 years old. Of that 20%, the majority of homeless young people are living in adult emergency shelters (approximately 88% of the total homeless youth population).

An end to youth homelessness in Calgary requires a special emphasis on prevention services. Ending youth homelessness requires effective interventions that engage youth as early in the cycle of homelessness as possible and helps to stabilize them in appropriate, supportive environments. Detecting young people at risk of homelessness and providing them with timely support and intervention services is absolutely critical and is a major focus in the Youth Plan. It is imperative that intervention occurs quickly and at critical stages, so that further entrenchment into street life and the associated harmful effects of street life are not endured by young people.

For young people in Calgary, it entails a system where young people can enter through “no wrong door.” Through coordinating activities in a system of key components (see page 18), young people will receive services that first assess their needs and then match those needs to the correct service. A special emphasis is placed on the importance of matching clients to appropriate intervention and how these interventions work together toward the system goal of ending homelessness. High-quality research dedicated to identifying and targeting measures is fundamental to an accurate system of “the right services, for the right person.” This system applies to young people who are at risk of homelessness, who require emergency homelessness services or who are exiting/transitioning out of homelessness.

This system also places special emphasis on the strengthening of informal support networks (positive family, friends, mentors, co-workers, associates, educators, neighbours, etc.) for young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Informal supports are not organized like the formal

systems, but instead are available when young people need them (i.e. get together to help someone move, put a good word in for employment opportunities, take up a collection and so on).

The Youth Plan proposes that a collaborative approach be taken to redesign the homeless youth service system in collaboration with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, community funders and other community agencies. To this end, the homeless youth service system must include the key elements listed below.

- A shared accountability and philosophy are developed throughout the community for homeless youth service system and outcomes.
- Community resources are acquired and mobilized to address homeless youth issues.
- Approaches are research- and outcome-based, integrated, accountable, measurable, comprehensive and efficient (Kidd & Davidson 2006).
- Interventions engage youth as partners in planning and decision-making. Each youth should be seen as an individual and an adult-in-progress, with unique strengths and assets.
- The diversity of the at-risk and homeless population, particularly in ethnicity and sexual orientation, needs to be appropriately addressed in program design and throughout service delivery. More specifically, there must be critical attention to meet the needs of Aboriginal people, youth with disabilities, newcomers and LGBTQTT youth.

## **A special emphasis on services for Aboriginal youth**

The Youth Plan places a special emphasis on increasing supports, awareness and services dedicated to Aboriginal young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness in Calgary. There are many reasons for this special emphasis. As one study points out, “There is a strong link between Aboriginal children growing up with involvement with Child Welfare and becoming homeless as youth,” (*Structural Determinants as the Cause of Homelessness for Aboriginal Youth*, Cyndy Baskin (Ph.D.) School of Social Work, Ryerson University, Ontario). The link between Children and Youth Services’ involvement and Aboriginal youth homeless needs to be examined further in an Alberta context. For instance, of all children and young people in Children and Youth Services’ care in Alberta, 64% were Aboriginal (Government of Alberta, Children and Youth Services Ministry, October 2010). Also according to *Structural Determinants as the Cause of Homelessness for Aboriginal Youth*, an emphasis needs to be placed on understanding how structural determinants<sup>21</sup> lead to youth homelessness.

### **1. Recommendations by the Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness (ASCHH)**

The Youth Plan supports ASCHH<sup>22</sup> recommendations:

- to end Aboriginal homelessness, and other housing issues, while understanding cultural competencies and ensuring cultural sensitivities through collaborative community efforts and awareness of cultural identity;

<sup>21</sup> The United Nations Native Society states that Aboriginal homelessness includes “those who have suffered from the effects of colonization and whose social, economic and political conditions have placed them in a disadvantaged position,” (sec 20, UNNS 2001).

<sup>22</sup> The ASCHH identified that Aboriginal youth homelessness and Aboriginal family Homelessness is intertwined and multi-generational. But Aboriginal youth homelessness should be defined as “unaccompanied youth” – without families. “Vital importance of Aboriginal youth parents knowing and learning their role and responsibilities as parent. The paramount role is that of parent. Caution against ideation of “lost youth,” where single parent is set up to resent and potentially abandon their child (comment based on program experience),” (ASCHH Minutes, November 29, 2010).

- provide subsidies and support services that would allow Aboriginal peoples to obtain, retain and maintain safe and culturally appropriate housing...allows for not just purchasing, but renting and maintenance as well;
- expand and support existing organizations and agencies that provide housing to homeless Aboriginal youth and children;
- centralize the intake system to ensure Aboriginal identification is captured and utilized;
- establish Aboriginal transition/halfway houses/group homes for Aboriginal youth leaving institutions, like ILS home, or Wellington House, when leaving foster care, CYOC, hospitals, etc.;
- establish safe, culturally relevant and sensitive discharge plans, so no Aboriginal person is discharged into homelessness or unsafe housing;
- do not want to discharge anyone into an unsafe (physically, or otherwise) situation;
- initiate greater consultation with Aboriginal organizations and agencies in the creation of HMIS (and incorporation of culturally sensitive questions at intake);
- talk to, and learn from, the Aboriginal people who have been previously or are currently homeless or have faced housing issues;
- it is far too subjective to measure success, instead we should find out from our people what they feel is and is not working, best practices, and where improvements can be made;
- increase competent Aboriginal workforce and treatment facilities, with cultural, spiritual and emotional perspectives (harm reduction);
- ensure all four levels of government are involved in ensuring Aboriginal inclusion;
- create an urban Aboriginal cultural support system/centre, with culturally specific wrap around programs.
- cannot just be managed on a case-by-case situation – should be available for prevention – proactive rather than reactive approach;
- provide more opportunities for urban Aboriginal people to earn income and receive education;
- more engagement and involvement with stakeholders, leaders, committee members and First Nation communities. Discussions around off-reserve funding availability;
- educate the community about poverty, homelessness and Aboriginal issues through Alberta-specific workers at community resource centres;
- will need to hire more Aboriginal people to work with existing centres;
- build a physical “epicentre”, like Thunderbird Lodge in Winnipeg, or the Anishnabe Health and Wellness Centre in downtown Toronto; and
- ensure Calgary Homeless Foundation includes two Aboriginal positions on its board – one on-reserve and one off-reserve to ensure a voice.

### **Key deliverables/outcomes**

- a) Conduct further research about the pathways into Aboriginal youth homelessness to help ensure services dedicated to Aboriginal young people (at risk of or experiencing homelessness) will be carried out in consideration of structural factors.
- b) Homeless youth have a higher proportion of females, Aboriginal and visible minorities than the general homeless population. Of those counted under the age of 24, about 59% were male and 41% were females. The majority were Caucasian (51%), followed by Aboriginals (28%) and

visible minorities (19%). The proportions of Aboriginal children, youth and young adults were almost double that of the total calculated homeless population (15%) (The City of Calgary 2008 Biennial Homeless Count). These statistics highlight the over representation of Aboriginal young people that are at risk of or experiencing homelessness.<sup>23</sup>

The Youth Plan adopts the following major milestone:

*By 2018, Aboriginal homeless young people will not be over-represented in the homeless population.<sup>3</sup> According to The City of Calgary 2008 Biennial Homeless Count, Aboriginal young people and children represent 28% of the under 24 years old homeless population. Census Canada 2006 data revealed that 3% of the Calgary population self-identify as Aboriginal.*

- c) In conjunction with the 10 Year Plan, the Youth Plan will ensure continued implementation of case management standards.

Case management standards are necessary for ensuring that: 1) young Aboriginal people have control over the planning of their lives, and 2) young Aboriginal people are receiving services with contextual considerations. “Contextual approaches”<sup>24</sup> must include pathways into homelessness for Aboriginal people (Gone & Alcantara, 2007; Menzies, 2006). Specifically, the role of inter-generational trauma specific to the effects of colonization must be addressed to ensure adequate cultural connectedness and therefore healing for Aboriginal people (Menzies, 2006). “It is essential to ensure that models of support or treatment options align with cultural/spiritual beliefs. There are often distinct differences in how Aboriginal communities engage in healing practices, different from non-Aboriginal healing techniques. This allows people to build connections to broader communities and supports outside of the immediate crisis interventions,” (Samson, 2009; Kral & Idlout, 2009).

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<sup>23</sup> A focus on Aboriginal youth homelessness is particularly important now, as this population is one of the fastest growing. “The Aboriginal birthrate is 1.5 times higher than that of the non-Aboriginal population,” (Statistics Canada 2006), while “50% of the Aboriginal population is under 25 years old,” (Castello 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Example of a contextual approach – Aboriginal male  
According to Menzies, (2006), intergenerational trauma has been experienced by Aboriginal people by the Canadian government’s implementation of public policies that eradicate Aboriginal value systems in the following four domains; individual, family, community and nation. Aboriginal people have been forced to be integrated into an outside, unfamiliar society, as an estimated 100,000 Aboriginal children were put into the public school systems between 1840 and 1983, and an “overwhelming number” were taken from their homes in the 1960s by child welfare authorities and permanently placed into foster care or made Crown wards (p. 4). The children were required to assume a new culture that failed to recognize their past Aboriginal culture, leaving them disconnected from both cultures. Many Aboriginal children lost their family and community ties, leaving them unable to cope due to this trauma. The author proposes a new definition for homelessness among the Aboriginal population: “homelessness is a condition that results from individuals being displaced from critical community social structures and lacking stable housing,” (p. 15). The author further proposes, “The Intergenerational Trauma Model,” which uses a holistic approach in considering how individual, family, community and the nation contribute to homelessness.

# Strategy One

## Build a coordinated system to prevent<sup>25</sup> and end youth homelessness in Calgary

Keeping in line with Phase Two<sup>26</sup> of the 10 Year Plan, the Youth Plan builds a more coordinated system for those at risk of or experiencing homelessness to get help. To be successful, this coordinated system requires:

- an understanding of how different components fit into the overall system and what is expected from each;
- agreed-upon goals, outcomes and performance measures to tell if components and the overall system are working;
- the HMIS to bring together the system, share relevant information and measure performance;
- a common assessment framework and central referral process; and
- standards to ensure quality of care among the different services.

### The Calgary youth homelessness system

The Youth Plan is brought together by a system made up of key components, which are linked by activities and tools. The Foundation will ensure the needs of a diverse population of youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness are recognized and upheld. This includes the needs of youth with mental health and/or addictions issues, youth with developmental disabilities, Aboriginal youth, young people who are new to Calgary with cultural and religious needs, and LGBTQTT youth. “Increased attention to inter-sectorial partnerships and collaborative service provision would have a positive impact on reaching these individuals,” (McLean, 2005). All facets of targeted and coordinated system intervention will be viewed in light of these needs.

#### 1. Key components to a youth homelessness system

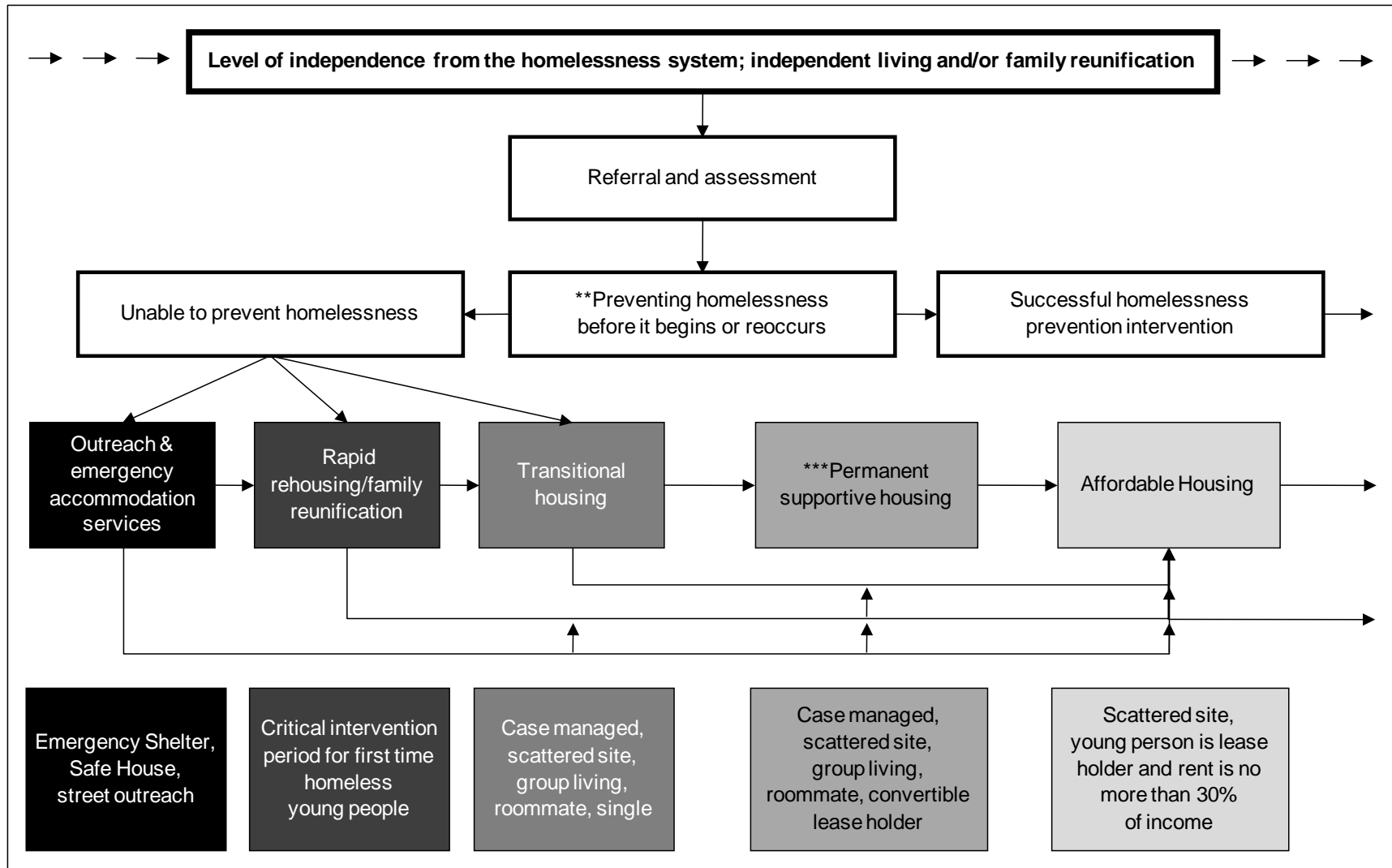
The foundation of a youth homelessness system is developed through the ongoing involvement of young people (feedback from young people who have experienced homelessness) in the development and implementation stages of planning. The key components outlined in the table on the next page identify pre-existing services in Calgary’s youth homelessness system. Some components, such as emergency shelters and transitional housing with supports, are easily identified structures within the current system. Other components, such as services to prevent youth homelessness, exist but are more difficult to outline.

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<sup>25</sup> At imminent risk of homelessness and needing homelessness prevention services.

<sup>26</sup> 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014.

## Calgary youth homelessness system and housing continuum



\*\* Prevention of youth homelessness activities (including strengthening informal supports, family reconnection, life skills development, cultural reconnection and many other activities) takes place throughout the youth housing continuum. Once a young person has been rehoused (with family/kin or independent living situations), they require support to prevent re-entry into homelessness.

\*\*\*A small percentage of young people may not be able to transition out of homelessness supports and services due to mental health and or addictions issues. Young people who are not able to fully transition (into a family setting or independently living) will receive on-going supports in the wider adult system

The flow chart on the prior page operates on a continuum. The arrows at the top indicate the aim to have young people flow from the homelessness system towards greater independence. The system places a special emphasis on prevention services, which act as a filter to prevent young people from entering the homeless system. This “prevention filter” sets the Youth Plan apart from previous youth homelessness systems and is instrumental to ensure an end to youth homelessness.

The first box (outreach and emergency accommodation services) emphasizes: a) services are targeted to absolutely homeless young people; and, b) movement out of the shelter systems into transitional or permanent housing happens as quickly as possible.

The second box (rapid rehousing/family reunification) is an intervention that targets young people who have entered the homelessness system (emergency shelter/sleeping rough) for the first time and are within their first two weeks of the experience to prevent further street entrenchment. Services are intended to ensure young people are quickly rehoused or unified with kin or family. “Transitional housing and supports” targets young people who will eventually have the ability to live independently. Transitional supports are time limited, but these time limits are set according to each young person’s developmental needs.

The third box (permanent housing and supports) is a component in the homelessness system dedicated to young people who have been deemed unable to fully transition into independence. Most young people will be able to transition into healthy, adult independence and live outside of the homelessness system in permanent homes. A minority of young people, however, may be unable to fully transition into independence due to mental health, disability and/or addictions issues. As indicated in the column, time-frame interventions are set accordingly to the needs and success for each young person.

The final column (affordable housing) is a component in the system dedicated to ensuring that young people are not precariously housed due to inappropriately high rents.

## **2. Coordinating activities and tools that help interlink the key components**

The Youth Plan relies on a well-coordinated system of key components that are interlinked through:

- a common objective to end youth homelessness;
- collective support for Housing First policies and practice;
- a shared understanding on quality standards of care (case management, outreach, housing);
- collecting and sharing high-quality research;
- common assessment framework and central referral processes;
- shared tools and resources, such as the HMIS; and
- agreed upon goals, outcomes and performance measures to tell if components and the overall system are working.

a) A common objective to end youth homelessness

The 10 Year Plan has been instrumental in helping the community refocus efforts from coping with homelessness to ending homelessness. This common objective has helped to further align the efforts of the adult-serving agencies and will, in turn, help youth-serving agencies work together as a collective.

b) Collective support for Housing First policies and practice

The Housing First approach is a challenge to the traditional approach in working with a homeless population. The traditional approach required people to be “housing ready;” this means people experiencing homelessness were expected to be free of addictions and have their mental illness addressed before they were ready for housing. Housing First provides people with permanent housing and then treats mental illness, addictions and other barriers that young people might face through intensive and individualized programs. The Housing First approach has an average housing success rate of 85% across the U.S. and in Toronto. Studies demonstrate that not only is it more cost effective to treat people experiencing homelessness this way, it is also more effective in improving their physical and mental health, and in treating addiction issues.

During youth consultation on Housing First principles in March 2011, youth unanimously said that housing is a right. They believe everyone should have access to housing, regardless of drug usage/state of mind. Verbatim feedback:

- “It seems very easy to lose housing because the rules are impossible to always fulfill to the fullest, and arbitrary rules seem to cause homelessness.”
- “Housing seems very hard to attain, but is very easy to lose. If we had a safe place to stay regardless of drug usage, we would use less drugs because we wouldn’t need to cope with homelessness.”

c) A shared understanding on quality standards of care

As part of the 10 Year Plan and as a key deliverable for the Foundation’s 2010-11 Business Plan, case management was recognized as a key intervention for sustaining permanent housing. A combination of case management and housing support is the most successful approach to ending homelessness, because young people require ongoing support as they transition into independence or when they return to a family home.

Case-managed supports help to ensure young people remain housed. Providing case-managed supports over a period of time reduces both the length of time and the reoccurrence of homelessness. Case management standards help to create a shared understanding within the youth-serving community about the level and quality of care young people should receive.

d) Collecting and sharing high-quality research

Localized research is a valuable part of the Youth Plan. As the community embarks on a Youth Plan, the community is aware there are gaps in understanding and knowledge about localized youth homelessness. For instance, The City of Calgary Biennial Homeless count was instrumental in providing an estimate on the number of homeless young people in Calgary, but there is a need for more precise numbers, which will be achieved through the HMIS.

Through literature reviews and localized consultations, there is a general understanding about the pathways young people follow into homelessness, but a much more in-depth understanding could be acquired about this population. For instance, a deeper understanding is needed about the particular pathways that diverse young people follow into homelessness (youth with mental health and/or addictions issues, youth with developmental disabilities, Aboriginal youth, young people who are new to Calgary with cultural and religious needs, and LGBTQTT youth). The University of Calgary and the United Way of Calgary and Area, among others, have played an integral role in helping the community further understand the youth homeless population. Ongoing collaboration and the sharing of research will further help inform and coordinate the Youth Plan.

e) Common assessment and referral processes

During consultation, the Foundation learned that young people, families and adults felt a certain level of frustration in having to tell their story over and over again to a number of agencies as they progressed through the homelessness system. Feedback from staff and managers in the youth-serving sector also revealed that young people are sometimes mistakenly taken into one homeless-serving program when they are better suited to a different youth homeless-serving program. During times of limited resources and bed spaces, young people might find themselves in a program because it has the only available bed.

Feedback from the 2009 Youth Summit revealed that service providers would like a centralized intake process with multiple points of entry. The intake process would have, “Multiple points of access feeding into a centralized intake process; a flexible range of accessible, co-located housing; program supports targeted to youth based on individual need and readiness; dissemination and engagement strategies to broaden public and service sector awareness; and, knowledge of programming and services for homeless and youth at risk of homelessness.”

Youth consultation feedback in March 2011 about a centralized referral process and HMIS confirmed the value of such a process: “This is a great idea, I hate retelling my story over and over again.”

f) Common assessment framework

A made-in-Calgary common assessment framework (CAF)<sup>27</sup> aims to address the above challenges. With the consent of the youth and through information sharing agreements, one assessment can help ensure individuals are matched with the correct service. This would help ensure youths’ wishes and needs are heard from the starting point and they are matched to the correct service. “Right matching” is a priority in the Youth Plan.

To ensure a coordinated and holistic approach, the Central Government in the U.K. (the Department for Children, Schools and Families) devised a CAF for homeless young people. CAF guidance sets out some specific considerations to be taken into account by Children and Housing Services professionals. CAF guidance points out that Children’s Services and Housing Services should work with the youth, other practitioners and agencies to assess the full range of the youth’s needs and to provide appropriate, holistic support.

Opportunities for prevention form part of the assessment in terms of family mediation and getting support from extended family. To be effective, any assessment of a young person’s needs should support positive, long-term outcomes for the young person, as well as identify his/her immediate needs. Assessments should be holistic, looking at a wide range of aspects of the young person’s life, not only their housing issues/needs. Assessment tools should take into account and appreciate the diversity of needs that a young person has and their identity in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability and religion (National Youth Homelessness Scheme, Assessment Processes and Referral-on).

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<sup>27</sup> The CAF is not intended for children who have already had an intervention because of a history of abuse (with Child Welfare services involvement) or with disabilities. In fact, it is intended for young people who may not ever have had an intervention, but are nevertheless at risk. The outcome of the assessment (if needs are identified) is to then link the child and family with a service that is best placed to address their needs. There is an expectation of a ‘case management’ approach to service provision at this point. This emerges out of a multi-agency consultation, in which a “lead professional” takes on the case management role.

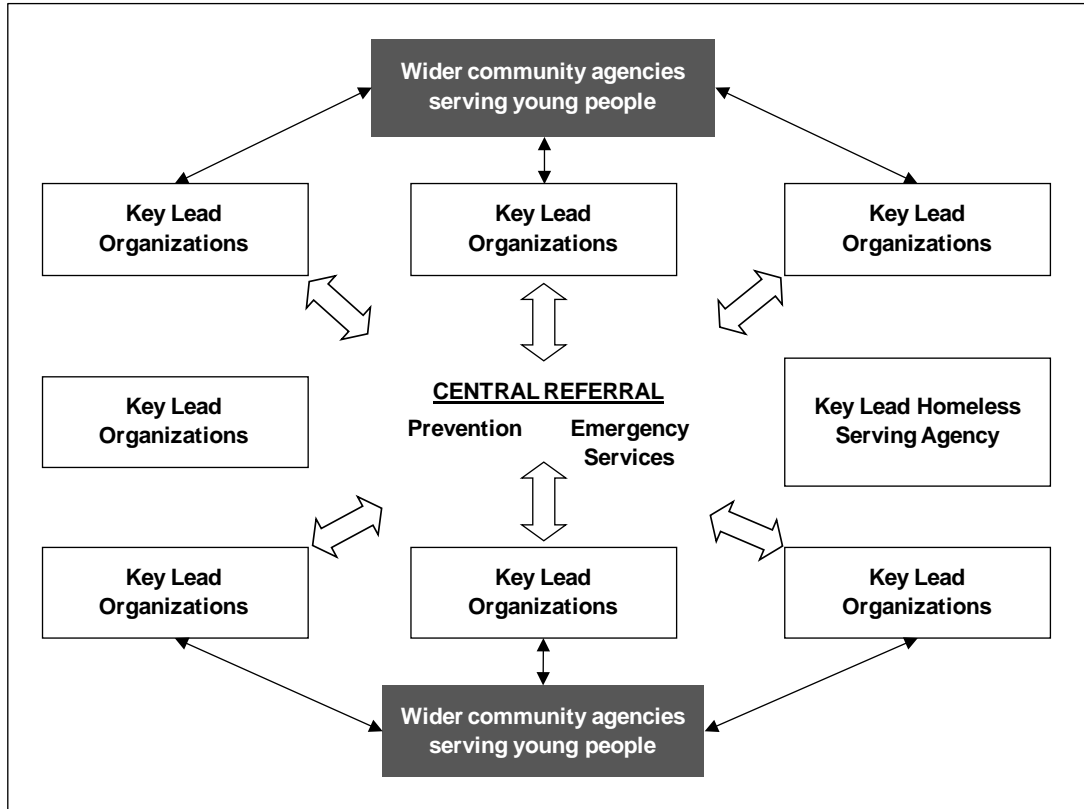
As stated previously, the CAF helps to ensure there is “no wrong door” for young people entering the youth homelessness system. For instance, young people requiring homelessness prevention services are likely to engage with current organizations *outside* of the homelessness system. A wider group of youth-serving community representatives, such as schools, would therefore require knowledge and training about the made-in-Calgary common assessment process.

Some organizations will have the staffing capacity to carry out a full CAF assessment with young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Other agencies will not have the staffing capacity or face-to-face interaction with young people to carry out a full assessment. Agencies that are unable to carry out full CAF assessments may build relationships / partnerships with key lead organizations that do have the capacity.

g) Centralized referral processes

The made-in-Calgary CAF is instrumental to ensuring that young people are able to access services, particularly prevention of homelessness services, regardless of how a youth enters the system. Feedback from the 2009 Youth Summit revealed young people would like prevention services to take place in familiar settings, “services located within familiar settings, connected to community supports, employment and/or school.” Widening the scope of community partners in an effort to prevent and end youth homelessness also requires a mechanism to help coordinate this wider collaborative approach. For instance, a well-trained CAF evaluator in a Calgary school will need to be able to send a completed CAF assessment and referral to an organizing body. Centralized referral is a way of coordinating this system. The arrows in the diagram on the next page show the CAF referral process.

**Central referral process**



To successfully develop a made-in-Calgary CAF and central referral process requires involvement (initiation, creation and implementation) from young people (particularly those with diverse needs), the Child and Family Services Authority (CFSA), Delegated First Nations Agencies (DFSAs), direct youth-serving organizations and wider youth-serving community organizations. The involvement of these stakeholders is critical to the CAF and central referral coordinating mechanisms.

h) Shared tools, such as the HMIS

HMIS is an electronic system that collects consistent information about Calgary's homeless population throughout the community of care. It is essential to the effective implementation of the 10 Year Plan. HMIS allows the community to:

- collect standard, system-wide, accurate and real-time data on the total number, length, causes, needs and demographic characteristics of those experiencing homelessness;
  - better understand people's experiences being homeless and the services they use; and
  - enable agencies to better meet clients' needs by improving service coordination, determining client outcomes, providing more informed program referrals and reducing the administrative burden.
- i) Agreed upon goals, outcomes and performance measures to tell if components and the overall system are working

Groups working directly on the issue of homelessness will develop and implement common ways to measure the success of the homeless-serving system in ending homelessness. The measures will be focused on the outcomes for those at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The following proposed measures can be monitored using the HMIS and can track progress to achieve Youth Plan goals.

System measures

- "Occupancy" measures the rate of bed utilization.
- "Destinations at exit" tracks the number people who exit to permanent housing solutions.
- "Return to shelter/rough sleeping" refers to the percentage of people who receive a positive exit from a program and then re-enter the shelter/street within a relatively short-time period.
- "Discharge from public institutions" measures the decrease in number of people discharged into homelessness from public institutions, such as hospitals, jails and child intervention services.

Program measures

- "Income gains at exit" measures the number of people who have increased their income while in a program.
- "Length of stay/stability" is the number of days a person or household is enrolled in a program.
- "Client rate of engagement" is the total amount of people engaged by a shelter or outreach program that end up obtaining a better housing intervention.
- "Self-sufficiency measures" look at programs providing intense support services in areas such as employment, substance abuse and mental health.

Once the proposed measures are agreed upon, benchmarks will be developed to evaluate how programs are working and establish goals.

## Goal one: Build system initiatives to prevent youth homelessness

### 1. The U.K. and Australian experience

Prevention of youth homelessness is a major focus in the Youth Plan. Prevention efforts, however, need to go beyond a single-agency approach; research indicates that a system-level approach is required. For instance, the U.K. and Australia have been undertaking youth homelessness prevention efforts, with wide ranging and integrated systems planning. Both countries have seen some very successful results.

The Australian “Reconnect Program” has been operated by the Australian government’s Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs since 1999. The program takes a systems-level approach to early intervention initiatives. It is designed to reduce youth homelessness by reconnecting both homeless youth and youth who are at risk of becoming homeless with their families, schools and communities (Winland, Gaetz, & Patton, 2011).

An evaluation of the program (Australian Government, 2003; RPR Consulting, 2003) identified positive and sustainable outcomes for young people and their families, including improvements in:

- the stability of young people’s living situations;
- young people’s reported ability to manage family conflict (and this improvement was sustained over time);
- parents’ capacity to manage conflict;
- communication within families;
- young people’s attitudes towards school; and
- engagement with education and employment (Winland, Gaetz, & Patton, 2011).

Just over a decade ago, the first inquiry into preventing youth homelessness was set up by 10 U.K. housing and youth charities to examine the scale, nature and possible solutions to youth homelessness (Evans, 1996). The inquiry was established in response to widespread concern about the substantial increase in youth homelessness in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Since this inquiry, local authorities were strongly encouraged to develop a range of earlier interventions, including housing advice services, rent deposits, mediation services, tenancy sustainment and new initiatives for ex-offenders and those experiencing domestic violence (Pawson et al., 2006, 2007). A National Youth Homelessness Scheme was launched in England in 2007, led by the YMCA and Centrepoin. This comprised a package of measures to reduce and prevent youth homelessness, including development of a network of supported lodgings schemes, a committee of formerly homeless young people to advise ministers on policy, a new national homelessness advice service and the establishment of regional centres of excellence. Furthermore, there is now a universal expectation that mediation schemes will be available for all young people (CLG, 2007a).

“Following a policy push in 2003, the number of people who are homeless in the U.K. fell by 40% in two and a half years, the reduction not being traced to rising employment or an expanded affordable housing stock, but rather, to the effectiveness of prevention and early intervention strategies,” (Pawson, Davidson & Netto, 2007).

## 2. Pathways into youth homelessness

The first step in preventing homelessness is to understand the pathways young people follow into homelessness. Overall, young people consistently say the reason for their homelessness is family conflict. Prevention efforts, therefore, need to be dedicated to working with young people and their family members to resolve conflict before it leads to homelessness. The Risks and Assets for Homeless Prevention Research<sup>28</sup> findings from Calgary indicate that young people follow particular pathways into homelessness.<sup>29</sup> Some key pathways include:

- family conflict, and a single parent or blended household which is often dealing with poverty issues;
- drug and/or alcohol abuse (by parent and/or young person);
- residential instability, and a history of family disruption and abuse; and
- young people with high levels of interaction with the criminal justice system, Children and Youth Services interventions and a low-level of engagement with the education system.

## 3. Key elements of a prevention system

### a) First contact

The key to any preventive strategy is to identify young people who are at risk of homelessness to assess their needs and to get them access to the services they need. Two major information and referral sources access routes are through:

- i) systems: organizations such as schools, community centers and sports teams, who are equipped with the knowledge and resources to identify young people and connect them to the help they need; and
- ii) young people and parents: who need communication and advertisements which are visible and identify access points for service (phone lines, web-based resources).

### b) Common assessment framework (CAF)

The goal of the CAF is to “help practitioners working with children, young people and families to assess children and young people’s additional needs for earlier, more effective services and to develop a common understanding of those needs and how to work together to meet them.” The CAF consists of:

- a pre-assessment checklist to help decide who would benefit from a common assessment;
- a process to enable practitioners in the children and young people’s workforce to undertake a common assessment and then act on the result;
- a standard form to record the assessment; and
- a delivery plan and review form.

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<sup>28</sup> A literature review for the Foundation published December 2009 by the University of Calgary’s Faculty of Social Work, summarizing research regarding the risk factors, predictors and pathways in and out of homelessness.

<sup>29</sup> For more information please see Risks and Assets for Homelessness Prevention - Executive Summary (PDF 1.56 MB) Published December 2009 by the University of Calgary’s Faculty of Social Work.  
<http://www.calgaryhomeless.com/default.asp?FolderID=3173>

c) Central referral process

The idea of having a single point of access or a hub where young people can go directly (or access through the phone or internet) becomes an effective way to help youth get the information supports and services they need. As a system, it relies on a good assessment system (such as CAF) and a strong organization linked to services inside and outside of the homeless sector. As a “triage,” a single-point access service ensures consistent assessment, a reduction in duplication and good judgment about the appropriateness of services so young people get the right services and supports they need.

d) Family counseling

Evidence-based practice shows that family counseling should be a core function in prevention of youth homelessness systems planning. “One local authority [in the U.K.] reported that nearly 50% of young people who participated in family mediation wound up remaining at home, or if they were homeless, returned home,” (Quilgars et al., 2008).

Given the pathways that some young people follow into youth homeless (leaving physically, sexually and/or emotionally abusive situations), remaining in the family home may not be a positive, safe option. But for some young people, family counseling or mediation may be the precise service and support that they require to prevent their homelessness. This service should also be extended to homeless young people who could reunite with family members. This intervention requires an expertise in family counseling, whereby the service is carried out by organizations that are dedicated to family counseling and mediation, or by agency staff members with family counseling qualifications and experience. The goal is to help family members develop a better understanding of their relationships, how to negotiate and interact in beneficial ways, and ideally how to develop supportive, long-term relationships within the family.

e) Working with schools

Working within schools involves several linked activities. First, there is the focus on education. Here, the intent is to inform young people about homelessness, to help them to identify and address situations where they may be at risk of homelessness and to provide them with information about services and supports for crisis situations. Second, supports in schools work on helping young people become more resilient through personal development. This means helping them develop more effective problem solving and conflict resolution skills. Third, the presence of agencies in schools helps them to become key points of contact for young people and/or teachers who suspect something is wrong.

f) Respite/emergency accommodation and timely outreach

Respite is a temporary accommodation for young people who are currently homeless, but are engaged in family counseling. It is, in a sense, a “time out” space where young people can work on repairing family relations sufficiently so that they can move home, or if they cannot return home, provides them with accommodation while they work out longer term housing support. Temporary emergency accommodation gives young people a break from their family or temporary shelter while they are looking for somewhere else to stay. There is never a good time for family conflict and often family conflict happens during late night hours when many support services are not available. Outreach workers with conflict resolutions skills are instrumental to providing in-home conflict resolution services to families who are on the brink of asking their child/youth to leave the family home.

g) Targeted intervention in the first two weeks of homelessness

Homeless youth face different challenges than their adult counterparts. Their level of development and life experience renders them particularly vulnerable on the street. This is manifested in homeless youth's quick entrenchment into street life. Without effective intervention within the first two weeks of street involvement, youth will likely become entrenched within two months. "Entrenched street youth face more serious risks, are more heavily involved in illegal activities and are much more difficult to engage and to serve," (McLean 2005). The Foundation supports the development of innovative prevention projects that will target young people who are within this two-week critical intervention period.

### Key deliverables/outcomes

- a) In collaboration with the CFSA, DFNA, key lead youth-serving community organizations, community funders and United Way of Calgary and Area, the Foundation will establish a made-in-Calgary youth homelessness CAF to assess young people at imminent risk of homelessness.
- b) The CFSA, DFNAs and key lead youth-serving organizations will identify an agreed-upon central initiation process, where young people at risk of homelessness are referred and receive prevention services. As shown in the Proposed Central Intake Process table on page 23, wider community organizations such as community resource centers (CRCs), family resource centers (FRCs), youth clubs, immigrant-serving agencies and other family or youth-serving organizations will have localized key lead youth-serving organization partnerships.
- c) The Foundation will support key innovative projects that target young people at imminent risk of homelessness and with diverse needs who are at risk of homelessness.
- d) Case management standards will be incorporated into all prevention services for young people.

## Goal two: Ensure zero discharge into youth homelessness

Many young people have been in care for years and some report being in a series of foster homes before becoming homeless. In many jurisdictions, gaps in the child welfare system mean that young people (16 and older) may have great difficulty in accessing services and supports (Serge, et al., 2002). "System failures in child welfare – including the fact that young people can 'opt out' but not back in, and that young people can age out of care – means that for many young people the transition from child welfare support is not to self-sufficiency, but to homelessness. And for many of these young people, there is, then, no "home" to return to," (Winland, Gaetz, & Patton, 2011).

To ensure discharging from Correctional Services and Children and Youth Services (i.e. foster care, group homes), as well as Alberta Health Services (hospitals, mental health and addictions facilities), does not result in homelessness for youth, there is a need for these systems to collaborate with case managers to ensure discharge planning includes permanent housing with longer term supports.

## Key deliverables/outcomes

- a) A zero discharge into homelessness working group will be established, involving Correctional Services, Children and Youth Services, Alberta Health Services and key lead youth-serving organizations (including housing) that will:
- clarify discharge planning roles;
  - create processes for identifying young people at risk of homelessness (Calgary Youth Homelessness CAF); and
  - identify discharge planning partnerships between Correctional Services, Children and Youth Services, and Alberta Health Services with youth-serving community organizations.

## Goal three: Create innovative emergency outreach services

Research shows that young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness often report a lack of positive connection or “mistrust” with adults. “The majority of homeless youth have some history of neglect and/or abuse, and have developed significant barriers to trust and engagement. Homeless youth are highly resistant to engagement with programs that they perceive to be judgmental or discriminatory,” (McLean, 2005). Organizations that play key interfacing roles (gateway and engagement services) with homeless young people need to be innovative in their approaches to building trust.

Peer support/mentorship has been a successful method for bringing young people and adults together in an effort to end youth homelessness.<sup>30</sup>

### 1. Outreach services

Specialized outreach teams can target both youth who are homeless and the systems that they might be engaged with at the time. Outreach can also provide basic system navigation given the youth’s readiness for intervention. Outreach services can focus on engaging youth in the shelter system and on the street alongside other service providers.

The role of outreach as engagement also extends to the systems that interact with youth. These include correctional, education, health and child intervention settings. Outreach has a role in engaging stakeholders in these systems to enhance the understanding of homelessness risk in their youth population and to ensure appropriate assessments and referrals are implemented. This is particularly critical for prevention efforts. Signs of mental illness, family instability and poverty are precursors to youth homelessness that can be identified early through the engagement of schools in interventions. Outreach services can increase awareness in these systems of the warning signs and what actions could be taken to address them.

### 2. Shelters and day services

Shelters provide essential services to youth. To end youth homelessness, these services must focus efforts on engaging youth in the rehousing process. By employing the CAF and HMIS process, shelters can ensure appropriate connections to case managers are made.

<sup>30</sup> For example, the Bromsgrove Youth Homelessness Forum (BYHF) in the U.K. is a good example of how youth peers can build trusting relationships through gateway and engagement services. The project provides a drop-in day centre with practical and emotional support (including a kitchen, shower and washing machine, plus donated food and toiletry parcels). The BYHF has been established for five years and recruits youth volunteers (often young people who have previously experienced homelessness) to engage young homeless people. The BYHF is looking to enhance its volunteering successes further through the introduction of a Peer Mentoring Scheme.

The Youth Plan envisions that shelters will provide very short-term emergency accommodation for young people first entering the homelessness system. The aim is to get young people out of shelter stays as quickly as possible, with the intent of having them never return. To end youth homelessness, it is critical that young people cease to cycle through the emergency shelter system. Ongoing case managed supports are critical to this process. Changing how young people engage emergency shelters services (adult and youth) requires further planning and innovations, such as a collaborative effort across all youth and adult services.

### **Key deliverable/outcome**

- a) The Foundation will support the development of outreach services that:
- finds innovative ways to engage young people (including diverse young people) who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness; and
  - emphasizes ending homelessness (have rehousing strategies built into their outreach plans, including CAF and central referral processes).

## **Goal four: Develop services for youth who are chronically and episodically homeless**

A core group of young people in Calgary can be described as “chronically homeless,” according to McLean’s 2005 *Seeking Sanctuary, Exploring the Realities of Youth Homelessness* study.

*The majority of respondents (44%) identified this as their first time homeless, while an additional 22.5% said that this was their second experience with homelessness. More disturbing is the fact that 19.6% of these youth had been homeless three to five times in their lifetime and 13.7% had been homeless more than five times. This latter group characterized their homelessness as chronic throughout their adolescence. The fact that 56% of our sample population have been homeless on more than one occasion would seem to refute suggestions that youth homelessness is a temporary situation, a phase, or a casual thrill-seeking behaviour on the part of young people.*

To end chronic youth homelessness in Calgary, the Foundation supports the creation of innovative and targeted services aimed at chronically homeless youth (including young people who cycle through the emergency shelter system). The first step is to understand the characteristics and life circumstances of youth experiencing chronic homelessness.

Understanding why some young people become chronically and episodically homeless (and the detailed characteristics attached to these young people) is currently a gap in research knowledge. This research is important for creating targeted intervention services for chronically homeless young people. The Rehousing Triage and Assessment Survey (RTAS)<sup>31</sup> used for triaging homeless single adults has been a useful tool for identifying the most at-risk (sometimes chronic) homeless adults in Calgary. It is suggested that similar research be conducted to help the community understand young people who become entrenched in street life and often become chronically homeless adults.

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<sup>31</sup> Rehousing Triage and Assessment Survey indicates who of the currently homeless population is most vulnerable and at greatest risk of death

This research is also important in the development of permanent housing and supports, which is a key component in the youth homelessness system. In certain cases, a youth's condition could be so severe that a "Pathways" model would be the most appropriate way to address complex needs of mental health, addictions, abuse and chronic homelessness. This model employs the Assertive Community Treatment strategy, using a multi-disciplinary team approach with low caseloads (about 10:1) to provide intensive supports that meet the clinical, housing and other rehabilitative supports of people who have mental illnesses. It has proven effective in reducing patient hospitalization, promoting continuity of care and increasing community involvement and stability. The most critical component is case management.

### **Key deliverables/outcomes**

- a) A research report will be done to identify why some young people become chronically and episodically homeless, and the detailed characteristics/circumstances attached to these young people. This research will inform the creation of a "Pathways to Housing for Youth" program.
- b) A "Pathways to Housing for Youth" program will be created, with targeted intervention for chronically and episodically homeless young people.
- c) The CFSA, DFNAs, key lead youth-serving community organizations and relevant community funders will collaborate to establish a made-in-Calgary youth homelessness CAF to assess young people experiencing homelessness.
- d) The CFSA, DFNAs and key lead youth-serving organizations will collaborate to identify an agreed upon central intake process whereby young people experiencing homelessness are referred and will receive intervention services. As shown in the Proposed Central Intake Process table on page 23, wider community organizations such as community resource centers, family resource centers, youth clubs, Centre for Newcomers and other family or youth-serving organizations will have localized key lead youth-serving organization partnerships.
- e) Case management standards will be incorporated into all transitional housing and supports for young people.

## **Goal five: Encourage initiatives aimed at youth transitioning into independence**

In the case of young people with child intervention status, initiatives should work with the Calgary and Area CFSA, DFNAs and the Alberta Child and Youth Advocate to ensure all obligations under the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act are upheld and fulfilled. Homeless young people without child intervention status should come under the consideration of the CFSA and DFNAs to ensure their safety and well-being is protected as they transition into adulthood.

Transitional housing and supports are some of the key components in the youth homelessness system. The end of youth homelessness in Calgary relies on a well-coordinated system of key components (pages 18 to 24). As stated previously, Calgary currently has easily identifiable projects that are dedicated to helping young people transition into independence (permanent, positive destinations outside of the youth homelessness system). Many of these projects are in the process of producing positive results and their understanding of good practice should be shared. At the heart, good practice within these projects is high-quality case management standards.

## 1. Case management, transitional supports and the housing continuum

Homeless youth need safe, accessible and appropriate physical shelter, but the provision of housing alone will not solve the problem. Housing must be coupled with extensive supports that address the diverse needs of homeless youth. Case managers will ensure youth are supported to maintain housing. Best practices point to the need for the implementation of supports that follow the youth's diverse needs regardless of their housing. The presence of a case manager or case management team helps the youth develop independent living skills, while also affording the youth the rights and responsibilities of tenancy.

"High Fidelity Wraparound Supports" has proven to be a successful method of engaging young people and their families. It is a strength-based, integrated approach to working with families/youth that emphasizes the idea of "voice and choice." It is a program based on the family and youth identifying people who they consider to be helpers in their lives.

High Fidelity Wraparound outlines 10 guiding principles focusing on "people helping people," and reaffirming family and youth decision-making. Each facilitator, coach or supervisor is trained to use a program with a specific skill set designed to promote the principles of Wraparound.

For young people to be able to transition out of a homelessness system, it is imperative that the fundamental protective factors are strengthened. The *Risks and Assets for Homelessness Prevention* Research (University of Calgary) identified factors that helped prevent homelessness. Such factors include: social support (beyond the street life), having completed high school, good interpersonal skills, parental monitoring and supervision of youth. Initiatives and projects that aim to strengthen these factors (i.e. positive mentoring, high school completion, family reconciliation /and or reunification, etc.) serve to ensure young people have a successful hand off to the community outside of the homelessness system.

## 2. Different forms of youth housing

The U.S. National Alliance to End Homelessness notes that a youth housing continuum should not set predetermined time limits and must allow youth to transition from one housing program to another according to their individual developmental stages. Based upon the needs and preferences of a given youth, such housing could take a number of forms, from shared housing to scattered-site, or independent apartments, with or without roommates. Youth should have the flexibility to move among housing programs as they gain greater independent living skills and economic stability, including the ability to re-enter housing programs and move back along the continuum if their current needs or abilities change. Responding to the needs of homeless youth and engaging them in determining their housing needs with developmentally-appropriate housing models along a housing continuum will increase their future independence (NAEH 2006, 2007).

To this end, housing could include:

- housing dispersed throughout a community and usually rented from a private landlord (i.e., scattered site, roommate, mentor);
- single, multi-unit buildings dedicated to youth and young adults (i.e., single site or congregate); and,
- units or entire floors set-aside specifically for youth and young adults in affordable housing developments (i.e., set-aside units).

### **Key deliverables/outcomes**

- a) The Foundation and others will support the development of transitional housing services that:
  - find innovative ways of ensuring young people, including those with diverse needs, successfully transition into healthy adult independence; and
  - seek additional funder and community support. For example, *ensuring young people successfully transition into healthy adult independence* is the focus of the United Way of Calgary and Area's three-year strategic plan in the Children and Youth area.
- b) Case management standards for transitional housing and supports will be applied for all young people.

## Strategy Two

### Develop an adequate number of housing units and supportive homes dedicated to youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness

The purpose of this strategy is to ensure that an adequate number of housing units and supportive homes are dedicated to homeless young people in Calgary, including young people with or without child intervention status.

Appropriate housing for young people exists on a continuum, incorporating various housing solutions that will respond appropriately to the broad range of the homeless youth's needs. The continuum allows youth to transition from one form of housing to another, according to their individual developmental assets. Housing options for youth should focus on ensuring stability, safety and affordability in order to lower their risk of "graduating" into the adult homeless shelter system.

Based on the individual needs and preferences of the youth, "Housing within a continuum can take any number of forms including: youth emergency shelters, shared independent housing (roommates), group homes, scattered-site, and independent apartments with, or without additional supports. Homeless youth in Calgary also reported that they desire housing options that are modeled after family-style placements, such as group homes with resident house parents or semi-independent residences with an onsite adult who acts as a house parent. Another example of a potential housing form within a youth housing continuum promoted in the U.S. is the concept of developing dormitory-style housing for youth that is connected directly to vocational training and/or community colleges to ensure that the youth can have stable housing while also increasing their job skills and level of education," (Youth Sector Strategic Plan, March 2009 – 2012).

Identifying a specific number of housing units that should be made available to homeless youth in Calgary is a difficult task. Youth homelessness often goes unnoticed as many live in hidden homelessness conditions (i.e. couch surfing) and have not been included in the Calgary Biennial Homeless Count. As well, the number of homeless youth in Calgary is not static; fluctuations in this population due to migration, economic cycles and other factors make it difficult to identify the specific number of housing units required.

#### **Goal one: Add housing for youth who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness**

Although the community lacks a detailed understanding about the number of young people who are or will be homeless in Calgary, there is a need to establish a baseline number of housing units required. As a starting point, approximately 20% of the total homeless population in Calgary (1,600 total homeless population in 2008) were unaccompanied homeless youth ages 24 years old or younger (The City of Calgary Biennial Homeless Count, 2008). Based on this figure, the community estimates that approximately one fifth of the units created under the 10 Year Plan should be appropriate and accessible to young people.

The proposed housing target for homeless youth needs to remain flexible. As the community acquires a more refined understanding about the needs of homeless young people (for example, identifying the number of chronically homeless young people in Calgary), it will be easier to match housing requirements to specific levels and needs. It is also important to note that changing economic

circumstances can play a role in the number of housing units required, thus targets need to remain flexible to reflect these changes.

### **Key deliverable/outcome**

- a) A baseline number of housing units for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness needs to be established based on what is known and then this housing must be developed.
- b) As more is learned about the needs of homeless young people, this understanding must be used to match housing to specific levels and needs.

## **Goal two: Work with government to create family-style homes**

Young people need homes, not just housing. As stated previously, local consultations revealed that some young people desire family-style homes. In consulting young people (age 12 to 17 years with an average age of 15.8 years) about their experiences with various programs and services, the majority expressed a central desire for housing options that are modeled on family-style placements.

### **Key deliverable/outcome**

- a) It is the community's goal to work with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to ensure that an adequate number of supportive family homes are available to young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

## Strategy Three

### Improve data and systems knowledge and influence public policy

Keeping in line with Strategy 4, Goal 1, of the 10 Year Plan, the Foundation will implement a Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). The HMIS system is being developed in consideration of the youth-specific needs and services and will be implemented in this fashion.

#### **Goal one: Continue to implement and resource the HMIS in Calgary**

HMIS ensures common standards for data collection, facilitating systems planning and outcomes measurement to improve interventions. The creation of an HMIS is critical to this effort so that data can be collected following the same standards across a community of care. Data can be analyzed to assess how long youth are homeless, what their needs are, what the causes of homelessness are, how people interact with mainstream systems of care, the effectiveness of interventions and the number of homeless youth.

Agencies are implementing HMIS in Calgary. An Advisory Committee, including representation from the Youth Sector, has chosen appropriate software. Young people were consulted to develop this system and now there are agreed upon common data elements, outcomes measures and privacy agreements.

#### **Goal two: Expand, coordinate and deepen research capabilities to gain detailed understanding of youth homelessness in Calgary**

Localized research is a valuable part of the Youth Plan. The community is aware there are gaps in understanding and knowledge about localized youth homelessness. The following proposed research agenda will help create more targeted services for homeless youth in Calgary.

##### **1. Prevention research**

Defining young people at “imminent risk” of homelessness is an important step in creating targeted youth homelessness prevention services. Drawing out a distinction between young people “at imminent risk” of homelessness as opposed to young people who might eventually become homeless due to a wide range of vulnerability factors is important as it will help us target the young people who need the most help. Studies about preventing families and singles from becoming homeless in the U.S. have been useful in creating targeted prevention services to the right people; people who (without intervention) would have become homeless.

For example, Dennis Culhane, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA; Katharine Gale, Katharine Gale Consulting, Berkeley, CA; M William Sermons, National Alliance to End Homelessness, Washington, D.C.; and Brooke Spellman, Abt Associates, Inc., Peoria, IL, provided insight about effective homelessness diversion projects around the U.S. at the National Alliance to End Homelessness Conference in July 2010. They identified the following common false assumptions in homelessness diversion projects operating throughout the U.S.

- “Households being evicted will become homeless if we don’t help them. When we do help them, we have successfully prevented homelessness.”

- “Households that know when they are at risk of homelessness will seek out help when they need it.”
- “Households that can’t prove that they can stabilize quickly without assistance are bad risks.”

These false assumptions produced fairly ineffective targeting due to the well-grounded fact that only a small portion of people, who might become homeless, actually do. A diversion system that aims to serve people facing eviction notice as the primary target population will mistakenly use valuable resources on people who would not have otherwise become homeless. Effective targeting is the key to successful homelessness diversion.

## **2. Diversity research**

Diversity of youth includes those with mental health and/or addictions issues, youth with developmental disabilities, Aboriginal youth and young people who are new to Calgary with cultural and religious needs and LGBTQTT youth.

Young people leaving care are vulnerable to homelessness as they transition into adulthood. It is important to understand the specific supports that diverse young people need as they make these transitions. For example, young Aboriginal people are particularly vulnerable; 64% of all young people in care in Alberta are Aboriginal (Government of Alberta, Children and Youth Services Ministry, October 2010). Further research is required about the circumstances that lead diverse young people to homelessness and the key pathways that assist in exiting homelessness.

## **3. Addictions and mental health research**

Young homeless people with mental health issues and co-occurring addictions issues are particularly vulnerable. In order to create appropriate services for these young people, more intensive research must be done about their particular developmental needs. For instance, young people under the age of 18 are often not diagnosed with mental health disorders prior to becoming 18. From a clinical perspective, there are valid reasons for delaying this final assessment, but from a systems support perspective, this could be a missed opportunity to help young people with severe addictions and/or mental health needs.

## **Key deliverables/outcomes**

- a) The community must continue to implement all phases of HMIS planning.
- b) HMIS must be fully implemented in key youth-serving homeless organizations.
- c) The Foundation must work in collaboration with community partners to obtain the necessary data and information identified in the proposed research agenda.

## **Goal three: Advocate for provincial effort to end youth homelessness**

The Government of Alberta has the mandate to assist children at risk and youth transitioning to adulthood. The Ministry of Children and Youth Services Ministry) is therefore the logical leader for providing systems change in Alberta that can prevent and end youth homelessness. The Ministry provides leadership to promote the well-being of children, youth and families. It also promotes greater capacity in community services supporting children in reaching their potential and supports the

delivery of quality services focused on improving outcomes for children, youth and families (Children and Youth Services Business Plan 2008-2011, Gough, 2006).

Children and Youth Services should work with municipalities, community groups and agencies, including the Youth Sector and other ministries (Alberta Learning, Employment and Immigration, Housing and Urban Affairs, Health Services and Justice Services) to develop an Alberta 10 Year Plan to End Youth Homelessness, which follows the tenets set out by the Alberta 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness and the Housing First principle.

Implementation of the plans in Alberta communities should engage key stakeholders in a collaborative, community-response model, under the system planning leadership of a community-based organization or CFSA. Critical attention should be given to tailor the provincial Youth Plan to meet the needs of diverse communities, Aboriginal people, youth with disabilities, newcomers and LGBTQTT youth (Trocme, Knoke & Blackstock 2004, Chan et al. 2005). More specifically, the Government of Alberta should establish an Alberta Secretariat for Action on Youth Homelessness with Children and Youth Services taking the lead role within the Secretariat. Once the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Youth Homelessness has been established, interdepartmental collaboration structures and processes should be established.

### **Key deliverable/outcome**

- a) The Foundation and community partners will coordinate with the Government of Alberta to establish an Alberta Secretariat for Action on Youth Homelessness.

## **Goal four: Adopt an inclusive definition of youth homelessness**

Given the diverse developmental stages of youth, the following definition of a homeless youth should be considered:

“A homeless youth is an unaccompanied person age 24 and under lacking a permanent night time residence. They can be living on the street, in shelters, couch surfing, in unsafe and insecure housing and living in abusive situations. They may also be about to be discharged without the security of a regular nighttime residence from a care, correction, health, or any other facility,” (*Setting the Course: A Blueprint to End Youth Homelessness in Calgary*, 2009).

### **Key deliverable/outcome**

- a) The Foundation and community partners will work with the Children and Youth Services Ministry of Alberta to adopt an inclusive definition of youth homelessness in Alberta.

## **Goal five: Encourage more Children and Youth Services supports for homeless youth under the age of 18.**

The best outcome for young people and children is to have them remain in a positive, safe environment in their family home, wherever and whenever, that is possible. There are circumstances, however, that may require Children and Youth Services to protect homeless youth. Any youth or child under the age of 18 who is homeless is at extreme risk for abuse, criminal involvement, exploitation, poverty and health issues.

*It is important to note that the 12 to 17 year olds without child intervention status reported their primary income generation/survival activities were panhandling (46%), drug trade (14%) and sex trade (22%) as opposed to employment (McLean 2005).*

Findings from the 2005 Seeking Sanctuary study (McLean 2005) focused on Calgary youth ages 12-17 years without child intervention status with the Ministry of Children & Youth.

At the moment, the responsibility of the Children and Youth Services Advocate is limited to young people with child intervention status (and to some young people without status, but only on a case-by-case basis). It is important to acknowledge that all young people in Alberta have rights and entitlements, and those applying for services from the Ministry (making an application for support in the event that they are homeless) should be eligible to an appeals process in the event that they are denied services. This appeals process should be upheld by the Children and Youth Services Advocate.

The Foundation applauds the Children and Youth Services Ministry of Alberta for creating and implementing high-standard quality assurance measures. To make sure these measures are successful, it is important to ensure that resources are adequate and are able to meet the needs of young people at risk or experiencing homelessness.

### **Key deliverables/outcomes**

- a) The Foundation and community partners will work with the Children and Youth Services Ministry of Alberta in amending the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act to include “youth homelessness” as grounds for child protection intervention status and support, and ensuring that these amendments are carried out in procedures and practice.
- b) The Foundation and community partners will encourage the Ministry to widen the mandate of the Children and Youth Services Advocate office to include young people requesting services of the Ministry.
- c) The Foundation and community partners will encourage the Ministry to ensure that an adequate number of social workers, support staff and housing units are readily available for young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness.

## **Goal six: Enhance income supports for young people transitioning into independence.**

The homeless youth population is extremely vulnerable and complex. Some youth experience many issues, including multiple mental illnesses, health and addiction problems, as well as abuse, exploitation and criminal involvement. Some young people are challenged by various forms of discrimination. The majority of young people experiencing homelessness will need support up until they are 24 years old. It is common for youth who have not experienced homelessness to seek assistance from their parents as they progress through developmental independence. This assistance can come in the form of rent support, a helping hand with moving, tuition support, books and the basic needs.

It is important to note that many young homeless people do not have this extended family support. Although a wider system of income supports cannot replace the support of a caring family, it is important to recognize the significance of these supports, especially in relation to their economic

needs. The following changes or enhancements to income supports are required for the healthy development and well-being of young people involved in the youth homelessness system:

There is a need to streamline access to income supports. Young people transitioning from Child Intervention Services into independence need ongoing economic support. It is unrealistic to assume that a young person at the age of 18 would be able to support him or herself independently. This is particularly important for young people who are interested in attending post-secondary institutions.

All young people who are experiencing homelessness in Calgary require emergency rent supports. Children and Youth Services should give young people access to income supports (emergency funds for rent) when a young person makes an application for support. This support should be readily available by social workers during the initial stages of the investigation process.

### **Key deliverables/outcomes**

- a) The community must advocate for the Government of Alberta to establish a Cross Services Ministry Committee to streamline access to income and rent supports for youth transitioning to independence. This includes a streamlined process whereby young people transitioning from Children and Youth Services care can access adult income supports (through Alberta Employment and Immigration) without delays in their monthly income support payments.
- b) The community will advocate for Children and Youth Services to permit all young people who have experienced homelessness in Calgary (who do not have parental/family support) to be eligible for the Advancing Futures Bursary.
- c) The community will advocate for Children and Youth Services to allow all young people with child intervention status who have experienced homelessness access to income supports from Children and Youth Services up to the age of 24.

## **Goal seven: Provide for greater access to post-secondary education**

All young people experiencing homelessness should have access to post-secondary education. The Advancing Futures Bursary is an exceptional program aimed at providing financial supports to young people with Child Intervention status who want to attend a post-secondary institution. There are limits as to which young people can access this support.

### **Key deliverable/outcome**

- a) Work with the Government of Alberta to increase limits to include all young people who have had child intervention status (regardless of the amount of time spent in care) and who have experienced homelessness.

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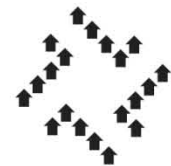
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