



Tri-Cities  
Homelessness  
& Housing  
Task Group

## HOMELESSNESS: A PRIMER FOR BUSINESS INFOSHEET #1

### Understanding Homelessness

#### Why do people become homeless?

Homelessness is a symptom of need, not a lifestyle or a category of being, and the line between being homeless and being housed is quite fluid. Many people go in and out of homelessness over time. People experiencing homelessness may not have much in common with each other besides being vulnerable and not having the housing, income and supports they need to stay housed. In most situations, homelessness is the end result of the impact of several different factors over time, rather than one single incident or cause.<sup>1</sup> Many people who are homeless have had traumatic experiences, and every person has a unique story

Factors that can lead to homelessness include:

#### 1. Personal factors:

- ◆ A traumatic event, such as a house fire, job loss or family break-up.
- ◆ Personal health issues or disabilities – such as struggles with addictions and mental health including brain injury and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) – and inability to work
- ◆ Problems in relationships – which could include family violence and abuse and other family members' addictions or mental health issues
- ◆ An arduous transition from foster care

#### 2. Societal factors

- ◆ Unavailability of affordable housing
- ◆ Inadequate discharge planning for people leaving hospitals, corrections and mental health and addictions facilities, leaving them with no place to go and difficulty reintegrating back into society
- ◆ Insufficient income – minimum wage, social assistance rates, unemployment
- ◆ Discrimination - age, race, gender, sexual orientation etc.
- ◆ Lack of support for immigrants and refugees

#### What does the world look like to someone who is homeless?

Persons who are homeless are not a homogenous group, and individuals react differently to homelessness. A youth who is escaping an unstable home and abuse might initially experience homelessness as freedom and adventure. Others will feel vulnerable and scared. Persons who become street-entrenched typically believe they don't fit in with society and experience feelings of shame, worthlessness, rejection and despair. They feel shunned and invisible.

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<sup>1</sup> homelessshub.ca – Homelessness101/Causes of Homelessness

## **What do people who are homeless need?**

The longer a person is street- entrenched, the more challenging it is to address their needs. This is because:

- ◆ They will be in poorer health, will have developed more challenging behaviours and need more intensive support
- ◆ They will have developed defense mechanisms and survival skills
- ◆ Their social fabric will have been ripped apart - they will feel no connection to the community and therefore no commitment to it, exacerbating behaviours which further alienate them
- ◆ They will be more likely to experience anxiety about living inside (claustrophobia) and being in a crowd (agoraphobia)

This will make it more difficult to transition back inside, and more trauma for them to work through once they do.

Persons who are homeless need a variety of supports in a respectful, non-judgemental and supportive environment to assist them to leave the street. Expressions of anger, blame and contempt from the public will simply reinforce social alienation.

Necessary supports include:

- ◆ Basic needs of life: food & water, shelter (including access to sanitation, shower and laundry) and safety
- ◆ Listening, emotional support, counselling, relationship-building and time: someone who can break through personal walls and create a window of opportunity. Persons who are street-entrenched often require intensive therapy from professional counsellors to assist reintegration.
- ◆ Access to medical help – physical, mental, addiction
- ◆ Affordable, stable housing with necessary supports
- ◆ Harm reduction programs that provide:
  - ✦ a safe environment for stabilization to persons unable to maintain abstinence
  - ✦ an alternative to open drug use in the community
  - ✦ an opportunity to develop supportive relationships
- ◆ Transportation to services and employment
- ◆ Pre-employment evaluation and training
- ◆ Employment