



# The Alliance to End Homelessness

[www.endhomelessnessottawa.ca](http://www.endhomelessnessottawa.ca)

## How to Develop a Report Card on Homelessness:

### The First Report Card on Homelessness in Ottawa, 2004

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**The Alliance to End Homelessness in Ottawa** is a coalition of community stakeholders committed to working collaboratively to eliminate homelessness by gaining a better understanding of homelessness and developing and implementing strategies to end it. The United Way of Ottawa funded the Alliance to provide a coordinator and support for the development of a model for an annual Report Card on Homelessness in Ottawa. The Report Card was intended as a public awareness and education tool with a focus on:

- Describing the homeless population in Ottawa;
- Explaining the factors contributing to homelessness;
- Highlighting both achievements and continuing needs;
- Providing an opportunity to help the community and the Alliance to End Homelessness to better address the issue of homelessness; and
- Developing a model that can be used on an annual basis.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS

### A Review of the Literature and Examination of Report Cards on Homelessness

A Report Card Working Group undertook the development of the model. This group worked with the Alliance Coordinator to implement the work plan laid out in our grant application and reported to the Research and Evaluation Working Group of the Alliance to End Homelessness. The Report Card Working Group included the Alliance Coordinator, researchers from the Centre for Research on Community Services at the University of Ottawa, a community volunteer with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) research experience, and representatives from United Way Ottawa, the City Of Ottawa Housing Branch and the Social Planning Council of Ottawa.

To prepare for the development of the Report Card, a review of the literature on report card methodology and an examination of Canadian report cards were conducted.

Julie Beaulac, Laura Goodine and Tim Aubry of the Centre for Research on Community Services at the University of Ottawa<sup>1</sup> found several definitions of a report card in the literature review. The definition that most closely fits with what we undertook is:

***“information on key social, health, economic or environmental conditions in a community” . . . that . . . “provides a compelling snapshot of a community’s status”***

United Way of America. 1999

A report card can serve many purposes, including:

- Defining community problems
- Monitoring and tracking changes
- Setting priorities
- Conducting evaluations
- Identifying underserved areas
- Providing feedback to service providers
- Encouraging collaborative problem solving
- Facilitating public education
- Improving public awareness
- Assisting advocacy efforts by local groups
- Initiating improvements in systems or promoting actions more generally
- Increasing accountability
- Supporting continued or increased funding
- Facilitating informed decision-making

The literature review found three distinct types of reports cards:

- Scientific – based on data, methodologically strong, comprehensive and valid
- Popular report cards – communicate relevant information clearly and effectively
- Hybrid report cards – combine scientific rigour with effective communication

Michael Cairns and Diane Urquhart<sup>2</sup> of the Social Planning Council surveyed eleven report cards produced for various communities across Canada. The report cards were reviewed for a number of factors including content and length. The survey by Cairns and

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<sup>1</sup> Beaulac, Julie, Laura Goodine & Tim Aubry, *Development of the Report Card on Homelessness in Ottawa – Part I Review of the Literature*, The Alliance to End Homelessness, Ottawa, August 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Cairns, Michael & Diane Urquhart, *Development of the Report Card on Homelessness in Ottawa – Part II – Indicators and Canadian Report Cards*, The Alliance to End Homelessness, Ottawa, August 2004

Urquhart found a very wide range in length of report cards from two to 187 pages, with the average being 46 pages.

Table 1 outlines the content of the report cards surveyed by Cairns and Urquhart with local data being the most often used. There is no data used by all eleven report cards and many of the data categories are used by less than half.

Five of the report cards examined by Cairns and Urquhart were produced only once, while others were updated annually. Lead organizations for the Report Cards also varied and included city government, community groups and a university.

While the literature review and report card survey provided some very useful background information for the development of a report card, they did not indicate a precise road map to follow. In addition, it was important for the Ottawa Report Card to reflect the distinct characteristics of the community.

<b>Table 1 Content of 11 Report Cards on Homelessness in Canada</b>	
<b>Item</b>	<b>#</b>
Local Data	10
Housing Demand	8
Action Plan	8
Housing Supply	7
Census	7
Support Services	5
Affordability	5
Survey Data	3
Interview Data	3
Other	3

## **Community Consultation Phase**

A brief consultation was undertaken with the homelessness sector and stakeholders. The Alliance Steering Committee completed it by email or by phone. Alliance members, other individuals on the Alliance listserv and on the Outreach/Street Health contact list were invited to complete the questionnaire by email.

Several themes emerged through the consultation that informed the development of the First Report Card on Homelessness in Ottawa, as can be seen by the following quotes:

*“Homeless people are just like you and I.”*

*“Many people are in danger of becoming homeless for economic reasons (low income, loss of job, high shelter payments).”*

*“Some of the homeless may go unnoticed if they “couch surf”.*

*“Homelessness does not occur as a result of a conscious choice (e.g., that they don’t want to work. For some, the journey may have started early when they were committed to foster care through a family breakdown. Along the way, many of the services, supports and interventions that might have helped had been withdrawn by successive government cutbacks and program changes. Consequently, the homeless may well find themselves facing multiple problems (such as mental illness and substance abuse) along with the economic issues*

*of few jobs, high rents, low support through OW/ODSP and few alternative housing options with little help available.”*

*“There is an economic basis to homelessness – lack of employment opportunities, high cost of housing, utility cost, etc.”*

*“The homeless population is quite diverse and includes families as well as individuals and the causes of homelessness differ accordingly. The public face of homelessness may be the panhandler on the corner but there is a spectrum of conditions including those at risk of becoming homeless, couch surfers, those living in shelters long-term, etc.”*

*“The homeless live in a very difficult environment. The housing options that are open are not always safe, be they shelters or rooming houses. They may have to share the streets and accommodation with people recently released from correctional institutions who may have a violent background. They may be subject to discrimination in finding alternative accommodation. This is clearly not a conducive environment to tackling issues such as substance abuse, given the pressures and opportunities to relapse.”*

*“Shelter and other frontline workers may not have the training and background to handle people with violent tendencies.”*

*“The homeless need coordinated services to address multiple issues at the same time (employment supports, housing and health issues).”*

*“The response to homelessness is not just to provide the housing required but other needs also have to be addressed including support and medical services.”*

## **Development of the Report Card**

The City of Ottawa had past assessments of the homelessness situation and plans that provided valuable background. The use of sound research and statistical evidence was important to the Alliance, so that the Ottawa Report Card would portray the situation on homelessness in our city clearly and accurately.

The form, content and design of the Report Card emerged over several months with work initiated at the Report Card Working Group level. The Research and Evaluation Working Group and the Steering Committee reviewed monthly reports from this sub committee. Drafts were circulated for comments and suggestions to both these groups as well as to the Alliance’s Public Awareness Working Group.

The Report Card Working Group decided on a “hybrid” model that would be scientifically based but also serve as an effective communication document for the community. This first model included three main sections:

1. The first section of the First Report Card dealt with the factors that can put individuals and families at risk of homelessness. This section included economic factors, housing costs and income support programs.
2. The next section dealt with the programs and services that exist in Ottawa to help people who are homeless.
3. The final sections dealt with what actions can be undertaken to help people who are homeless get back into stable housing.

The First Report Card was able to draw upon a Panel Study on Homelessness<sup>3</sup> conducted by researchers from the Centre for Research on Community Services at the University of Ottawa, Carleton University and St Paul’s University. The Panel Study is a longitudinal study of individuals and families who are homeless in Ottawa. In preparing the Report Card, the Working Group assembled a great deal of statistical information concerning Ottawa from a variety of reliable sources including: Statistics Canada, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, etc. In addition, we were able to use statistics from the City of Ottawa on service provision and utilization for the year 2004 that are routinely collected through the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) Initiative.

The term “report card” could imply a rating on a pass/fail system, a point score or a comparison to a norm or standard. However there is no objective standard that would allow a comparison between to be made based on the number of people who are homeless, services available, or on other indicators between communities based on the number of people who are homeless, services available, or other metrics. Nor was it possible to compare Ottawa’s situation with respect to homelessness in 2004 with an earlier time since this was the first report of its kind in our city.

As work progressed on gathering information, it became clear that our first report needed to be developed as a benchmark or baseline report with indicators that could be tracked in the future to measure progress. We selected relevant and reliable secondary data sources for the indicators in our First Report Card on Homelessness, which included:

#### **HOMELESSNESS INDICATORS**

- Number of Individuals who stayed in a shelter in a year
- Number of times shelter beds were used
- Length of stay in emergency shelters for
  - Single men
  - Single women
  - Youth
  - Families

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<sup>3</sup> Panel Study on Homelessness, Aubry, T., University of Ottawa; Klodawsky, F., Carleton University; Runnels, V., St Paul’s University; 2004.

### **HOUSING INDICATORS**

- Number of social housing units
- Number on social housing waiting list
- Number of rent supplement units
- Number of supportive housing units
- Rental vacancy rate
- Average rents for 2-bedroom apartment

### **INCOME INDICATORS**

- Social assistance for a single person
- Average monthly number of Ontario works cases
- Minimum wage
- Cost of living increase

## **Design, Format and Production**

The First Report Card was reproduced in English and translated into French in separate document. The design evolved as content was determined, always keeping in mind the importance of producing a Report Card that was accessible to the general public. The Alliance Coordinator produced the design, layout and formatting receiving ongoing feedback on drafts. Pictures of service agencies and symbolic graphic art were used instead of photos of homeless individuals to protect identities in a permanent public document.

To save costs while at the same time producing a document that reflected the seriousness of the content, two PDF's of the First Report Card were reproduced into high-end photocopied booklets with centre stitching. The PDF's were first posted on United Way Ottawa's website and have since been posted on the Alliance's new website [www.endhomelessnessottawa.ca](http://www.endhomelessnessottawa.ca) for easy downloading and copying.

## **Launch and Distribution**

The Alliance's Public Awareness Working Group took responsibility for planning the release of the First Report Card to the media and the community at large. They developed a "launch countdown" that was implemented by the Coordinator. As this First Report Card was a "baseline" document, considerable work was put into the development of a strategic message to use at the launch and with the media. This message focused on "the many faces of homelessness".

A deliberate strategic decision was made not to release advance copies to any media outlet and putting just enough data in the media releases for the launch to entice local media to attend the launch for more information.

In recognition that this was a first, baseline Report Card, an approach was developed to handle the “grading” question expected from the media by assigning “satisfactory” versus “unsatisfactory” responses to expected queries. For several months during this period, professors and students in the School of Journalism and Communications at Carleton University undertook a pre-, during and post-launch monitoring of the media coverage of homelessness in Ottawa to be released in the fall of 2005.

The Public Awareness Working Group prepared press releases and background documents including a question and answer sheet on potential reporter questions. Lists were prepared of local print and broadcast media, including student and neighbourhood media that reach a large portion of the local community. A media advisory was sent out several days in advance of the launch as well as a press release on the day before. Phone calls were made to a number of media outlets. Ottawa politicians at all three levels of government were invited to the launch and couriered hard copies of the First Report Card on the day before its release.

The launch press conference was held at a supportive housing program that was centrally located. There were three spokespeople: two from the Steering Committee of the Alliance to introduce the First Report Card and an individual now living in supportive housing to provide the media with personal insight into the experience homelessness.

All the spokespeople were interviewed throughout the day. The formerly homeless individual was featured prominently on the television news. As well several other people with experience of homelessness were in attendance to speak with the media. Throughout the day the Alliance Coordinator directed media queries to a cross section of organizations.

The First Report Card was the lead story on all of the local news shows that day. The spokespeople were interviewed on the drive home shows as well as a call-in show on the community channel. In total, there were five radio stations reporting the First Report Card as a lead item throughout the day, four television stations running the First Report Card as a lead item with interviews all day, and four print media outlets each running a number of articles over several days.

The PDF's of First Report Card in English and in French were posted on the United Way of Ottawa's website on the day of the launch. As well, it was distributed to the Alliance's own Homelessness Ottawa list serve (over 300 members) and to a broad range of organizations at both the local and provincial levels that through contacts of the Steering Committee, the Research and Evaluation Working Group and the Public Awareness Working Group.

For several months after the launch, members of the Alliance Steering Committee Alliance met with federal, provincial and municipal politicians as well as with the Minister of Housing, Joe Fontana. By inviting feedback on the First Report Card on Homelessness in Ottawa, the Alliance had the opportunity to provide a briefing on the current situation in Ottawa with regard to homelessness and to engage these politicians on what concrete steps might be made at their level of government to address the issue.

## Evaluation

An extensive evaluation of the model was undertaken; it included an analysis of both the process and information gathered in a pre and post launch sector consultation and examined the nature and extent of the distribution. In addition, a strategic analysis of the media coverage was undertaken by Josh Greenberg and Tim May at the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University and shared with the Alliance Steering Committee. The 2004 evaluation helped inform the process for the development and production of the Second Report Card on Homelessness in Ottawa as a model to be used in subsequent years. As well it will be used to prepare a final report on the baseline report card for our funder, the United Way of Ottawa which approved funding for an additional year to complete our model.

The First Report Card filled an information-sharing vacuum and provided a tangible basis around which Alliance members can work together. The process helped build capacity within the sector, demonstrated successful working relationships, and offered a common understanding of the issue and how to characterize it numerically.

Before a problem can be addressed, there has to be agreement in the community on what it is, how large it is and what can be done about it. The Report Card is the vehicle through which those working with and for people who are homeless can take charge of the issue. With their experience and expertise, the debate on homelessness can focus on what can be done.

The Report Card was also designed to serve as a basic reference document. The number of copies downloaded from the United Way web site along with the number distributed affirms that there are many copies in circulation. The second consultation also found that many of the readers shared copies with their colleagues. Numbers from the First Report Card now regularly appear in the media as further proof that the Report Card has become part of the community's information on homelessness.

As an annual event, the Report Card will be able to have a long-term incremental impact, as it will ensure that the issue is brought into focus on a regular basis. Each year, the selected indicators can and will be updated so that the community can measure progress and re-examine what can be done in terms of new measures.

The long-term aim of the Report Card is the end of homelessness in Ottawa. As a signature document of the Alliance to End Homelessness, the Report Card on Homelessness in Ottawa provides a much-needed opportunity to focus attention on the topic, increase awareness in the community and monitor progress towards that ultimate goal.

### **“IT TAKES THE SECTOR” TO PRODUCE THE REPORT CARD**

There were two learning strands, as there often are with a developmental project: designing the process and producing the product at the same time.



The process elements included:

- The Alliance to End Homelessness;
- A research and evaluation working group with representation from the academic side, the City and senior level practitioners and a Report Card subcommittee chose the indicators with input from the reference group. The data came from a wide variety of sources.
- A public awareness working group to create a communications strategy for the launch of the Report Card;
- Specific professional resources engaged for detailed tasks such as methodology research, design, content research, etc.;
- A steering committee made up of executive directors and senior managers from the sector; and
- Engagement of the entire sector in Ottawa in the pre and post consultation in providing input and comments.

The main lesson on the process was that “**it takes the sector**” in Ottawa to produce the Report Card which represents the collective view of the sector with regard to the issue of homelessness. The different parts of the sector contributed to the development of that view. Those in the homelessness sector had to back up their views with evidence or research since the Alliance’s choice was to create a Report Card that would be factual and research-based and provide positive recommendations on actions and policy.

In addition to the United Way, several Alliance partners provided a monetary contribution to the development of the First Report Card. In the end, these amounts were exceeded by the contribution made by the members of the various Alliance working committees and the organizations they represented in order to produce and launch it.

The Ottawa homelessness sector learned how to produce a very credible Report Card and how to use it to increase awareness in the community through the media and political leaders. A media strategy was developed and tested for getting the message out to the media in the future.

The sector itself also learned more about the different aspects of homelessness through the information compiled for the First Report Card. The homelessness sector has several sub groups such as social housing providers, shelter staff, mental health outreach workers, etc. who are to some extent hampered by time and ease of accessibility to clear specific and brief information about other sub groups than their own.

The First Report Card provides a baseline assessment of the state of homelessness in the Ottawa area. By compiling indicators and scanning the availability of services, it provides a basis for comparison over time. Also, the community has been made aware of the issue of homelessness in a way that was never done in the past. Finally, a reliable and current reference document has been developed that both the broader community and the homelessness sector can use to increase their understanding of homelessness and to support the solutions to end homelessness.

The Second Report Card on Homelessness in Ottawa will benefit from being available on the Alliance's new website, an inexpensive place for year-round community access. Some of the material provided in this first issue, such as the list of organizations involved in the sector, may not need to be repeated. Subsequent Report Cards will be an opportunity to update and grade changes to our benchmark indicators while also providing some new material to ensure the same level of media and community interest as the first issue received.

Some of the new material will come from updates to research and some from articles on different aspects of homelessness, perhaps profiling solutions and successes to demonstrate for the community that ending homelessness is possible. Expanding evaluation activities will help improve the Alliance's knowledge on how to best share with the community annual information on the issues of homelessness in Ottawa to reflect both gradual improvement over time and highlight emerging issues and solutions.

## CONCLUSION

The First Report Card on Homelessness in Ottawa provided a tangible basis around which Alliance members can work together and share information with the community. The process helped build capacity within the sector, demonstrated successful working relationships, and offered a common understanding of the issue and how to characterize it numerically.

The long-term aim of the Report Card is the end of homelessness in Ottawa. While the Report Card itself will not be instrumental in that objective, as the signature document for the Alliance to End Homelessness, it provides a much-needed opportunity to focus attention on the topic, increase awareness in the community and monitor progress towards that ultimate goal.

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