Calgary ALBERTA

The Infinity Project

Key Messages

- *A program targeted at youth homelessness and adapted to meet the needs of this specific sub-population.*

- *Shows how a service organization can adapt its programming to meet client needs.*

- *If read in conjunction with the Calgary Homeless Foundation case study it will help provide a broader understanding of the ways in which different models can exist in one community.*

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Introduction

*No young person should be living on the streets. Unfortunately for many youth, intolerable living situations created by family difficulties can make the streets appear to be their better option. According to Calgary's 2008 **Biennial Homeless Count**, 355 youth under 18 and 327 youth between 18 and 24 were experiencing homelessness; continuing a serious trend from the previous count in 2006 (304 youth under 18 and 343 youth between 18 and 24) (City of Calgary, 2006). In total, youth homelessness represents approximately 20% of the total population experiencing homelessness in Calgary (Stroik et al., 2008). However, these figures underestimate the size of population experiencing youth homelessness. Many youth are a part of the hidden homeless population and remain undocumented in homeless count statistics; they are couch surfing, staying with friends or remaining out of sight while sleeping outdoors.*

Getting Started: Framing the Issue

Since 2007 Calgary has been developing a Housing First response to homelessness. Beginning with *Calgary's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness* (2008), the community has created a unified system of response to homelessness administered through the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF). CHF, an independent not-for-profit foundation that receives both private and government funding, administers the distribution of funds to most services and programs addressing homelessness in Calgary (see Case Study on CHF).

CHF has also developed a *system of care* approach to service provision that integrates service delivery. Services collaborate, coordinate and share information, while also bridging the gaps between mainstream and homelessness geared services in the community. Much of this coordination is accomplished through the Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS), a cross-sector data management system that allows agencies to ensure clients are receiving appropriate resources and support. Through CHF's leadership, the shift to a Housing First model has been implemented with significant success: by 2012, 4096 people had been housed and an overall 11.4% reduction in the number of individuals experiencing homelessness was achieved between 2008 and 2012 (CHF, 2012).

As the number of youth experiencing homelessness continued to rise despite the successes of Housing First in Calgary, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary (BGCC) explored news ways of addressing youth homelessness. Because young people are still in the developmental stage of their lives, they experience a unique form of homelessness. For most young people, family support is essential to the process of becoming self-sufficient adults. Families often provide basic needs, financial support, one-on-one support and advocacy, social and emotional support and guidance. Young people who leave home are often stripped of these essential experiences. They enter into homelessness with little or no work history and often experience high levels of criminal victimization. Youth who are forced to live on the streets have fewer life skills (i.e. cooking, money management and job searching) and struggle to attend school. It was clear to BGCC that ending youth homelessness required the creation of a Housing First program that offered intensive housing support tailored to the unique needs of young people.

Moving Forward: Planning

Since 1939, BGCC has provided safe and supportive space where children and youth can experience new opportunities, overcome barriers, build positive relationships and develop confidence and life skills. When youth homelessness arose as a concern 25 years ago, BGCC responded by opening Calgary's first youth shelter, Avenue 15. Since then, BGCC have expanded their services for youth experiencing homelessness to include prevention, outreach, two shelters and housing. Youth accessing these programs began expressing to program staff their need for more youth-serving agencies, for a sense of belonging and for a place to call home.

Data from YHC showed that 44% of youth were not fitting into the available youth housing programs.

BGCC recognized that youth homelessness was best understood on a continuum of homelessness. The continuum of homelessness acknowledges the multiple layers of hidden homelessness that exist between absolute homelessness and being housed. The CHF's definition of youth homelessness captures the many ways a young person can experience homelessness:

> "A homeless youth is an unaccompanied person aged 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"

(Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2009:4).

In 2008 BGCC piloted The Youth Housing Connection (YHC), a project providing youth with help accessing basic needs and housing. Data from YHC showed that 44% of youth were not fitting into the available youth housing programs. YHC had also quickly revealed new sub-populations of youth, such as parenting teens, young families with one partner older and one younger than 18 years old and pet owners, which were not being served by Calgary's existing services. Youth from these subgroups were choosing to sleep rough in tent cities and remain together rather than enter existing shelters.

The need for youth-focused, permanent housing demonstrated by The Youth Housing Connection, combined with BGCC's research into the effectiveness of Housing First models in removing barriers to housing, indicated a new form of youth housing service delivery was needed in Calgary. In March 2009 BGCC launched The Infinity Project, a youth-focused Housing First program funded by CHF. Utilizing the Housing First model adopted by Calgary's 10 Year Plan, the project provides youth (aged 16 to 24) with a permanent home in the community of their choice and the supports they need to maintain housing and become self-sufficient. Since 2009, the project has supported 58 youth in becoming housed.

Housing First at The Infinity Project

Aligning with the requirements of CHF, the following Housing First principals are the foundation for The Infinity Project's services and programs:

- Housing is a human right. Youth do not earn their home through good behaviour and do not need to be 'housing ready' to be successful in maintaining their home. Youth should not have to change residences when their service needs change.
- 'Choice' and 'voice' in one's own life is essential.
- All youth need time and practice to learn to be good neighbours and to gain the skills and confidence necessary to live as self-sufficient adults.
- Supportive, accepting relationships that youth can count on are essential as youth move out of homelessness and street life.
- Youth need financial and instrumental supports to get started.
- All people, including youth, benefit from connection with community supports and resources that offer a safety net in times of trouble.

PROGRAM FRAMEWORK

The Infinity Project works with up to 30 youth at any given time. The anticipated length of participation in Infinity is 2 years, with the recognition that each youth requires a unique plan with a unique timeline. Approximately 5-10 youth rotate in and out of the program every year.

During intake, consideration is given to 'right matching'; matching the youth's needs with Infinity's services. In the event that the youth is better suited to another program, referrals are made to the appropriate program. The youth is supported by The Infinity Project until they begin to receive case management supports from the new program.

Transition planning, which refers to both the transition to adulthood as well as transition out of Infinity and homelessness-focused services, begins at the time of intake. As part of this transition plan, youth are supported to complete the necessary concrete tasks (as listed in the Graduation Checklist) in preparation for independence.

Participation in the Infinity Project is voluntary and youth retain the right to self-discharge from support services and from the housing that has been arranged for them. Refusal of support services does not result in housing loss.

HOUSING SUPPORT

For most youth who have experienced homelessness, housing in the community is the best option. Many youth have been repeatedly institutionalized, experienced trauma and have attachment and interpersonal challenges. The undermining of their autonomy and the challenges in conforming to the requirements of group living has contributed to keeping them in a state of homelessness. Based on the best practices for youth service delivery identified by the Collaborative Community Health Research Centre (2002), Infinity uses a scattered site model that promotes individual community living where a youth can feel at home and find support long past program involvement. Infinity staff work with youth to find
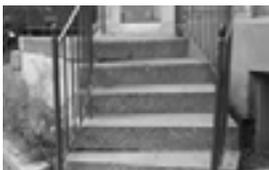
Housing is a human right. Youth do not earn their home through good behaviour and do not need to be 'housing ready' to be successful in maintaining their home. Youth should not have to change residences when their service needs change.

affordable, permanent housing quickly and provide the financial support, through CHF funded rent supplements, to access that housing.

Housing Support Workers (HSW) assist youth in communicating with landlords, reviewing lease agreements, securing convertible leases, responding to landlord concerns, developing budgeting skills and helping youth access additional financial supports (Employment Insurance, Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) and student financing). In the event of eviction, Infinity follows CHF policy and procedure using supportive case management. Staff work to rehouse the youth as quickly as possible and minimize the time of housing instability.

As youth acquire the skills for more independent living and experience the challenges of transitioning to adulthood, their service needs may change. Infinity ensures that a change in service needs does not require a change in residence and never warrants being discharged into homelessness. By maintaining a strong zero discharge to homelessness policy and using convertible leases, youth are able to maintain their housing following graduation and develop a strong sense of safety and acceptance.

SUPPORT FOR ACHIEVING SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Many youth in the Infinity program lack healthy supportive relationships in their lives. The relationship built with their HSW is vital to the youth's movement out of street-involvement and homelessness. Using Outcome Star, an outcome and goal planning tool, the HSW assists the youth in identifying individual goals and developing action plans in the following areas:

- Motivation and taking responsibility;
- Self care and living skills;
- Managing money and personal administration;
- Social networks and relationships;
- Drug and alcohol misuse;
- Physical health;
- Emotional and mental health;
- Meaningful use of time;
- Managing tenancy and accomodation; and
- Avoiding criminal offending.

HSWs also assist youth in maintaining their housing and achieving self-sufficiency by working with them to:

- Find jobs or enrolling in employability and/or training programs;
- Enroll in school;
- Access financial supports;
- Prepare resumes and practice interview skills;
- Attend the Youth Employment Centre;
- Learn meal preparation and home management (cleaning, organizing, communicating with the landlord);
- Access community life skill development opportunities; and
- Learn parenting skills and relationship building.

HSWs operate from a coaching and mentorship philosophy that mimics one-to-one, parental teaching. This often means 'doing with' in the early stages of skill acquisition. The HSW begins transition planning on the day of intake and coordinates resources that wrap around the youth, supporting them in becoming self-sufficient both in their home and in their community. Youth also have access to BGCC Youth Housing 24/7 emergency on-call support from a HSW who is able to respond by phone or in person when necessary.

PROGRAM GRADUATION

Infinity staff support youth in becoming productive adults through permanent housing and intensive support provision. A client has fulfilled the basic criteria for program graduation when they have paid three consecutive months of rent on time and in full, found stable income that enables the youth to meet their financial responsibilities and (when applicable) completed three consecutive months of stable employment with one employer and without reprimand. Consideration is also given to life skill acquisition, mental and emotional stability and the presence of community and natural supports.

Making it Happen: Implementation

STAFFING

The Infinity Project is one of BGCC's programs. While the project has dedicated staff, management of the project is done by staff whose role includes other BGCC projects.

MANAGING DIRECTOR OF YOUTH HOUSING AND SHELTER

The Infinity Project is one of eight programs in the Managing Director's portfolio. The responsibilities of this role in relation to the Infinity Project include strategic planning, external advocacy, overseeing program development and maintaining continuity with Calgary's overall *system of care*.

MANAGER OF YOUTH HOUSING

With support and direction from the Managing Director of Youth Housing and Shelters, the Manager of Youth Housing is responsible for the development, management and oversight of operations of the Infinity Project (approximately one third of their total hours). The Manager of Youth Housing ensures that services are relevant to the needs of the clients and consistent with best practices research in Housing First programming.

Infinity also collaborates with the Youth Sector, a committee of vulnerable youth-serving agencies that seeks to better coordinate services, advocate as one voice and build a continuum of housing and supports in a variety of areas.

INFINITY PROGRAM COORDINATOR

The Program Coordinator is a dedicated project staff responsible for all aspects of the operation of the Infinity Project. The Coordinator must ensure that all aspects of the program model are effectively implemented and that the program is effectively integrated within BGCC's continuum of programs.

HOUSING SUPPORT WORKERS (HSW)

Four HSWs are dedicated to the project and each help 7-8 youth find and maintain permanent housing. In this case management position, building relationships with the youth is essential as workers are responsible for identifying the appropriate amount of support required by each youth to help them remain housed and accomplish their other goals.

PARTNERSHIPS

Through BGCC, Infinity participates in CHF's Systems Planning Advisory Committee (SPAC), which works to develop CHF's 'system of care' through coordinated access and assessment, as well as through the implementation of the *System Planning Framework (SPF)*. As a member of the SPAC, BGCC has aligned its contracts, services and outcomes with the SPF and continues to make changes as the framework evolves.

Currently Infinity/BGCC and SPAC are in the process of adding the 828-HOPE Assessment and Referral service to the HMIS system. Begun in 2008, the 828-HOPE Assessment and Referral is a centralized referral service and interim case management for youth (primarily ages 16 to 24) who are at-risk of or are experiencing homelessness. The service currently provides a 48 hour face-to-face response, basic needs support, assessment and referral matching, interim case management and system navigation. 828-HOPE also provides a coordinated and centralized referral service for concerned sector and community members. Combining 828-HOPE and the HMIS system will allow vulnerable youth to be quickly referred to resources in Calgary and prevent or shorten their time on the streets.

Infinity also collaborates with the **Youth Sector,** a committee of vulnerable youth-serving agencies that seeks to better coordinate services, advocate as one voice and build a continuum of housing and supports in a variety of areas. As a result, clients can access a variety of services through one organization, rather than coordinating with multiple systems to access all of the supports needed. As a result of being part

of this collaboration, as well as Calgary's system of care, Infinity Project staff are able to access and refer young people to a range of services throughout the city.

Infinity staff report that working within the 'system of care' and with the Youth Sector committee lessens the need for formal partnerships. They do however work closely with several organizations, most notably housing providers and their parent organization, BGCC.

Alex Youth Health Centre (YHC) is The Infinity Project's closest partner and which provides health and wellness supports for youth experiencing homelessness.

Boys and Girls Club of Calgary (BGCC) is The Infinity Project's parent organization, which provides Infinity clients access to a variety of BGCC's programs. For example, Infinity staff have found that alternative education and life skills programs offering financial support are extremely successful in engaging youth and helping them gain financial stability. Infinity staff work closely with all of BGCC's programs to ensure that eligible youth are benefiting from these services.

The Treehouse building, a 10-unit apartment building in Crescent Heights owned by BGCC, is also available as affordable housing for youth from Infinity's housing programs. The building is managed by BGCC's internal Building Management System and has two units currently being renovated to allow for barrier free access. The residents of the building include youth from all BGCC Youth Housing programs and alumni youth who still qualify for affordable housing, as well as one community resident. The youth in the building, along with the housing staff and building management, organize "community" suppers and grounds clean-up events to promote youth community engagement.

Relationships with *housing providers*, such as landlords and property managers, are crucial to ensuring that young people can access housing. Infinity staff invest in relationships with housing providers from all types of housing options and provide them with access to the BGCC Youth Housing 24/7 Emergency On-call Support Worker. For example, agreements with Arlington Realty and Swordsman Properties ensure that a certain number of units are rented exclusively to Infinity clients. This type of relationship has been particularly helpful in ensuring that youth under 18 have access to safe and affordable housing options where they may be able to sign their own leases, take ownership over their homes and practice important life skills.

Despite Calgary's shortage of affordable housing stock for youth, The Infinity Project has been able to grow its housing portfolio by forming close ties with housing providers and renting blocks of apartments. The use of convertible leases also increases Infinity's ability to access housing. Landlords are often more willing to rent to Infinity because they are guaranteed rent, supported with tenant challenges and can seek restitution for damages.

COST AND FUNDING

The Infinity Project is fully funded by CHF. The total annual budget for the April 2012 to March 2013 fiscal year is $608,221.00. The project serves 30 youth at a time and anticipates serving 37 unique clients this year.

Evidence of Effectiveness

The Infinity Project has been collecting data on outcomes for all of its participants since the beginning of the program and has recently implemented the HMIS, a shared database that is used in the Calgary homelessness sector. Staff also use the Outcome Star as a service planning and outcome tracking tool. The following data has been collected to demonstrate Infinity's success in achieving its three main goals: housing retention, self-sufficiency and access to services to actively prepare youth for productive adult living.

HOUSING RETENTION

Housing retention rates are based on all program participants from the beginning of the program to October 2012.

Of those who had been in the program for one year as of October 2012 (n=48):

- *44 youth were known to be housed (two were unknown, two had lost contact)[1].*

Of those who had been in the program for two years as of October 2012 (n=37):

- *32 were known to be housed (five were unknown).*

STABLE INCOME

Of youth who have been in the program six months or more:

- *63% of those over 18 and 87% of those under 18 have stable income either through employment, alternative funding and education and/or employability programs.*

It should be noted that although youth have stable and consistent income, it was found to be insufficient to cover monthly living expenses and these individuals still require substantial rental subsidies (BGCC, 2012).

ACCESS TO SERVICES

Of the youth served since April 2011 and who have been in the program six months or more, 100% have engaged in community activities and supports. 84% of youth under 18 and 94% of youth over 18 reported that Infinity supported them in accessing community resources. In the last year [2011]:

- *50% of the youth accessed mental health and addictions supports in the community (four of those youth attended a residential treatment program).*

COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

The Infinity Project's success can also be demonstrated financially. As part of the pilot project, the program engaged in a cost analysis exercise in order to demonstrate a decrease in the average cost of services per youth per day. The average cost per day for youth in their first month was $143.94 and by six months, the cost had decreased to $23.96 per day. Raising the Roof's *Youth Homelessness in Canada: The Road to Solutions* (2009) estimates that the daily cost to house youth in a shelter is $82 and $250 in a detention center. In the first year of The Infinity Project, the average cost to help support an Infinity youth was $38.81 per day.

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1. Housing retention rates may be higher as youth may still be housed, but have lost contact with Infinity staff so their housing status is unknown.

SATISFACTION SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUP FEEDBACK

Infinity staff have regularly collected feedback from program participants via satisfaction surveys and focus groups. Participants are asked: What's one thing that's changed since entering the project? Responses have included:

"I am now connected with counselling thanks to The Infinity Project. What I like about this program is that staff encourages you to look for community resources with their support; staff do it with you not for you. I have gained independence from having to learn how to find resources and I now feel more confident in my ability".

"I feel like I am more aware of what is available in the city. I finally have a therapist and it's one that I really like. I am now aware of how to access the food bank when I need it. If I need to know about resources, staff is always willing to help me find them".

"I just need to get ahead financially. I am ready to live on my own because I have learned how to pay rent, maintain a job, get out of debt and the importance education has on my life".

"I am very happy to have people who are willing to help me as I am becoming independent. I know that I have medical issues that hold me back and I wouldn't be able to do it without support. I now know what it takes to live on your own and I am more aware of what I need to be doing".

Key Learnings

'CHOICE' AND 'VOICE' IN ONE'S LIFE IS ESSENTIAL

The guiding mission of The Infinity Project is based on a literature review of best practices for transitional youth services. The University of Victoria (Collaborative Community Health Research Centre, 2002) identified key factors that contribute to the effectiveness of supportive housing services for youth, as well as the factors that keep them housed. The research revealed the critical importance of choice in young people's lives. Choice empowers youth and provides the conditions to make them happier and better able to address their other needs. Young people need to be able to choose the neighbourhood they live in so that they can access other services including education, employment and being close to family. Choice also gives youth the opportunity to make mistakes and to learn from them. Giving young people a choice allows them to learn that their ideas have to be self-generated, rather than a response to the presence of a caregiver or enforcer. As a result, young people will be more self-sufficient and able to help themselves.

NEED FOR ADEQUATE SUPPLY OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Housing is a human right and although Calgary City Council has recently approved plans to increase the housing stock, there is still a lack of safe and affordable housing in Calgary. Youth face additional barriers to accessing housing because many landlords are hesitant to rent to youth, especially those under the age of 18. Not having a home makes it difficult for youth to attend school and maintain a job. Affordable housing and/or adequate income supports for students who have experienced homelessness would be beneficial in ending homelessness in Calgary. Infinity staff have been able to develop positive ongoing relationships with housing providers who have agreed to rent to a number of the projects' under 18 youth.

NEED FOR INTENSIVE CASE MANAGEMENT AND LONG-TERM SUPPORT

Connections with friends, family and other social supports are important for everyone's health and wellbeing. Many youth experiencing homelessness lack these positive relationships. In addition, the earlier they leave home, the fewer opportunities young people have to develop the skills necessary to self-sufficiency and the longer they may need to practice these skills. Infinity staff found that youth under 18 require more intensive advocacy, as well as assistance with education and employment, system and benefit navigation, as well as health and wellness training. They also require extra financial assistance, including longer and additional rental and living subsidies.

An increasing number of youth are also struggling with mental health and addiction challenges, requiring intensive case management and ongoing support to help them become self-sufficient and avoid a return to homelessness. However there is a lack of appropriate treatment options and housing with intensive supports that can respond to complex mental health needs. Staff continue to advocate for housing and support options for youth struggling with mental health and recognize the importance of early assessment and intervention. Infinity has also implemented the CHF's Case Management Standards and successfully completed the international accreditation through the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF).

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REDUCE BARRIERS TO EDUCATION, TRAINING, EMPLOYMENT, FINANCIAL SUPPORTS AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

A number of barriers prevent young people from accessing opportunities that would help them get off the streets. Some youth struggle to maintain employment and are likely to experience periods of unemployment, often because of a lack of communication and conflict resolution skills. These youth also have fewer opportunities to develop skill sets that will lead to sustainable employment. Infinity has been able to refer participants to a variety of programs that address the vast range of young people's complex needs.

Lack of adequate employment options that pay a living wage has been a significant challenge for The Infinity Project. The youth are only qualified for minimum wage employment opportunities due to their lack of experience, age and skill level. This creates challenges in completing educational goals as youth struggle to meet their financial obligations. Staff have identified that minimum wage is substantially less than a living wage. Higher and longer term subsidies for rent and living expenses are required for this population.

Maintaining small caseloads in recognition of the developmental stages of youth has been beneficial in stabilizing and maintaining housing, as well as working towards goal planning.

Additionally, student financing is dependent on a minimum of 20 hours of weekly classroom attendance, as well as passing grades. Unfortunately, youth face many challenges that prevent them from fully participating in educational opportunities. An inability to meet student financing requirements can result in immediate termination of funding. An additional challenge to accessing this funding is the system backlogs that significantly delay processing. Too often policy and programming focuses on what the youth are not doing, rather than addressing the barriers that prevent them from attending or completing school. Additional advocacy and leniency in funding requirements would be beneficial for this population.

SMALL CASELOADS

Maintaining small caseloads in recognition of the developmental stages of youth has been beneficial in stabilizing and maintaining housing, as well as working towards goal planning. Small staff to client ratio (currently 7 or 8 participants to one HSW) ensures that youth are supported in both the development of life skills and in accessing resources and services that will allow them to transition successfully into adulthood. Ideally caseloads are even smaller (5 or 6), if funding permits. This is especially crucial for staff that have a full caseload of clients with the highest acuity needs resulting from chronic homelessness, challenges with mental health, addictions and criminal involvement.

YOUTH NEED A HOUSING FIRST PLAN

The Infinity Project's success in providing housing for youth experiencing homelessness in Calgary provided a model demonstrating that Housing First could be effectively adapted for young people. Drawing on The Infinity Project's example and with BGCC's contribution, CHF responded to the community's call for action on youth homelessness in its updated *10 Year Plan to End Homelessness in Calgary* (2011). The updated *10 Year Plan* incorporated the *Plan to End Youth Homelessness in Calgary*, the first Housing First, city-wide plan to end youth homelessness in Canada (CHF, 2011). *The Youth Plan* included three strategies:

- Build a coordinated system to prevent and end youth homelessness in Calgary;
- Develop an adequate number of housing units and supportive homes dedicated to youth at risk of or currently experiencing homelessness; and
- Improve data and systems knowledge and influence public policy (CHF, 2011).

The *Youth Plan* also identified three goals:

- Reduce the length of shelter stays for youth;
- Implement a Homeless Management Information System (HMIS); and
- Ensure that no more than 10% of young people served by Housing First programs return to homelessness.

Young people experiencing homelessness in Calgary needed effective housing and support services. The *Youth Plan* presented a comprehensive systems view of young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness, placing special emphasis on preventing youth homelessness and providing young people with timely support and intervention services through a Housing First model.
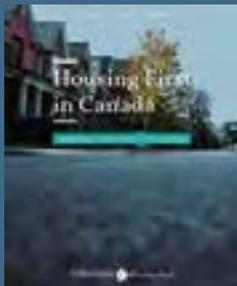
Read the full report and other case studies at
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This case study was researched and written by Fiona Scott and Sarah Jean Harrison.