



Boys and Girls Club of Calgary: The Infinity Project

Calgary, Alberta

PROGRAM TYPE: Housing First and Intensive Supports

No young person should be living on the streets. Unfortunately for many youth, family difficulties contribute to an intolerable living situation whereby the streets are seen as a better option. According to Calgary's 2008 Biennial Homeless Count, 355 youth under 18 and 327 youth between 18 and 24 were homeless; a significant increase since the previous count. In total, youth homelessness represents approximately 20% of the total Calgary homeless population (Stroik et al., 2008). These figures underestimate the magnitude of the homeless population; young people often engage in hidden homelessness activities (couch surfing with friends and/ or sleeping outside) and therefore do not show up in these statistics.

Youth homelessness is unique because young people are still in the developmental stage of their lives. For most young people, family support plays a key role as they navigate 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 stripped of these essential experiences. They enter into homelessness with little or no work history and often experience high levels of criminal victimization. Young people who are forced to live on the streets have fewer life skills (i.e. cooking, money management and job searching). Homelessness also makes it difficult for young people to attend school.

It became clear in Calgary that an end to youth homelessness requires a plan tailored to the unique needs of youth. In August 2011, the Calgary Homeless Foundation launched the first city-wide plan to end youth homelessness in Canada (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2011). The Youth Plan includes 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 experiencing homelessness
- Improve data and systems knowledge and influence public policy

KEY MESSAGES

- "CHOICE" AND "VOICE" IN ONE'S LIFE IS ESSENTIAL
- NEED FOR ADEQUATE SUPPLY OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING
- NEED FOR INTENSIVE CASE MANAGEMENT AND LONG-TERM SUPPORT
- REDUCE BARRIERS TO EDUCATION, TRAINING, EMPLOYMENT, FINANCIAL SUPPORTS AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES
- SMALL CASELOADS



Boys & Girls Clubs
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The updated 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness in Calgary recognized a community call for action and the Youth Plan was built into Strategy One: Prevention and Rehousing (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2011). The key milestones identified by the plan include reducing the length of shelter stays for youth, implementing a Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), and ensuring that no more than 10% of young people served by Housing First programs return to homelessness.

Young people in the city of Calgary who are homeless need effective housing and support services. The Youth Plan has a comprehensive systems view of young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness and places special emphasis on preventing youth homelessness and providing young people with timely support and intervention services.

Among the services for homeless youth in Calgary is the Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary (BGCC), which has a history of providing safe, supportive places where children and youth can experience new opportunities, overcome barriers, build positive relationships and develop confidence and skills for life.

In 2009, BGCC introduced The Infinity Project: a Housing First program for youth who find themselves on the homeless continuum. It has been in operation since February 2009 and to date has served 58 young people. The Infinity Project provides youth (aged 16 to 24) with a permanent home in the community of their choice and the supports they need to maintain it and become self-sufficient.

“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)

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Infinity Project works with up to 30 youth at any given time. Youth are able to stay up to two years, which means approximately 5-10 youth rotate in and out every year. Infinity staff help youth obtain housing, become self-sufficient and prepare for adult living.

Housing

Infinity staff help youth obtain housing by: locating affordable housing options; communicating with youth and landlords; reviewing lease agreements with youth; securing convertible leases, helping youth respond to landlord concerns; introducing youth to budgeting concepts; providing rental supplements when needed; and helping youth access financial supports (Employment Insurance, Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), student financing).

Support for Achieving Self-sufficiency

Infinity staff support youth in achieving self-sufficiency by helping them: find jobs or enroll in employability and/or training programs; enroll in school; access financial supports; prepare resumes; attend the Youth Employment Centre; prepare for mock interviews; learn meal preparation and home management (cleaning, organizing, contacting landlord); access community life skill development opportunities; learn parenting skills and relationship building.

Preparing for Productive Adult Living

Infinity staff support youth to become productive adults by: facilitating reconnection with family and natural supports where safe and appropriate; exploring community resources and opportunities with youth; supporting youth to attend community events; identifying interests with the youth and exploring opportunities for them to become involved in programming, facilitating referrals or volunteering; exploring educational & career goals with youth; helping youth locate education or training programs to meet their goals; providing referral and advocacy as needed; and assisting youth with system navigation.

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 a shared database that is used in the Calgary homelessness sector, the Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS). Staff also use the Outcomes 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 up 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 2 years as of October 2012 (n=37):

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

Stable Income (self-sufficiency)

Of youth who have been in the program 6 months or more:

- 63% of those over 18 and 87% of those under 18 have stable income either through employment, alternative funding, or 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 6 months or more, 100% have engaged in community activities and supports. Eighty-four percent 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. In a report by Raising the Roof entitled *Youth Homelessness in Canada: The Road to Solutions*, the authors estimate that the daily cost to house youth in shelters is \$82 and \$250 in detention centers (Raising the Roof, 2009). In the first year of the Infinity Project, the average cost to help support an Infinity youth was \$38.81 per day.

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.

USER PERSPECTIVE



Tyler entered the Infinity Program after he had aged out of the child welfare system, and found himself facing homelessness. Tyler was involved with the child welfare system for most of his childhood and spent most of his teenage years accessing the youth shelter system. While Tyler was accessing the youth shelters he became entrenched in street life (i.e. gang violence, dealing drugs, and using drugs and alcohol on a regular basis). Tyler also became entrenched in the justice system and was in and out of youth and adult correctional facilities.

Tyler began his journey with Infinity in January of 2011. During the first months, Tyler struggled with addiction issues and was using drugs and alcohol heavily. During this time Tyler told staff that he would be sober before he left the Infinity program. Tyler celebrated six months of sobriety on April 6, 2012. Tyler has been able to maintain a stable home and has also been able to keep himself away from people or places that may trigger him to use, accessing the program and community resources to support him in building a healthy support network. Tyler says that he is no longer struggling with sobriety but finds it a natural way of life.

Additionally, Tyler has begun to address some of the barriers that have hindered his success in the past. Tyler has struggled with anxiety for a fairly long time and has started engaging with a psychologist to address this issue. Tyler has also started looking at some of the factors affecting his mental health and has faced the reality of his mental health with calamity and courage. Tyler has begun to think about long-term goals and is talking about his future and what he wants for himself. Tyler has just recently registered at Bow Valley College to go back to school and finish his high school diploma. Tyler plans to finish his high school education and go on to post-secondary education, where he plans to study to become a youth worker, and support youth who have found themselves dealing with similar issues that he has so valiantly overcome.

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 counseling 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."

RESOURCES & ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL



Staffing

The Infinity Project is but one program of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary. Thus, 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 a continuum in Calgary's overall system of care.

Manager of Youth Housing

With support and direction from the Managing Director of Youth Housing & 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 participants and consistent with best practice research.

Infinity Program Coordinator

The Program Coordinator is a dedicated project staff and 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 the Boys and Girls Club of Calgary's continuum of programs.

Housing Support Workers

Four Housing Support Workers are dedicated to the project and each help 7-8 homeless youth find 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

The Calgary Homeless Foundation has developed a *system of care* in the homelessness sector in Calgary. Through the *system of care*, the Calgary Homeless Foundation has identified housing options, set definitions and benchmarks, and has orchestrated the implementation of the HMIS system. Next steps will be to monitor data, assess the system, and make improvements and fill gaps.

The BGCC 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 having to go through multiple systems to access all of the supports needed. As a result of being part of this collaborative, as well as Calgary's system

of care, the Infinity Project staff can access and refer young people to a range of services throughout the city.

Infinity staff report that this connectedness lessens the need for formal partnerships. They do however work closely with several organizations, most notably housing providers and their parent organization, the Boys and Girls Club of Calgary (BGCC).

Alex Youth Health Centre (YHC)

The Infinity Programs's closest partner is the Alex Youth Health Centre, which provides health and wellness supports for homeless youth.

Boys and Girls Club of Calgary (BGCC)

The Infinity Project is a program of BGCC. They have benefitted from this partnership by having close connections with a variety of BGCC's programs. For example, Infinity staff have found that alternative education and life skills programs that offer financial support are extremely successful in engaging youth and helping them gain financial stability. Staff work closely with all of BGCC's programs to ensure that eligible youth are benefiting from these services.

The BGCC Treehouse

The BGCC Treehouse building is also available as affordable housing for youth from Infinity's Housing programs.

Housing Providers

Relationships with landlords are crucial to ensuring that young people can access housing. Infinity staff invest in relationships with landlords from all types of housing options. For example, agreements with Arlington Realty and Swordsman Properties ensure that a certain number of units are rented exclusively to Infinity participants. Infinity guarantees that the rent will be paid. This 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.

Cost/Funding

The Infinity Project is fully funded by the Calgary Homeless Foundation. 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.

KEY MESSAGES

"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 identified key factors that contribute to the effectiveness of supportive housing services for youth, and what helps 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 and employment, and be close to family. Choice also gives youth the opportunity to make mistakes and to learn from them. Giving young people a choice also enables them to learn that their ideas have to be self-generated, rather than a response to the presence of a caregiver or enforcer (Collaborative Community Health Research Centre, 2002). 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 homeless youth lack these positive relationships. In addition, the earlier they leave home, the fewer opportunities young people have to develop the skills necessary to be self-sufficient, and the longer they may need to practice the skills necessary to become self-sufficient adults. Indeed, Infinity staff found that youth under 18 require more intensive advocacy, as well as assistance with education and employment, system and benefit navigation, and 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 problems, 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 implemented the Calgary Homeless Foundation's Case Management Standards and successfully completed the international accreditation through the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF).



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 living wage. Higher and longer term subsidies for rent and living expenses are required for this population.

Additionally, student financing is dependent on a minimum of 20 hours of weekly classroom attendance, as well as passing grades. Unfortunately, the youth face many challenges that prevent them from fully participating in educational opportunities. Often in this situation the focus is on what the youth are not doing, rather than addressing the barriers that prevent them from attending or completing school. An inability to meet these requirements can result in immediate termination of funding. The other challenge here is that access to this funding can take months due to backlogs in the system. Additional advocacy and leniency in funding requirements would be beneficial for this demographic of previously homeless youth.



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 case worker) 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 as a result of chronic homelessness, mental health, addictions, criminal involvement, etc.

CONCLUSION

In the quest to end homelessness, it is critical to address the problem of increasing homelessness among youth. If we continue to ignore the multiple needs of developing homeless youth, thousands of young people will lack essential relationships and the skills and experiences that will support them in becoming healthy and productive members of society.

Almost all of the youth who have participated in the Infinity Project come from chaotic situations and have troubled relationships with their families of origin. Disruption in these core relationships can cause significant threats to a young person's ability to maintain a stable life and housing. Importantly, Infinity's timely crisis intervention, followed by a prolonged period of support and education has allowed youth on the brink of losing their job, relationships, and housing, to achieve stability and remain housed.

When youth are removed from the chaos of street life they feel safe and are able to focus on their individual needs. They are able to stabilize their lives, explore barriers to success and begin to eliminate these barriers and ultimately thrive. When youth live in a safe and permanent home with support to develop the financial assets and living skills that promote self-sufficiency, then they are able to end their cycle of homelessness.

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