

A HOME FOR THE HOMELESS

Klein-era cutbacks pushed thousands onto the streets.
Alberta's 10-year plan to fix the damage is a start.

By SUSAN RUTTAN

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RICK HOLLER'S BRIGHT MODERN APARTMENT IS A long way from his former haunts in downtown Edmonton. That suits him just fine. "I keep away from my old friends," says Holler, a 55-year-old with a long history of drug and alcohol abuse and stints in jail. "None of them know where I live. I don't need the drugs in my life."

He came out of a rehab program last June, but relapsed within a day because he was back in his old environment. Then he heard about Edmonton's new 10-year plan to end homelessness. Through the Boyle Street Community Services agency he got his first apartment in many years in July, applied for rent support and was able to put life in the emergency shelters behind him.

Holler's one-bedroom apartment is sparsely but adequately furnished—a small kitchen table and two chairs, a comfy couch and coffee table, a flat-screen TV loaned by his cousin. He's starting to put pictures of various kinds on the walls. At least for now, he's not using drugs and alcohol.

"I've been craving a beer lately," he admits, but he knows one beer will lead to many more, plus the drugs. So he'll do something to distract himself from his craving, or he'll go to a Cocaine Anonymous meeting. And each Friday he gets a visit from his Boyle Street support worker, who helps him adjust to his new life. "This is the best thing that's happened to me for a lot of years," he says.

RICK HOLLER IS ONE OF SEVERAL THOUSAND homeless people who have been housed through 10-year plans launched in 2008 in Calgary and 2009 in Edmonton. These ambitious plans, funded almost entirely by the provincial government, aim to end homelessness by providing affordable housing, support workers and addiction and mental health treatment to people moving out of homelessness.

The plans were sparked by an explosion in numbers of homeless people in Alberta's big cities beginning in the early 1990s. The 2008 count of homeless in Calgary was 4,060, nearly 10 times the 447 in 1992. Edmonton was not far behind, with 3,079 homeless people in 2008. And the one-day count that produces those numbers is considered the tip of an iceberg: thousands more people drift in and out of homelessness in a year.

The Alberta government says that without a serious effort to change the situation, the province could have more than 20,000 homeless people within a decade. It has made its own 10-year commitment and is putting serious money behind it—some \$100-million this year to provide housing, plus \$42-million to fund agencies that support people leaving homelessness. The total cost over 10 years is expected to be \$3.3-billion, divided between capital costs to build housing (\$1.3-billion) and operating costs for social supports (\$2-billion).

The province expects the 10-year plan will cost less than maintaining the status quo. A homeless person currently costs the province over \$100,000 annually (in healthcare, judicial and correctional resources); simply "managing" the existing homeless population for the next 10 years is expected to cost \$6.65-billion. A person's needs aren't eliminated once

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As part of the 10-year plan, the Mustard Seed will build 224 government-subsidized affordable housing units in Calgary.

the person is housed, of course, but their likelihood of being arrested, needing an ambulance or visiting a courtroom is significantly reduced. The government expects that the 10-year plan will actually *save* the province \$7.1-billion over the next decade.

The decade model was adopted from the US, where a similar rise in homelessness (and similarly skyrocketing social costs) started causing concern in the 1990s. From that concern emerged the “10-year plan to end homelessness” whose charismatic salesman was Phil Mangano, known as president George W. Bush’s homelessness czar. As executive director of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness between 2002 and 2009, he barnstormed the US selling the idea that ending homelessness is not only necessary but cost-effective. Mangano was able to convince political and business leaders that putting homeless people in housing and stabilizing their lives would save huge amounts of money. Even conservative politicians who normally hated government “handouts” to the downtrodden responded to his dollars-and-cents pitch.

In 2006 Mangano brought his message to Calgary, and city leaders were ready. In January 2007 a committee was created to draft a 10-year plan, a committee loaded with business heavyweights including TransAlta CEO Steve Snyder, Carma president Alan Norris and Imperial Oil chairman and CEO Tim Hearn. The non-profit sector was also represented, but it was the big-name business input that gave the committee its clout.

In early 2008, Calgary’s plan was launched. At the same time, Edmonton struck its own high-powered committee to draft a

10-year plan. The Stelmach government got on the 10-year bandwagon as well, and now funds homelessness eradication efforts in seven Alberta cities. Lethbridge, for instance, has a goal of ending homelessness by 2011. The city’s 2009 homeless census showed that 192 people live on the streets of Lethbridge (down from 276 the year before).

The plan is to build affordable housing and bolster social agencies; to “spend now to save later.”

Key to the Mangano idea is “housing first”: get the homeless person into their own accommodation, and then work on their mental health issues and addictions. Expecting a person to straighten out while they’re sleeping in a shelter or a city park is setting them up for failure, the argument goes. Once they’re in an apartment, they can focus on their addiction problem or take their anti-psychotic medications more regularly. They can also apply for government support they may qualify for but couldn’t access without a fixed address.

That’s exactly what Edmonton and Calgary have been doing. Edmonton put more than 500 homeless people into apartments in the first year of its plan. Calgary housed 1,200 in its first two years. The goal in the coming years is to bolster social agencies that work with homeless people, expand the stock of affordable housing units, provide adequate mental health and addiction treatment, and tackle the root causes of homelessness.

The plans have been helped by a cooling housing market;

many landlords are happy to have a homeless person move in now that Alberta's near-zero apartment vacancy rate has climbed to around 7 per cent. Landlords like that the new tenant has a support worker and a rent supplement from a social agency.

To truly end homelessness, we'll need to address root causes—such as policies that create poverty.

So far, the Edmonton plan has relied primarily on finding suites in existing apartment blocks to house homeless people. The Calgary Homeless Foundation has largely been buying and converting older apartment blocks for use in Calgary's 10-year plan, says CEO Tim Richter. Eventually, he says, the CHF will have to actually build new apartment buildings.

Alberta's largest landlord, Boardwalk Real Estate, is a leader in the 10-year plan. Boardwalk is placing homeless people in some of its 12,000 rental units in Edmonton and 5,500 in Calgary. "We took absolutely chronic homeless people with mental illness and substance abuse problems and put them in our apartments," says David McIlveen, Boardwalk's community development director. The key to making it work, McIlveen says, is having support for the person once they're in an apartment. If the tenant's drug dealer friends start dropping by, the landlord needs to know that the support worker will deal with it.

Edmonton's plan sets a limit on how many suites in a given building go to homeless people: no more than 20 per cent, says Jay Freeman, executive director of the Edmonton Homeless Commission (EHC). He says experts consider it best to have a mix of tenants, rather than special "homeless people buildings." Exceptions are made for buildings that house people with problems so severe they need a special residence with full-time staff.

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TO FULLY ELIMINATE HOMELESSNESS, SAYS TIM Richter of the Calgary Homeless Foundation, you have to look at the causes. "The things that created homelessness are the things you need to address to end it," he says.

There is general agreement among concerned parties that the causes of homelessness in Alberta are:

a) *Lack of income among the poorest citizens.* In 1993 the Klein government began an aggressive "welfare reform" policy that reduced welfare rolls by nearly 50 per cent in four years, through restrictions on eligibility. Right-wing commentators such as former Stephen Harper strategist Ken Boessenkool lauded the government, calling the reforms a

model for other provinces.

Not coincidentally, homeless numbers in Calgary rose by 60 per cent in those years, and continued to rise throughout the next decade. No comparable figures are available for Edmonton, where homeless counts began only in 1999, although annual surveys show that homelessness tripled in Edmonton between 1999 and 2008.

Welfare rates in Alberta were also kept low for many years. In 2008, Alberta's rate for singles was second-lowest in the country. Today a single, employable person on income support gets \$583 a month. Alberta's minimum wage of \$8.80 an hour is also the second-lowest among Canadian provinces. Even if the government boosts the rate by 25 cents, as was recommended by an all-party legislative committee in October, Alberta's minimum wage will still be lower than six other provinces.

b) *Decisions by the federal and Alberta government to reduce funding for social housing.* In the 1980s and early 1990s an average of 15,000–16,000 new social housing units were built every year in Canada, funded by the Canada Mortgage & Housing Corporation. But in 1993 the CMHC froze all funding for social housing, and three years later Ottawa transferred responsibility for administering social housing to the provinces. Alberta in turn devolved much of the responsibility to municipalities and non-profits. Both the federal and provincial governments wanted to cut budget deficits but were also influenced by a prevailing right-wing political culture. Deanna Williamson, a University of Alberta poverty expert, says the Reagan/Thatcher era produced a belief in market solutions and individual responsibility rather than taxpayer-funded support for the poor.

c) *Over the past two decades an influx of people—often with limited job skills—moved to Alberta.* Some came from eastern Canada, others from First Nations around the province. The Aboriginal population of both Edmonton and Calgary doubled in the two decades before 2001, and the numbers in Edmonton have risen another 25 per cent since then. In Edmonton, Aboriginals make up by far the biggest group among the chronically homeless. "Within five years we'll have the largest urban Aboriginal population of any major city in the country," says the EHC's Jay Freeman.

d) *The disappearance of rental apartments in Alberta.* Landlords abandoned the rental market, many buildings were condo-ized, and virtually no new rental apartments were built. The Calgary situation is particularly dire, with an estimated 40,000 rental units, down from some 58,000 in 1994. Edmonton has about 55,000 rental units and lost an estimated 1,800 between 1990 and 2003 (at the same time the city's population grew by 125,000). And while the economic downturn that began in 2008 has eased tight vacancy rates—Calgary's, for example, improved from 0.2 per cent in 2008 to 5.3 per cent in 2010 while Fort McMurray's increased from 0.1 to 13.2 in the same period—it hasn't brought rents down much. Alberta average monthly rent of \$937 is down less than 2 per cent from 2008's \$953 average.

Fort McMurray is on its own planet when it comes to affordable housing. The city is struggling with a giant influx of

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people and limited serviced land on which to build. Renting a one-bedroom apartment in Fort McMurray costs upward of \$2,000 a month, double what you'd pay in Calgary or Edmonton, says Brian Lutes, president of the Wood Buffalo Housing & Development Corporation (WBHDC). That makes affordable housing a problem not just for low-income workers, but for young teachers and RCMP officers moving to the city.

e) *Discharge policies from hospitals and provincial jails are also pushing people into homelessness.* A person released from prison leaves with nothing and has nowhere to go, says Freeman. "When you're shown the door with not a penny in your pocket, what are the chances of that person not ending up homeless or committing a crime?" Alberta hospitals are supposed to have policies about not letting poor people be discharged without somewhere to go, he says, but that's not been the experience of emergency shelters. "The Hope Mission (in Edmonton) says they've had an ambulance pull up and let a guy out literally in his pyjamas."

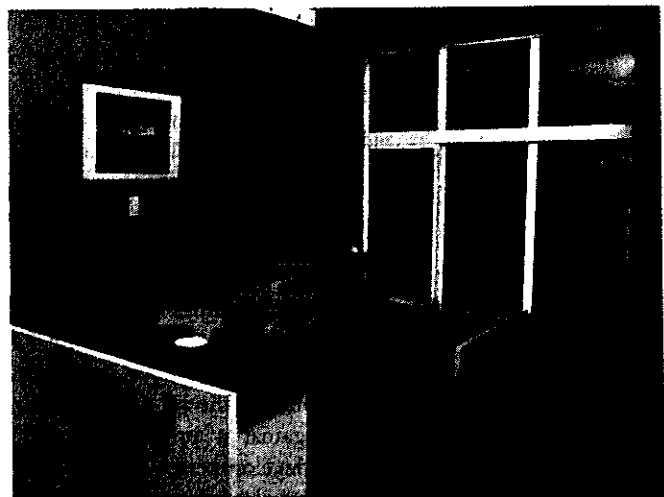
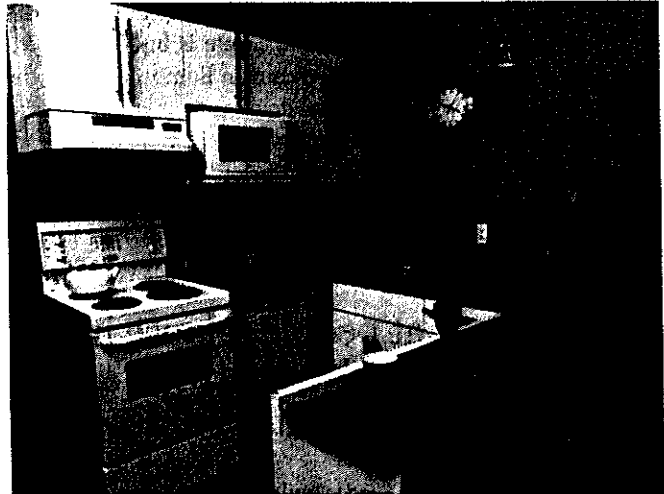
Then there's the overburdened and inadequate child welfare system which discharges young people out of foster homes onto the streets at age 18. A 2004 study by the City of Red Deer found that one-third of that city's homeless population came from the foster care system.

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BY MOST MEASURES, THE INITIAL EFFORTS OF Alberta's 10-year plans have been successful. Edmonton and Calgary have placed more chronic homeless people in housing than planned. John Rook, co-executive director at The Alex Community Health Centre in Calgary, calls the results "staggering." The Alex deals with homeless people with the most severe problems—the mentally ill, the addicted and people coming out of prison. The agency now puts these people in apartments; one guy had been "living rough" in parks and under bridges for 14 years.

Freeman says many homeless people are ecstatic to get their own apartment. Still, adjusting can be tough. One Edmonton man who was coaxed into an apartment last summer was so used to sleeping outside that he initially slept on his balcony. After a few days, says Boyle Street housing director Bonnie Belhumeur, "we got him back in his apartment and he started sleeping on his floor in the sleeping bag. Then we got him to the couch, and then we got him in his bedroom." In some cases, she says, that initial adjustment can take months.

Not infrequently, a homeless person will become sick once they've moved into their own home, says Freeman. When they are no longer in a daily fight for survival on the streets, their body decides to crash. One fellow placed in an apartment started complaining of stomach pains. "It turned out he had a tumour in his stomach the size of a grapefruit," Freeman says. "That tumour



Interior views of a show suite for the Mustard Seed's affordable housing project, which opens in downtown Calgary in 2012.

didn't just 'occur.' It speaks to how when they're homeless, every ounce of their being is consumed in survival."

The support worker assigned to a newly housed person plays a crucial role, he adds. The homeless typically don't know how to be good tenants, how to shop for groceries or keep a budget. And loneliness is an issue for these people, who are used to living in emergency shelters and public spaces, say Freeman and Rook. They often don't have jobs, at least not right away, and have often had to give up their old friends and haunts.

CLEARLY IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO JUST FIND apartments for homeless people; part of the 10-year plan needs to be aimed at stopping people from sliding into homelessness in the first place. Otherwise, says Tim Richter, you're bailing a boat without fixing the leak that's letting the water in. Richter says prevention means improving discharge policies from prisons and hospitals, fixing the child welfare system, reducing poverty and expanding affordable housing.

The Alberta government has, at least, been doing something about the latter. Its affordable housing strategy, launched in

2007, pledges to build 11,000 new units across Alberta by 2012.

In one big project, ProCura Real Estate is building a 237-unit apartment block on Jasper Avenue in Edmonton, with the federal, provincial and municipal governments combining to pay 30 per cent of the construction cost. In return, ProCura must rent the suites at 10 per cent below market rate for 20 years. While these tenants will be single students and seniors, not homeless people, the new units will help ease the overall shortage of affordable apartments.

The fact that people relapse is not unusual. It's not always a straight curve out to wellness.

In Calgary, the Mustard Seed is building an 18-storey, 224-unit building in the Beltline district, funded in part by a \$4-million grant from the City of Calgary. The suites will go to people who use the Mustard Seed's emergency shelter and other services.

In Fort McMurray the WBHDC does everything from run the homeless shelter to build and operate apartment buildings. Through it, people can rent apartments, townhouses and duplexes at rates geared to their income, or buy a condo or house with an affordable mortgage. In June, the WBHDC opened a 172-unit project on land donated by the province, which also provided \$25.8-million in funding.

One continuing problem with the creation of housing for low-income and homeless people is neighbourhood resistance. The most notorious recent example was the vehement protest of some St. Albert residents against a proposed Habitat for Humanity multi-family development. Low-income neighbourhoods in Edmonton have also resisted the creation of more supportive housing in their midst, saying they're already overwhelmed with such projects. EHC's Jay Freeman says Edmonton's 10-year plan aims to place homeless people in apartments throughout the city. Only a few residences exclusive to homeless people with severe problems are being built, he says, but he admits that in communities already full of special housing even one more project may be the final straw.

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THE CLEAREST SIGN THAT THE 10-YEAR PLAN IS working, claims Alberta Housing Minister Jonathan Denis, is the drop in the numbers of people using emergency shelters during the previous year. But "success" depends on what you measure. Freeman says Edmonton's two main drop-in centres have seen unprecedented numbers of people seeking help. "Probably equally as important, they're seeing faces they haven't seen before." He suspects a lot of people who lost their jobs, or had their work hours cut, are sleeping on a friend's

couch instead of at shelters, but do come to the drop-in centres for meals.

Homelessness is a huge problem, say many experts, but it's only part of the larger problem—poverty. John Rook, who is board chair of the National Council on Welfare, appreciates Alberta's homelessness plan, but praises provinces such as New Brunswick that are tackling poverty in a different way. "If you had everyone with an adequate income... then people could solve homelessness themselves," he says.

Alberta's minimum wage hasn't kept pace with inflation, which means it can't truly be considered a "living wage" (the minimum amount needed to maintain a safe and healthy standard of living), say Public Interest Alberta, the Alberta Federation of Labour and Vibrant Communities Calgary. These groups have all called for the minimum wage to be raised from the current \$8.80 an hour to more like \$12.

THE ULTIMATE SUCCESS OF ALBERTA'S 10-YEAR PLAN will depend on whether the government continues to fund it adequately, says professor David Hulchanski, a University of Toronto expert on homelessness. Many 10-year plans in US cities foundered for lack of consistent funding, he says. In fact, a "10-year plan" may simply provide cover for politicians by giving the illusion that the problem of homelessness is being addressed.

The key funding concern about Alberta's 10-year plan is whether the province will provide money for rent relief and support workers beyond the first 12 months. Right now provincial funding for a housed person ends after a year; those who work with Alberta's most vulnerable people say that for many of them, that's not long enough.

"The fact that people relapse is not unusual," says David Berger, deputy director of Boyle Street. "It's not always a straight curve out to wellness." He and others say the plan has to be flexible enough to provide support for as long as people need it.

Jonathan Denis, Alberta's housing minister, has no plans to extend the 12-month funding. The idea is to have the people in jobs or transferred to community or family support, he says. "It's my goal that we can get people back to work, back on their feet."

Berger calls the current status of the 10-year plan a promising start. But he adds that there's a lot more work to do. "Four walls for someone has never proven to be enough," he says. "People want to be connected to community, to activity and to a path to wellness. And it doesn't happen just with the residence; it's everything else that matters too."

Rick Holler is very aware that his rent support and Boyle Street worker will end in July 2011. He's been assured that if that happens and he has to give up his suburban apartment, his worker will help him find another suite—probably without the same support from the government, probably downtown.

"I don't want to be downtown," says Holler. He knows all the old temptations will be there waiting for him. ■

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