Healing Homelessness: Reimagining Community

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Abstract

People who are homeless or experiencing housing insecurity often find themselves caught in a cycle that is hard to break. Many services and programs exist on a provincial level to help homeless people secure housing and find employment. Still, while these are two excellent goals centred around aiding a vulnerable population, together, they are not enough. Homelessness is a complicated issue that requires a multi-dimensional solution rather than the simple social services that are currently being offered. Additional areas of concern need to be addressed, and communities need to be built with multiple specific needs of homeless people in mind.
Healing Homelessness: Reimagining Community

Homelessness is often described as a cycle that is hard to break, and thousands of Albertans find themselves caught in this cycle every year without a clear way out. Despite the efforts to make a difference and help homeless people, the mark is still being missed, and crucial areas of concern are not being addressed. The most effective way to positively influence the cycle of homelessness in Alberta is by creating a productive community where people can maintain housing stability, employment status, and get the support they need while finding somewhere to belong.

Currently Available Social Services

Services provided by provincial governments to people experiencing homelessness are presently ineffective in creating long-lasting pathways from homelessness. Instead, temporary solutions are offered. The nature of employment in many Albertan towns like Fort McMurray means that the population is continually growing or shrinking. Many people who work in resource-based cities like these are there to work temporarily and are faced with different challenges because access to government-funded programs is limited, and these services are often already overextended (Dashora et al., 2018). It is common to hear about shelters not having enough beds or that extra volunteers are needed to help feed people during busier times of the year. While this is a great way to spread awareness and involve other members of the community, it does not contribute to an exit from homelessness because people are still being left on the street. Many people don’t know where to find the help they need, are unaware of specialized services that exist to help them, or they rely on shelters alone to provide support (Shier et al., 2011).
Most people who are homeless do not want to stay in their current situation but find it difficult to change their lives on their own. Someone who has fallen into hard times by the loss of a job, an illness, or a natural disaster can find themselves in a situation where one thing after another goes wrong. With nothing left, reaching out for help is the first step to getting back on their feet, but the systems in place aren’t always as helpful as they could be. Tools used by service providers for determining housing eligibility, such as the Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT), allow some people in need of housing assistance to be overpassed if they don’t meet every single requirement (Shier et al., 2011). It is nearly impossible for a homeless person to get a job if they have nowhere to live, and just as impossible to find somewhere to live if they are unemployed and have no income. By having programs that exclude certain people, the government is ensuring that many people who are homeless stay that way. The services offer different ways to stay alive but have limited options for people who want to change their lives. The long-term outcomes of these services are failing to meet the expectations of the people who utilize them.

**Social Services Working Against Each Other**

Shelters and other programs available to homeless people are often uncoordinated with each other and may contribute to confusion and difficulty finding employment and stable housing. In addition to having multiple basic needs that are not being met (such as food and a home), there are extra challenges for those experiencing homelessness. Shelters may enforce stringent rules or have limited opening hours, creating danger when there is nowhere for people to find safety from harsh winter weather conditions (Dashora et al., 2018). Even if someone can find shelter for a night, they may be sent outside first thing in the morning, left to fend for
themselves until it comes time to seek refuge once again. Having somewhere safe to sleep is very important but is not the same thing as having a place to call home.

Employment services are also offered by the government and finding a job is crucial to a successful pathway from homelessness. Still, a positive state of well-being includes more than just employment (Johnstone et al., 2016). Homeless people can be at a disadvantage if an employer is not willing to hire a potential candidate because of housing insecurity. If leniency is offered in more places of employment, people could regain a sense of independence that comes with the responsibility of paying rent and maintaining a home.

Dashora et al. (2018) state that “[c]are must be offered in a consistent and collaborative manner to be effective” (p. 141). Many service providers are not working together or are unaware of the services offered by each other, leaving gaps where vital services are needed (Dashora et al., 2018). If shelters and employment service providers could do more to address both needs at the same time, more long-term positive outcomes may be seen. Current limitations that exist to shelters are a high turnover rate of staff and too little funding from the government. Necessary changes to provincial services could include re-evaluating shelter policies to be more inclusive and increasing communication among service providers to be more efficient in their care. Increased funding could also be considered to ensure that services could be made widely available to anyone who needs them.

**Therapeutic Relationships**

**Shelter Workers**

Building and maintaining positive relationships are imperative to the well-being of people experiencing poverty. There is a culture associated with homelessness that often includes substance and alcohol use disorders, both of which frequently require extensive counselling and
therapy to overcome. Dashora et al. (2018) explain that for staff in rural towns, “the high turnover of outreach workers [is] not conducive to addressing the complex needs of some of their clients” (p. 144). The process of rehabilitation can be slowed down considerably or even reversed if an individual completes their course and returns home to find out that their caseworker or counsellor is no longer available to them. If shelter staff are faced with a high volume of people seeking aid during times where the population is booming, this can add to their workload and their stress levels. If any extra staff are hired during this time, it can be expected that they may leave or be laid off during times when the population is low. If caseworkers in shelters are continually coming and going, building trust and therapeutic relationships becomes difficult, possibly increasing the likelihood of relapse and a prolonged state of homelessness.

**Family and Friendships**

Long-term support is needed for people exiting homelessness. Though the family is considered an essential emotional resource, many homeless people have little family contact because of social stigma or to avoid hindering their loved ones (Shier et al., 2011). It is sometimes more comfortable for people to find social support within the homeless community rather than search for assistance outside of it. By making friends and knowing relatable people who are in the same situation, homeless people can try to create safe spaces within their own community. This is commonly seen in areas where homelessness is prevalent and homeless cities or tent cities are established. Johnstone et al. (2016) concluded that “[d]ecreases in social support were associated with declines in well-being, which improved when social support improved, and the effects were consistent even when controlling for housing status, alcohol use and employment status” (p. 421). Positive relationships are necessary to ensure that homeless people
can be heard and understood to resolve the problems that brought them into poverty in the first place, increasing the likelihood that their exit from homelessness will be permanent.

**Building Constructive Communities**

Taking a broader view of homelessness and building a community with the intent to address multiple issues at the same time is a more effective way of helping people in need than the solutions currently in place. Delivery of social support services is not an adequate replacement for the positive impact that a stable community has on a successful pathway from homelessness (Shier et al., 2011). A specific community needs to be built in Alberta, where homeless people can find everything they need in one place, such as a home, a job, social safety and support. This can be achieved by government funding to establish a community of tiny houses or RV’s. There are examples of communities like this flourishing all over North America, where people are getting the help they need and maintaining a permanent exit from homelessness at the same time (Alexander, 2019). By doing this, a space can be created where people can work where they live and contribute to a society where they are accepted. Rather than providing support in each different area alone, a more comprehensive approach would increase the likelihood that the cycle of homelessness can be permanently broken.

**Conclusion**

Reimagining community in Alberta with a more supportive approach can be a lasting and effective solution to homelessness. A substantial effort is being made with current social supports and services being offered to homeless people, but they are not often accomplishing the desired outcome of lasting pathways away from homelessness. Instead of working together, they are incoherent and can keep people from achieving sustainable pathways from homelessness. These services are offered with good intentions but without consideration for the importance of
building therapeutic relationships to increase well-being. Multi-dimensional approaches to the creation of community must be considered when searching for long-term solutions to homelessness. Constructive communities built with the purpose of providing support in every area of a person’s life, instead of just providing housing, is necessary to ensure permanent exits from homelessness.
References


