

Free Queen's Lecture Series

Planning the Urban Environment: The Case of Kingston

Session 5: Homelessness & Homeless Services - Monday October 30th

Lecturers:

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Who are the “Homeless”?

Visible Homeless: those that live on the streets and stay in shelters

Hidden Homeless: those that are couch surfing, staying with friends

There are also different patterns of homelessness:

- Chronic: those with complex issues
- Episodic: mostly comprised of those with behavioral issues that are off and on
- Transitional: those who are between employment – tend to be non-repetitive short term stays

The one common factor between all homeless people is poverty.

Currently in Kingston there are approximately 280 homeless, of which 80% are men, 17% are women, and 3% are children. The ages cover everything from 7 weeks old to 86 years. They can generally be divided into 4 groups by income class:

- 1/3 have received no income within the past month
- Some receive Ontario Works – they will receive \$535/month of which \$325 is expected to cover rent and the remaining \$210 is for living expenses
- Some are on Ontario Disability and receive \$935/month
- 10% are the working poor – they are living in the shelter while working. They have no job security, low paying jobs, and additional job-related costs such as bus fare, uniforms, etc.

There are certain realities related to the demographics of homelessness:

- Many homeless have addictions, either mental or physical. There is a long waiting list for programs such as Seaton House in Toronto – from 6 to 10 weeks. Once they have completed a program they are often discharged back to shelters and the streets, where they are likely to begin using again. Furthermore, the Kingston detox is almost constantly full.
- Approximately 1/3 of the homeless population has mental health problems. Many of these people are undiagnosed and cannot be given treatment unless they want it.
- There are an increasing number of women & children in the shelters. These people require 24 hr service and often there are families with children that do not want to be separated. This is a phenomenon of the past 20 years.

- The largest majority of youth who are homeless are coming from difficult family situations. Not very many are actually rebellious or defiant. In Kingston youth stay at Interval House.
- Some have an Institutional history and have been discharged from Quinte and are not on parole.

What happens to a homeless person?

They have no roof, no fridge, no TV, and a loss of self-esteem and self-worth. Often men will leave the City to look for work elsewhere in order to hide from their family and friends. Many homeless are people with functional addictions or mental health problems on a minor scale but once homeless these problems increase and become more difficult to handle.

The main goal is to stop the cycle of homelessness as quickly as possible – as people remain homeless they lose the will or strength to look for something better.

Kingston is home to five homeless shelters:

- Ryandale – Men & Family
- Don House – Women & Children
- Salvation Army Lighthouse – Men
- Winter Shelter/Overflow – open until April 20th
- Interval House – Youth

Together these shelters have a total of 56 beds.

The major needs for these shelters to function are:

- Prevention services
- Homelessness Services – 46 beds close during the day
- Housing
- Counseling
- Ongoing support

Some major issues which homeless services face are:

- The clients themselves – widely varying needs have to be addressed with limited resources. More individual services are required. Clients may have mental health problems, addictions, etc.
- Service abuse on the part of clients – often they will be refused due to bad behavior in the past.
- Low funding and unrealistic expectations from funders
- Staffing issues – there is a high staff turnover and volunteers may not have adequate training to meet client needs.
- Public impression of homelessness – homeless population in Kingston increased by 400% from 1998-2002. This is a growing problem in the community that needs to be addressed.

The rate of homelessness has increased dramatically since the mid 90s and Kingston has a high rate per capita compared to most mid-size towns. Furthermore, the homeless situation in Kingston is difficult for programs due to the amount of releases from mental health and correctional institutions in the Kingston area. Difficult clients are being banned from services or turned away due to inherent issues related to their conditions. This is increasing the at-risk population and leaving more people in danger to themselves.

Another major problem in Kingston is that affordable housing is not keeping pace with the need. Real incomes are dropping due to inflation and the cost of living is increasing. Supported housing is limited in Kingston and landlords are evicting people on a more regular basis. The system is being stressed currently and without an injection of aid will suffer under future pressures. A growing problem with finite resources leads to poor outcomes.

Who serves the homeless in Kingston?

- Emergency hostels
- Day services – drop-ins and meal programs, the Gathering Room at Ryandale
- Transitional housing
- Hostels/Shelters/Street/Housing outreach
- Housing Help – Housing Registry – RGI
- Supported housing
- Mental Health, Clinical Health/Addiction Services
- Ontario Works
- Eviction Avoidance Program
- Police/Corrections

Planning for Homeless Services

- Community Plan
- Municipal Planning – both Interim and Long Term
- Provincial Planning
- Federal Planning

Community Plan

- Larger scale coordinated plan – involves National Housing Initiative (NHI) specific to Kingston, this is also a SCPI process
- Involves a Community Panel (advisory) representing 12 sectors
- Started as a needs assessment and planning initiative to ensure an informed funding distribution
- Funding is based on sustainability
- Was last updated in 2004
- Was implemented by the CHHAC but the advisory committee is no longer in place
- Now implemented by service providers and advocacy and consumer groups
- Services are developing – guided by the “community plan” and demand
- There has been an increase in service providers working together

- Also an increase in advocacy groups
- Between these two groups we need more coordination and partnerships
- Municipal government has had policy and funding changes – now placing homelessness as a priority by expanding shelter bed spaces

Municipal Plan

- Seen a marked increase in homelessness numbers and complexities since 2000
- Part of the Community Planning Process
- Absorbing social assistance, Ontario Works from Province
- “Kingston’s Model for Action”
- Need for long term strategy
- Dealing with uncertainty about Provincial and Federal Funding Program changes
- Increasing and changing homeless programs and policies
- Need for coordinated approach

Interim Planning

- Interim planning is based upon addressing specific pressures.
- Community planning, provincial program changes and municipal timing needs must be addressed
- There is a need to balance multiple needs
- These concerns have been used to produce an interim Municipal Services Homelessness Plan

Further developments:

- Needs assessment, participant connection or recreation worked through existing or initiated processes
- Stakeholder participation – inclusion and representation
- Define a focus in order to make the huge and complex doable
- Establish community priorities to inform the Consolidated Home Prevention Process (CHPP)
- Need more long term planning in the form of collaboration and consultation

Components of the Interim Plan

- Street/Shelter Outreach
- Shelter System Stability
- Day Services
- Transition Supports
- Eviction Prevention
- Access to Affordable Housing
- CHPP Plan

The major problem in following a course of action lies in funding as each government successively passes the buck on their policy decisions.

Current Progress

- Policy Development

- Utility and Rent Bank Programs – no longer loans but grants
- Increased flexibility in Ontario Works applications
- Community initiatives such as the Gathering Place, Peer Outreach, Hostels to Homes (pilot project), networking efforts, meal providers, etc.
- Service diversity – Ryandale, Joseph St., Youth Net, John Howard Shelter, IFTC, KYS, etc.
- Funding coordination – local funders working together

Continuing Challenges

- Fostering an understanding within the community of the issues related to homelessness
- Creating a shared definition and understanding
- Gathering solid local research
- Evaluating current situation
- Finding resources
- Establishing communication and transparency at all levels to encourage collaboration
- Leadership within the community

There are no quick fixes!!!

What will make it happen:

- Optimism & Persistence
- Flexibility and Innovation
- Good data collection