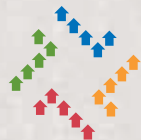




Calgary freelance writer Susan Scott has been documenting issues of poverty and homelessness, especially as they relate to women, for many years. Her second book, *All Our Sisters, Stories of Homeless Women in Canada*, prompted the first national conference on women and homelessness, held in London, ON, in 2011.



Calgary  
Homeless  
Foundation

ISBN 978-1-77136-037-1



9 781771 360371 >

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

SUSAN SCOTT

# THE BEGINNING OF THE END

The story  
of the  
Calgary  
Homeless  
Foundation  
and one  
community's  
drive to end  
homelessness

*SUSAN SCOTT*



# THE BEGINNING OF THE END

*The story of the Calgary Homeless Foundation  
and one community's drive to end homelessness*

Susan Scott

Copyright © 2012 Calgary Homeless Foundation

All rights reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form  
without the permission of the Calgary Homeless Foundation

PHOTOGRAPHY:

[BandiPhotoGraphy.com](http://BandiPhotoGraphy.com)

Gord Christie

Greg Gerrard

Mandy Joy

Joanna Kostanecki

Bonnie Laing

Ken Richardson

ISBN 978-1-77136-037-1

Printed in Canada

Typeset in Book Antiqua and PMN Caecilia

*This book is dedicated to the memories of*

**ART SMITH**

*founder of the Calgary Homeless Foundation*

*and*

**MARK A.**

*who might have lived had he had a home*



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword . . . . .	1
Calgary Homeless Foundation Mission Statement. . . . .	4
Chapter 1: The Foundation. . . . .	5
<i>Al</i> . . . . .	21
Chapter 2: Bricks and Mortar. . . . .	25
<i>Doug</i> . . . . .	42
Chapter 3: What's Going On?. . . . .	45
<i>Tasha</i> . . . . .	62
Chapter 4: Turning the Titanic . . . . .	67
<i>Kristy</i> . . . . .	80
Chapter 5: The Road to Damascus . . . . .	85
<i>Maggie</i> . . . . .	97
Chapter 6: Boldly Going Where No Agency Has Gone Before . . . . .	101
<i>Don</i> . . . . .	127
<i>Michael</i> . . . . .	129
Chapter 7: We Have a Plan . . . . .	133
<i>Cindy</i> . . . . .	153
Chapter 8: The Alberta Advantage . . . . .	157
<i>Aaron</i> . . . . .	174
Chapter 9: A System, Not a Plan . . . . .	177
<i>John and Mary</i> . . . . .	201
Chapter 10: Coming Home . . . . .	205
<i>Randy</i> . . . . .	219
<i>Virginia</i> . . . . .	221
Chapter 11: The Count Down. . . . .	225
<i>Michael P.</i> . . . . .	232
Profile	
<i>The Mustard Seed</i> . . . . .	235
Calgary Homeless Foundation Board of Directors, 1998 . . . . .	241
Calgary Homeless Foundation Board of Directors, 2012 . . . . .	244
Acknowledgements . . . . .	247

## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

---



---

## FOREWORD

*The Beginning of the End* tells the story of the Calgary Homeless Foundation and the first three years of our 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness. This story is interesting if for no other reason than we don't yet know how it ends. The title assumes, and I believe, that the un-natural disaster of homelessness will end in Calgary.

As I write this there are 5 years, 6 months, 25 days, 1 hour and 58 minutes left until our deadline of January 29, 2018. Homelessness in our city is down for the first time in 20 years, but we have a long road ahead before we can declare victory. There are signs our greatest challenges remain as emergency shelter use begins to creep up with the return of a booming economy.

The title of this book is inspired by Winston Churchill's famous 1942 quote: "Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

Churchill said these words following Allied successes in North Africa after three long years of defeat. The successes Allied armies enjoyed in North Africa were a glimmer of hope for Britain and her allies, but Churchill knew the war was far from won.

These words seem apt to me because after many long years of defeat, Calgary and other 10 Year Plan communities have turned the tide of homelessness and are seeing significant reductions, but this battle too is not yet won.

In this book Susan Scott does a wonderful job of telling the story of the formation of the CHF, our early years, the creation of the 10 Year Plan and the successes and challenges we've had along the way.

For those living it, homelessness is traumatic, sad, dark and

desperate. As an issue in the public imagination, homelessness seems like a story of defeat, sadness, resignation and charity.

What I hope the reader takes from this book is that an end to homelessness is not only possible, it's within our reach. Our story is living proof that smart, relentless and focused ordinary citizens can move governments and turn the tide on one of the most intractable social issues our cities face.

We began this project hoping to capture our history before it was lost to time, but also, hopefully, to inspire others to follow in our footsteps. Many other cities have gone before us and will come after with plans to end homelessness. Others have had and will have greater success. We share our story with the humility of learners who have benefited from the wisdom of others freely shared, and we offer our story to the growing body of knowledge.

Thank you, Susan Scott, for telling our story in such a clear and accessible way. Over the years I've come to know Susan as not only a wonderful storyteller, but a particularly effective advocate for poor and marginalized women who has moved mountains with words and transformed lives. She is a gift.

You will read about many of the incredible people behind the Calgary Homeless Foundation and Calgary's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness in the pages of this book. Thank you to all of them and the thousands of people over the years who have volunteered, worked, donated or otherwise contributed to our success. It is not possible to name or acknowledge all of you, but please know your contribution is appreciated.

Special thank-you to Premier Ed Stelmach for the courage to end homelessness in Alberta. Your foresight and leadership is saving lives every day and will be felt by thousands of Albertans for decades to come. And to Steve Snyder for putting your reputation on the line. By unselfishly offering your leadership, time and considerable talent you have blazed a trail for your peers and are transforming how our city, province and country respond to homelessness.

To the people we serve - you are doing the hard work of ending homelessness yourselves. I wish we had homes for all of you today, but we don't. What we do have is the resolve to get there as fast as we can. And we won't stop trying until we do.

## FOREWORD

---

Finally, the success of the Calgary Homeless Foundation is a living memorial to our founder, the late Arthur Smith. I think Mr. Smith, a veteran of the Second World War, channelled Winston Churchill throughout his lifetime of community service. When he saw homelessness afflicting so many of his fellow citizens he acted without hesitation. His focus, relentlessness and tenacity are hardwired into the DNA of the foundation he established and will see us achieve our mission.

Onwards.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Richter', with a stylized, sweeping underline.

Tim Richter  
President & CEO  
Calgary Homeless Foundation  
July 2012

## MISSION STATEMENT

*Tabled at second Calgary Homeless Foundation meeting, June 1998*

The Calgary Homeless Foundation will:

- (i) Search for short and long-term affordable housing to accommodate the homeless.
- (ii) Promote public understanding of the many dimensions of the homeless problem in our city.
- (iii) Serve as a complementary force to the many organizations engaged in the daily work with the homeless.
- (iv) Assist in the implementation of the *Community Action Plan (CAP)*.
- (v) Provide synergy amongst government, business, community interests, service providers and faith communities.
- (vi) Raise such funds as may be necessary to achieve the objectives of the *CAP* recommendations.
- (vii) In recognition that the homeless problem is not short term, to establish a foundation, in place permanently, until the problem is resolved.



## THE FOUNDATION

**I**t was a cold night, -30°C to be precise, early in 1998. Art Smith was driving home. Inside the car it was warm and the freezing temperatures outside hardly affected him. He had just received an award from the Calgary Economic Development Authority (CEDA) and all was apparently very well with the world. To keep himself company, Smith turned on QR77. Then he felt a sudden chill invade his vehicle. Major Reg Newbury from the Salvation Army was speaking and it is what he had to say that cooled Smith's mood.

"People are going to die on the streets tonight because it is so cold and the shelters are bursting at the seams," said Newbury, explaining that Calgary couldn't accommodate all those people who had poured into town because of the heated economy and the resulting availability of work. Their wages were not enough for a damage deposit.

"Impossible," thought Smith as he turned into his driveway. "Not in my town."

In the morning, Smith phoned Newbury to see if his ears had really heard what he thought they had heard.

"Tell me what you said on the radio is not true," said Smith.

"No, I'm telling the truth," replied Newbury.

It was at that point Smith, a war hero, politician, entrepreneur, mentor, husband and father, became a powerful advocate for the homeless. He phoned other agencies to check that they were also experiencing the avalanche and to get a better grasp of the situation.

"He was like a knight in shining armour on a dashing white charger," says one commentator with scarcely a note of irony. What Smith set in motion was to lead to big changes, changes in the way

we think about poverty and homelessness and changes in the way we deliver help to the city's most marginalized people.

His wife, Betty Ann, says over the years she has heard many versions of this story and that undoubtedly there is a central truth to it. She knows for sure that he visited a shelter and was very touched by the despair he witnessed. "When he became aware of the homeless situation, he wanted to do something about it. That was his nature, the way he was," she says. "He was so anxious for families to be housed, to keep families together so that they could get ahead in life and get out of despair. . . . A lot of people want to work and have pride and when they can't provide for their family they have no pride."



**Art Smith, left, whose vision and drive led to the creation of the Calgary Homeless Foundation, shares a laugh with Pat Black and columnist Bill Brooks.**

Smith combined both compassion and drive. He left little time for the grass to grow under his feet; he knew everyone who was anyone. While some say he was full of bombast, there is no denying that when Smith took up a cause, things happened and they happened at break-neck speed.

Smith, born in Calgary in 1919, grew up in Alberta and British Columbia. Like many young men in this province, his first job at 16 was as an oilfield worker, in his case in Turner Valley. Unlike the

majority of oilfield workers, though, he went on to distinguish himself in several different arenas. He enlisted at the outbreak of the Second World War, becoming a pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force and winning the Distinguished Flying Cross. He returned to the oilpatch, working his way up from roughneck to being the assistant to the president of the Anglo-American Oil Company. In 1952 he became the editor of the Petroleum Exploration Digest, but he had yet wider horizons – politics. He ran for city council the following year, serving as an alderman for two years before becoming a Social

Credit MLA. Again two years later, in 1957, Smith ran federally in Calgary South for the Progressive Conservatives, winning the seat when another larger than life Calgary figure, oilman Carl Nickle, retired. Smith stepped down as a Tory MP in 1963 and returned to a more grassroots level, running again in 1965 for City Hall and holding his seat until 1967.

After his elected political career was over, Smith became a successful businessman, serving as chair and CEO of SNC-Partec Inc. and Lavalin Services Ltd. over a 20-year period before his retirement. He remained keenly interested in what was happening in the political world, mentoring the likes of former premier Ralph Klein and current Premier Alison Redford, and endorsing Mark Norris in the 2006 provincial Progressive Conservative leadership race. He served as an executive for numerous companies, on public boards and volunteered in youth sport programs.

Among other achievements, Smith was instrumental in helping establish Alberta Economic Development as well as CEDA in 1981; he was appointed chief of protocol for the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympic Games, the same year he became a member of the Order of Canada. Smith and lawyer Milt Harradance used their political influence to raise funds for a Lancaster FM-136 (the type of Second World War plane that Smith had flown) for display at McCall Field and he was involved with the Aerospace Museum. A recipient of the Alberta Order of Excellence, Smith became honorary colonel of the 416 Tactical Squadron in 1997. The list could go on.

One of her husband's favourite projects, says Betty Ann Smith, was the Art Smith Aero Centre for Training and Technology at SAIT Polytechnic. "He was so fond of all the students and he used to visit and play pool with them." Although he never really took to the title, in some quarters Smith was known with good reason as "Mr. Calgary."

One of his greatest assets was his rapport with people and his ability to listen, says Betty Ann Smith. "He was interested in people and always chatted to people about what they were doing and, as a result, they would ask him about what they should do."

"Art Smith was really what Calgary was all about, being active in business, politics and most importantly in his community," said then mayor Dave Bronconnier when Smith died in 2008. Former premier Ed Stelmach added, "Art's contributions to the city and

the province he loved would normally have taken several lifetimes to achieve, and will live in our memories for generations to come. He was a cherished voice of wisdom and reason for me, both before and after I became premier and for that I am eternally thankful."

The city's billowing numbers of homeless didn't know it, but they had found themselves a powerful champion and Smith, fuelled by the famed Calgary can-do attitude, compassion and, possibly, by his Anglican faith, had found another cause. He was not about to let Calgary be a city where people died on the streets.

In 1998 the face of homelessness in Canada was changing. No longer were agencies just dealing with scruffy Santa figures wheeling their shopping carts around the less salubrious areas of city centres. Younger men and women were ending up on the streets and families were struggling to pay the rent and feed their children, ever teetering on the verge of losing their homes until they were evicted forever.

In 1998 the United Nations (UN) Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights urged Canada to address the homeless problem, declaring it a "national emergency." The next year the UN Human Rights Committee said it was "concerned that homelessness has led to serious health problems and even to death." That same year the mayors of Canada's major cities declared homelessness a "national crisis," with an estimated 100 people dying annually. In Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman commissioned a report on the situation. Chaired by that city's United Way president, Anne Golden, the report, *Taking Responsibility for Homelessness*, was important because it questioned reactive emergency responses and it said everyone, including all three levels of government, should take ownership of the problem. Eventually when New York City began to look at cleaning up its act, Toronto was one of its role models in dealing with the issue.

When Ruth Ramsden-Wood, president of United Way of Calgary and Area from 1997-2011, heard about the Toronto report, she said, "You've done what? You've taken on homelessness?"

The report was important because it shifted away from blaming people to setting out everyone's responsibilities - the federal government, the province, the city and the community. This was a new way of thinking says Ramsden-Wood, who was becoming increasingly frustrated with each level of government conveniently



laying the blame on the others so they could avoid doing anything. The report broke down the solutions to homelessness into “doable” parts so that it looked less daunting and it became “a bit of a prototype” for Calgary. However, she says, it was an easier sell in a liberal province like Ontario compared to Alberta, which was “pretty pathetic.”

So, how did we move from having a handful of men on the streets to an array of people turning up at shelters and food banks? As the Toronto report said, “A ‘typical’ homeless person is no longer a single, alcoholic, adult male. Youth and families with children are now the fastest-growing groups in the homeless and at-risk populations.” What caused Reg Newbury’s *cri de coeur*, the UN’s condemnation, the Toronto response, and the concern that was beginning to build in Calgary?

To understand why this torrent of humanity poured into the streets in the late 1990s, we have to go back a few years to when politicians at all levels of government in Canada were struggling to balance the books after years of unfettered spending. Cuts began at the federal level and cascaded rather than dripped down to the municipalities via the provinces. Some of the federal cuts made with Liberal Finance Minister Paul Martin’s sweeping axe included the national social housing strategy (1993) and the Canada Assistance Plan that had doled out enough to the provinces for them to ensure social assistance was sufficient to live on. At the same time the Unemployment Insurance program was renamed Employment Insurance and was revamped so that it was harder to make claims.

Immediately, provincial and municipal social housing received less funding and in some instances was bought up and converted into market housing. Gentrification ate up more stock and, because purchasers with money in the bank for luxury condos or single-family dwellings are a better financial bet for builders, there was little incentive to create low-cost rental units. Housing shortages instantly began to squeeze the poor. At the same time, the provinces were pulling in their belts, so many mental health institutions were lost, releasing people onto the streets where the community supports failed to materialize in significant numbers; landlord-tenant legislation was relaxed resulting in more evictions; and without money for social assistance the provinces eradicated people from the programs and cut payments to the survivors. It

was a perfect social storm whirling across the country and Alberta was totally without protection.

As former city alderman Bob Hawkesworth said in his 2003 master's thesis, *Relationships To Alleviate Poverty*: "The sources of income that people once relied upon were taken away, and they were unable to maintain a place of residence . . . it has just sort of wrenched those people, and squeezed them out of the system, and they continue to be squeezed out."

As vacancy rates dropped and rents increased, fewer units were available for people on low income. The waiting lists of people wanting to get into the available social housing became longer and longer. All these circumstances made it very difficult to help people make the transition out of shelters once they ended up there.

The people precipitated into homelessness each had their own story, including mental health issues, substance use, domestic violence and trauma. Even then Aboriginal people were overly represented. While all were poor, they also had other underlying issues and certainly not everyone who lived in poverty ended up on the streets.

"Homelessness is not only a housing problem, but it is always a housing problem. The central observation about the diverse group of Canadians known as 'the homeless' is that they are people who once had housing, but are now unhoused. Canada's housing system once had room for virtually everyone; now it does not," wrote David Hulchanski, associate director, Research Cities Centre University of Toronto, in *Housing Policy for Tomorrow's Cities*.

In Calgary, events affecting the country were exacerbated by our boom-and-bust economy. In 1992, former alderman Barb Scott asked the City of Calgary to do its first homeless count. Guesses varied from 100 to 1,500; the actual figure turned out to be 447. However, from 1992 to 2002 our population rose by 26 per cent, sometimes growing by as many as 40,000 per year. During the same decade the number of homeless people increased by 338 per cent. Clearly something was out of whack. Carole Oliver, director of the Calgary Salvation Army's regional services, said in a *Globe and Mail* article, "I see the downside to this boom: It is drawing people here and we're not in a position to deal with it."

For the same reasons as those affecting other Canadian communities, Calgary began to lose cheap rental accommodation.

Calgary had a number of housing projects that were developed with Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) low-interest mortgages in the 1960s, thus creating affordable housing. In the 1980s many developers saw land values soaring and wanted to wiggle out of the agreements. “Sure,” said CMHC, “pay off the loan and off you go.”

The developers did just that and then sold off many units at market prices which cut into the number of affordable units. One way or another, we lost 16,988 purpose-built rental market units between 1994 and 2007, or one-third of the stock, according to the City of Calgary. On top of this Alberta had a low minimum wage compared to other provinces and no rent controls. Calgary also lost two downtown hospitals – the Calgary General in 1996 and the Holy Cross in 1997 – which meant that there were more physically ill and troubled people on the sidewalk.

The storm arrived here with the bitter cold experienced in November 1995. The shelters were packed to the rafters and all of a sudden the problem was in everyone’s face. The city declared an emergency and a number of organizations worked together to manage the immediate situation by finding more shelter beds. The province also jumped in in the person of the Social Services regional manager who approached two groups: the Calgary Housing Committee and the Special Action Committee on the Homeless. The former was established in 1990 by the Minister of Municipal Affairs and was chaired by Calgary Bow MLA Bonnie Laing; the latter, chaired by Hawkesworth, was formed by the city in 1992 and originally chaired by Alderman Scott. In a very rare move, the province and the city were now working hand in hand under the unlikely combination of a PC MLA and a city alderman who formerly sat in the Legislature under the NDP banner.

“Bonnie and I found ourselves leading the initiative because



**Bonnie Laing**



**Bob Hawkesworth**

of our personal passions. We both believed something had to be done . . . . It would never have happened without our personal commitment,” says Hawkesworth praising Laing for her integrity. “It was a bigger risk for Bonnie because she was a Tory and because back then there was no latitude in the party system and it would have been more embarrassing (for her) if it went sideways.” The political atmosphere was highly charged with the province awash in red ink because of failed mortgages, plus Alberta had just got out of social housing and wasn’t likely to welcome it with open arms again.

“Her participation was more critical because it brought in another level of government. It took political courage and risk. If any one piece were missing it wouldn’t have happened,” says Hawkesworth underscoring the significance of the partnership.

The joint group organized a dinner held in St. Mary’s Parish Hall for a motley bunch including a sprinkling of politicians, many people experiencing homelessness and a scattering of business people, notably John Currie, a senior executive with a major petroleum company, representing the Downtown Business Association. He impressed everyone by saying that the business community had a role and a responsibility to help solve the problem and should be invited to help. “I can remember that session distinctly as I guess it was the first opportunity I had as a business person to speak out on the issue,” says Currie, adding that he wasn’t alone among the movers and shakers to think this way. “I guess I was one of the first to speak out because my involvement in many civic organizations convinced me that the exceptional planning and development talents we used every day in our businesses were not being exploited to find solutions to these complex and messy social issues.”

By taking the microphone and expressing his opinions, Currie sowed the seed for the vision of the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness in Calgary, although it was to take a few more years to bloom. Currie, esteemed by many, was a lawyer who became involved with the oil and gas industry through Tenneco that over the years had several incarnations including Canada Development Corporation and Canterra, which was bought by Husky in the late 1980s. His last big project at Canterra was as senior vice-president of administration, working on the Canterra Tower, although he never



**Donna McPhee and Fred Robertson, who had both experienced homelessness, were recruited to join the steering committee with Laing and Hawkesworth.**

got to move into the building. Subsequently he became a consultant and was involved with many other community projects including running for mayor. Never one to brag about his achievements, he always tried to interest the province in returning to the affordable housing issue.

After the St. Mary's dinner, seven working groups were formed, including one entirely of people experiencing homelessness. The groups met on a regular basis, but without a structure the enthusiasm began to wane. By the following April, a steering committee emerged under the leadership of Laing and Hawkesworth with a wide range of "key stakeholders," including Donna McPhee, Fred Robertson and Derek Wilken who had all experienced homelessness. Gradually the group adopted the title, the Ad Hoc Steering Committee, to send a clear signal it was only temporary and not angling to take over the agencies' jobs.

The committee worked hard to collect information and ideas, emphasizing collaboration and cooperation. It initiated the Street

Speaks survey, one of the first times that people experiencing homelessness had done research interviewing other people in the same boat. A study by Julio Arboleda-Florez and H.L. Holley, entitled *Homelessness in Calgary*, drawing on statistics and interviews, was the first Calgary study to document the numbers of people experiencing homelessness who work. Around 45 per cent of those interviewed said they had jobs, a head-on challenge to the stereotype of lazy bums unwilling to help themselves. However, their findings may have been a little suspect because respondents were paid for their participation, so some managed to do it more than once and one was heard to comment, "I just told them what they wanted to hear." Despite this, the findings were used to guide developments in Calgary. The report said most of the employed homeless did not stay in shelters for long, which was used to justify the development of transition shelters and was cited by the Salvation Army to support their proposal for a new building downtown.

The city was seeing the need for more than counting heads, says John te Linde, current manager of social policy and planning, community and neighbourhood services, so Kay Wong, a social planner, was dispatched to work full time with the Calgary Homeless Foundation. "She was very, very knowledgeable. Her concepts were way ahead of her time. She always said affordable housing was the answer," says Currie commenting on Wong's work over the years. "She looked at it in a holistic way, at all the issues."

Grappling with ways to make sense of all the studies and hearings they were holding, the Ad Hoc Committee set up a Future Search conference in 1997. For three days, 94 people put their heads together and came up with nine strategic initiatives including the formation of an umbrella organization to integrate and coordinate services and policies; improving the gathering and dissemination of information; developing a charter of rights; increasing the availability of housing; and pursuing legislative and policy changes.

While the committee was toiling away there were other rumblings of trouble. For example in 1998 the Calgary YWCA came out with a hard-hitting report, *The Right Thing To Do*, documenting the growing gap in Alberta between the rich and the poor – many of whom were single-parent families headed by women. *The Right Thing To Do* argued that "the amounts of Alberta's Supports for

Independence (social assistance) are not sufficient to allow Albertans to break out of the poverty cycle; moreover they do not even meet the most basic needs of individuals and their families.” To remedy this, the YWCA report said assistance should be increased; the impacts of poverty on children should be identified; and resources should be focussed to mitigate them.

One day, Bob Millar, board chair of CUPS, gave Lorraine Melchior, the executive director, a book entitled *Room in the Inn* by Charles F. Strobel (Abingdon Press, Nashville 1992). Strobel was a Nashville, TN, priest who had witnessed families sleeping in cars outside his church. As a result, he had set up services for them in the basement. Melchior tried to interest her own congregation of Christ Church Elbow Park, which included Art Smith, to do something similar. Through her work at CUPS, she was aware of how few services there were for families experiencing homelessness; “no one believed there were any.” The city might pay for a few to spend a night in a cheap motel, but that was it. Undaunted, Melchior passed the book to Alderman Barbara Scott, who said, “I don’t go to church, but if you want to call a meeting of downtown churches, I will pay for lunch.”



John Currie, who represented the Downtown Business Association, was called upon by his friend Art Smith.

Out of this, Inn from the Cold was born, opening its doors at St. Stephen’s Anglican Church on May 2, 1997, with John Robson in charge. The Inn gave priority to families who were showing up in ever increasing numbers with nowhere to call home. Every night they were taken to different churches, where volunteers provided food and supervision, and they were released back onto the streets early in the morning. None of the existing shelters like the Calgary Drop-In & Rehab Centre and The Mustard Seed were set up to take in people with children. Connection Housing that specialized in finding cheap rentals could only help so many and was already in its death throes, finally collapsing in 1997.

By January 1998 the Hawkesworth-Laing committee had been meeting for two years and was close to delivering a long list of

recommendations, although it was still taking submissions. Fired up by what he had heard from Reg Newbury, Lorraine Melchior and others, Art Smith lobbied to make a presentation. One of the people listening was John Currie, representing the Downtown Business Association. Smith put in a submission suggesting that business with its ability to muster resources had the solution in its hands.

With his usual energy and charm, Smith began to call up his troops from among the movers and shakers including Currie, who cut his old friend's spiel short telling him, "I don't think you realized it, but I was at your submission." According to Sharyn Brown, who was to be caught up in Smith's vision for the rest of her working life, Smith's objective was to persuade corporations to stand behind him so he could raise enough money to house people. "He thought corporate Calgary could solve it." Currie adds that there was a group of people with a keen sense that they were helping transform Calgary into a major city. "Art was part of that group and if he saw anything that would detract from becoming that city, he would jump on it."



**Art Smith chats with  
Sam Kolias of Boardwalk  
Rental Communities.**

It wasn't as easy as Smith hoped to assemble a group of business people who also had his sense of urgency. Indeed many, according to his wife, Betty Ann, went so far as to deny that we had a problem. "Then you should go to a shelter and take a look," he would retort. Betty Ann adds Smith felt that corporate Calgary was largely responsible for the crisis by "painting a golden picture of the West enticing people to come. And, they did. They piled their families into cars and came."

By February 6, however, Smith had pulled together what he called an ad hoc group with 35 people. It had business representation including Currie, City Chief Commissioner Paul Dawson, two agency heads from the homeless sector, Newbury and Melchior, and Sam Kolias of Boardwalk Rental Communities. They heard from



the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers about future job prospects in the oilpatch, Dawson declared a need for 1,000 low-rental units, and Smith mooted the idea of a revolving damage deposit fund to help men get out of shelters into accommodation. There was another meeting March 3 with the same cast, although minutes have not survived for this gathering. Art Smith put it to them that when the Hawkesworth-Laing recommendations came out in May, this hand-picked committee could implement them.

These developments came as a complete shock to the Laing-Hawkesworth group, although in the end they dovetailed well.

"In the middle of our process with John Currie as our business leader, all of a sudden invitations are going all over the place from Art Smith," recalls Hawkesworth. "What's all this about? He hadn't been involved, he never talked to us. I looked at Bonnie and she looked at me. . . . It was like he found religion and the next thing I know the foundation (the CHF) is set up to get this problem fixed. It was a disconnect from anything we had been doing. For those who believed in consultation for policy development, it was a cultural faux pas. You don't just summon people and tell them what's going to happen. We spent the next six months trying to figure out how to absorb Art Smith and his gifts."

Prior to the March 3 meeting, fuelled with enthusiasm, Smith went to his old friend Premier Ralph Klein looking for an office. He came away with a free space in the McDougall Centre just down the hall from CEDA, giving the committee and then the foundation almost unprecedented access to government. The group now had an office but no staff, no official name and no mandate, although it knew it would be focussed on long-term solutions. "It was Art Smith's brainchild. He sat here," says Brown looking around the high-ceilinged, panelled room lined with files, documents and research papers where she worked until 2012 when the CHF had to move out.

On March 19 Smith wrote formal letters inviting Currie among others to be on the board of directors and on March 25 they had their inaugural meeting with him as the acting chair. Others present included Koliass, Stephanie Felesky, Milton Bogoch, co-founder and director of the Canadian Apartment Association, Kay Wong from the city, Melchior from CUPS, the Salvation Army's Newbury and Derek Lester who worked in real estate. Hawkesworth was a guest

at the table. "Art pointed to people for positions, everyone agreed and afterwards he filled in the nominees and seconders," says an amused Currie who was made vice-chair at the next meeting. (A full list of officers can be seen on page 241). Smith also unilaterally decided on the name, the Calgary Homeless Foundation.

This March 25 meeting discussed whether there was an actual need for the CHF and it was agreed that there was plenty of work and that not only should the three levels of government be involved, but so should the business community. It was also declared that the Hawkesworth-Laing report "must include in the recommendations that there is a need for an implementation group." This would give the CHF its justification to continue.

Smith's philosophy, Currie recalls, was to go slowly, but always with an eye on the ball. He thought every dime possible should be directed to the cause; as a consequence the CHF was always chronically short-staffed. Smith and Currie both had a desk as did Sharyn Brown who was seconded from the province as the first member of staff, again thanks to Klein, who tossed in a small copier borne down the hallway in the arms of Calgary-Foothills MLA Pat Black. Klein also promised the CHF \$2 million in lottery monies. Smith and Currie carried out most of the managerial duties while Brown did everything else from cutting cheques to brewing coffee. She was to recall later that she didn't get a single day off for two years.

Smith, however, failed to understand the depth and complexity of the situation. "He didn't know what he was getting into until the report was released," says Currie, who had faithfully attended the Hawkesworth-Laing committee and who, more than many, was aware of the scope of the problem. "He didn't know all the issues and he didn't know what he was committing to. It was some months later when he realized what he was undertaking. He thought that we had to do something and he had an idea, but it wasn't the big picture." Smith's initial thought was that with so many homeless actually working all that would be required were loans to help them with the damage deposit and, hey presto, all would be well.

Just over two years after the St. Mary's dinner, the Hawkesworth-Laing *Community Action Plan (CAP)* was released on May 25, 1998 during Homeless Awareness Week at a press conference held in the Calgary Chamber of Commerce. It was never the Ad Hoc Steering

Committee's intention to carry out the implementation piece and it was far from clear to them how matters would proceed. But quite fortuitously, ready and waiting, was the CHF, not exactly a rebel without a cause, but certainly a foundation in quest of a mandate, not to mention a plan. According to Hawkesworth, the foundation embraced the plan and, in turn, the foundation was embraced as the vehicle for implementation. "It was a convenient, viable and attractive arrangement for both parties."

Smith didn't fumble when Laing and Hawkesworth passed the baton to him. He seized it and sprinted off down the track. "Thank God he did," says Hawkesworth. "He gave (the recommendations) structure and it was a group with a commitment to doing something. No other city ever replicated it in such a spontaneous way."

The second meeting of the CHF was held later in the day that the CAP was released. Smith thanked Hawkesworth and Laing for their work and suggested that they join the board. All members were asked to read the CAP so that implementation could begin. New members were introduced at the meeting and various principles were discussed, including the fact the CHF shouldn't be a threat to existing agencies and that its primary role was to raise money. Seven committees had already been set up: public affairs, industry association liaison, shelter supply, fundraising, faith community, finance and budget, and allocations.

After a couple of years, Smith resigned from the CHF board and John Currie took over his role. However, he remained keenly interested in its work, turning up for meetings and popping into the office to say hi to Sharyn Brown on his way from SNC-Lavalin to lunch at the Petroleum Club. Currie often sent Smith on informal missions to his friends in the provincial and federal governments when the foundation had pressing matters that needed a helping hand. As chair emeritus of the foundation, he backed the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness, even though he was ill with cancer through most of its formative period. On a sunny summer morning at its 2007 annual general meeting, the foundation honoured Smith for his role in mobilizing all sectors of the community and setting the stage for the plan, which then was in its embryonic stage. Klein, who had just retired from politics, gave the address honouring his mentor and friend.

Afterwards at the reception upstairs in the McDougall Centre,

Darcy Verhun, who early on had been strong-armed onto the board by Currie, had a few quiet words with Smith, newly discharged from hospital and looking very frail.

"How are you doing?" asked Verhun, currently a partner in Conroy Ross.

"I've always read a lot, but when I was in hospital I went blind for a while. When I couldn't see, I couldn't read, so I had lots of time to think. I've been thinking about my life," Smith replied. "The things that rose to the top were those times when I reached out to help somebody."

Art Smith died at 89 on June 30, 2008, six months after the 10 Year Plan was announced. It was said the city and the country had lost a great Canadian. Almost to his last breath Smith had strong words for Calgary's power machine. "Participate," he urged. "We've had an improvement in corporate attitude . . . but we need more people from the business community to get off their wealthy butts - especially the young millionaires we breed every day."

## Al LaRose

Some people's dwelling is merely a house; others transform timber and stucco into a home, which is precisely what Al LaRose has done.

As LaRose opens the door, that indefinable something – a combination of safety, warmth and personality that betokens home – reaches out to a visitor. Midnight the cat wraps himself around your feet in welcome and then jumps up onto the back of one of the comfortable sofas from whence he surveys the scene – when he's not snoozing.

The scene is LaRose's cosy suite, a place where he and Midnight are secure and their friends are welcome. Authors, from Stephen King to Ogden Nash, line one wall. Caps, including his pride and joy, a New England Patriots, are ranged on another wall. It's not a scene that LaRose would have envisaged when he was living under a Macleod Trail bridge. "Not in my wildest dreams," he says.

"It gives me a sense of security; it gives me freedom," says LaRose, aged 47. "I can lay my head down when I'm tired and, if I'm hungry, I can eat whatever I want, when I want, how I want."

LaRose began drinking and using drugs, preferably heroin, when he was still a teenager, hoping that his solidly middle-class parents wouldn't notice. They all lived in Boston, MA, and LaRose had a job at IBM. Then his father, who was employed by an accounting firm, was transferred to Calgary. Everyone, including LaRose's young wife, a student at MIT, packed their bags and came along.



Al LaRose shares the comforts of his home with Midnight.

LaRose's wife went to SAIT and became a chef. They had a daughter, but his addictions had taken over his life. He sank deeper and deeper into depression when first his mother died and then his daughter succumbed to a brain tumour.

Eventually the courts ordered him to leave the family home. There followed eight years of "hell."

LaRose was in and out of shelters. If he had a home, he ended up losing it. He did everything but steal to survive each hellish day by each hellish day.

Then in August of 2009, Ken Swift of The Alex's HomeBase program found LaRose under the bridge and took him by the hand to detox at Alpha House. From there he went to the Bonnyville Indian-Metis Rehabilitation Centre. In the meantime his name was put on the HomeBase housing list.

A month later as the bus pulled into the Greyhound Station, two people from HomeBase were waiting to meet him and take him to a boarding house. His journey from detox to rehab to housing was seamless. He didn't have to figure out what to do next or return to a shelter.

It took about three days for LaRose to phone his support worker. "Get me out of here. There's people using marijuana, heroin, crack and throwing beer bottles in the hall."

HomeBase immediately took him to look at apartments in the southwest. He liked one, moved in the same day and the next day went shopping for a bed because all that he had in this world was one backpack and two changes of clothes.

LaRose is now in his third apartment and since January 2011 has been working as a file clerk at the Peter Lougheed Hospital. He likes the quiet area and the peaceful upstairs neighbours. "It's a safe environment. There are no wild parties and zero tolerance," he says. Several of his former friends from the streets have asked to crash, but they are out of luck. There is a one-word answer: "No."

When LaRose is tempted to use again, he remembers the advice he gives others. "Just think of something to which you are allergic." In his case, this happens to be cauliflower. When he recalls how sick this vegetable makes him, it gives him the strength to deal with his cravings.

His new partner, who is on a similar journey, lives there too and family members are welcomed with open arms, as are new friends. Then there's Midnight. "He's my hero. When I go to work, I anticipate coming home to see him," says LaRose who finds the cat a companion and a source of comfort and support.

Although he's working, LaRose says it's still important to be connected to HomeBase because he knows that they will be there for him. "If it wasn't for them, I don't know what I would do," he says.

But life is a two-way street and, when LaRose isn't working, he finds time to help HomeBase with various chores. He also volunteers at three shelters. Just looking at the amount of alcohol and drugs circulating in them, he knows that he couldn't have got his act together on a mat.

Safety, too, is important to LaRose, who was stabbed twice on the streets besides being beaten up. "This is independence," he says as he and Midnight look around their domain. "I don't have to look over my shoulder any more. It's mine, all mine."

## SOURCES

Interviews: Sharyn Brown, John Currie, Bob Hawkesworth, Lorraine Melchior, Stacey Petersen, Ruth Ramsden-Wood, Betty Ann Smith, John te Linde, Darcy Verhun

CBC News, *Calgary Loses Icon Arthur Smith*, June 30, 2008

Calgary Herald, June 30, 2008, *Art Smith, a Calgary Icon Dies at 89*

Calgary Homeless Foundation board minutes, 1998

City of Calgary, *Fast Facts #08, Trends in the Calgary Housing Market*, revised November 19, 2007

Hawkesworth, Bob, *Relationships To Alleviate Homelessness*, MA thesis University of Calgary, 2003

Hulchanski, J. David, *Housing Policy for Tomorrow's Cities 2002*, Canadian Policy

Research Networks Inc. [www.urbancenter.utoronto.ca](http://www.urbancenter.utoronto.ca)

Macleod, Murdoch, *Ottawa Asked To Play Role in National Policy on Homelessness and Affordable Housing*, Business Edge, January 17, 2001

Petersen, Stacey, Fresh Start Recovery, Community Action Committee – History Notes

YWCA of Calgary, Social Issues Committee, *The Right Thing To Do*, May 31, 2000





## BRICKS AND MORTAR

When the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF) took the baton from the Ad Hoc Steering Committee it was a lean, but certainly not a mean organization. From the beginning Art Smith felt it had to represent four constituencies: the private sector, the three levels of government, the faith community and the social agencies, not necessarily in that order.

He also stipulated that operating costs had to be kept to a minimum which meant the board members were more than mere ciphers; they had to do all the work. "The plus was that it got us all involved in the issues," says John Currie, the first vice-chair. "The downside was that volunteers couldn't handle the complexities and I don't think Art ever accepted that."

Summoned by Smith, 35 people from various walks of life attended an initial meeting at City Hall on February 6, 1998. Smith had done some homework so that he was able to rope in representatives from the oil and gas sector who told the group that in 1997 6,000 direct positions had been created in the industry with untold spin-off jobs. They also said they were trying to squelch media stories luring untrained people here with the promise of work because appropriate skills were a necessity. The city identified low-cost housing as a priority with an immediate need of 1,000 units. Finally, Smith put out a request for eight to 10 individuals with a broad range of skills and backgrounds to volunteer for the board. The inaugural CHF board meeting was held on March 25 at the McDougall Centre and the foundation's incorporation was announced at the October board meeting. They were officially off and running.



Ralph Klein serves Art and Betty Ann Smith a well deserved dinner.

All along, there was a feeling the board should be accountable, but to whom? Smith decided that there would be four sponsors to whom the board would report and that those sponsors should represent the four constituencies. It was typical of Smith's charisma that he was able to enlist the premier (Ralph Klein), the mayor (Al Duerr), the president of the Chamber of Commerce (Kevin Gregor), and the chair of the United Way of Calgary and Area (Larry MacDonald). As one observer said, "Art Smith was a force of nature not to be denied." This quartet had the right to say no to the board and thus provided the checks and balances.

It should be noted that at this point there was no representation from the federal level of government and that the structure was a little top heavy with business people (see page 241). However, the foundation was committed to implementing the *Community*

*Action Plan (CAP)* drawn up by the Laing-Hawkesworth Ad Hoc Steering Committee and released at the end of May. The plan was something of an unwieldy document being more or less a snapshot of Calgary's needs in 1998. It was holistic in nature, says Bob Hawkesworth, and it grasped the linkages between issues. It addressed systemic problems and identified the importance of education, health promotion and support services. Others called it comprehensive and substantial, and yet others exclaimed less diplomatically, "Holy crap, it's massive! What do we do?" It was divided into five sections under which recommendations were listed almost in bullet form:

1. **Increasing the housing supply**, identifying specific steps each level of government could take to increase the number of units of various kinds. It included a set of performance measures to assess progress.

2. **An umbrella system** so that there would be a single point of entry into the system to end the ceaseless round for people going from shelter to shelter without access to other services. In effect, it would encourage cooperation and coordination.

3. **Aboriginal services** were given priority and it was recommended that culturally sensitive programs should be developed and government policies that worked against Aboriginal cultural values needed to be changed.

4. **Community awareness** was considered important to combat the prevalent Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) syndrome.

5. **Implementation** was the fifth pillar, but all it said was that the Ad Hoc Steering Committee should be replaced by an implementation committee to ensure "appropriate involvement of the corporate sector, service providers, consumers, community funders, (and) the faith community." The plan neither suggested a strategy, nor a structure.

On June 9, 1998, Currie brought Darcy Verhun, then a partner with Ernst & Young Calgary, onto the board to help figure out priorities. "You know about boards and business plans," said Currie. At that point the CHF didn't even have a bank account, let alone much cash, apart from some help from SNC Lavalin and RGO Office Supplies. Through the year there was a lot of discussion about whether to accept lottery funds, or not. Some groups, especially the faith community, were very opposed, saying

gambling money even if it had been filtered through a couple of agencies was unacceptable. So heated did the debate become that the Roman Catholic bishop, Fred Henry, pulled out. In the end it was solved by keeping any revenues from gaming in a separate account in deference to agencies like The Mustard Seed and the Salvation Army that were uncomfortable with receiving such funds.

Verhun remembers his phone ringing and a voice saying, "Young man, it's Art here. I've got a cheque for \$1 million. Where do I put it?"

"Er, what?"

"I picked it up today from Ralph."

Early on Verhun, whose business acumen continues to inform and guide the board, produced a high-level, three-year budget plan and criteria for evaluating shelter proposals that came before the board. Shelter was the most significant item in the budget, which was based on raising \$6 million in the first two years and \$7 million in the third.

"It is assumed that once the property is suitable for occupancy, it will be turned over to another agency to own/manage/operate," said Verhun in a faxed memo to Currie. The foundation was very clear that it did not want to disenfranchise any front-line agency. The criteria for evaluating a project were: cost effectiveness (for a long time there was a figure of \$10,000 per bed that was adhered to); impact on people experiencing homelessness; overall assessment; availability of CHF funds; and the impact on Aboriginal people. Verhun's memo stated, "Detailed plans for targets for fundraising and shelter expenditures have not been made . . . . This is primarily due to the need to take action to resolve the homeless problem quickly, the high degree of uncertainty around available projects and the fundraising capacity of the foundation."

Verhun became one of those volunteers like Betty Thompson, Stephanie Felesky, Brian Olson, George Coppus, Derek Lester, Peter Wallis, David McIlveen and Gerry Thompson (who was a conduit to the federal government), upon whom the foundation came to depend. Once Currie mused that Thompson had done so much she must truly be twins. She was of assistance in many ways and it was typical of her that when the federal government drew up a hefty contract for the agencies to sign, she went out on a limb and condensed it into two or three pages. Of Verhun, Currie said,

“His thoroughness adds to our credibility and accountability in this community.”

Originally, Klein had promised an annual payment of \$2 million for five years, but shortly after Edmonton heard that Calgary was receiving this sugarplum, the Treasury Board split it between the two cities. Calgary Mayor Al Duerr ponied up \$1 million in cash out of city coffers and offered another \$1 million in kind, and many of the board members also made donations, but not as much as, possibly, Smith had hoped. After some initial differences with the United Way, which looked on the CHF as a potential competitor, it was agreed that the former would finance programs and the latter the bricks and mortar aspect of homeless sector projects, and that initially the CHF would come under the United Way’s umbrella for tax purposes. From a slightly rocky start, the relationship developed into what Currie calls “the finest partnership I’ve ever witnessed.” However, in the end, the United Way was unable to help out with tax receipts, so City Commissioner Paul Dawson found a means for the city to take over this role.

Verhun recalls discussions among the fledgling group: “We did not have a goal of ending homelessness. We even struggled where to focus, for example, emergency shelter or rent supplements.” At one point Smith wondered out loud whether the foundation should concentrate on constructing affordable housing, but he was quickly silenced by real estate representatives who felt there was plenty of rental accommodation, a view they were to repeat over the years.

Bearing in mind the CHF’s vision that “all Calgarians will have access to housing where they feel safe and secure,” the board started to look at the CAP report recommendations, but Smith was champing at the bit to make a difference. He was already disappointed that he had had to wait until the end of May, says Currie. When Smith presented to the Laing-Hawkesworth committee, he said that the business community could pay people’s damage deposits on a loan basis. Others cautioned, “Wait and see. We gotta sit down and see how much we can chew off at one time.” Once again the force of nature was not to be denied. Smith forged ahead. The CHF quickly drew up plans for a damage-deposit loan program that was an easy sell to the more fiscally minded board members who thought it would be very educational for the recipients to learn better budgeting skills.

In June, a \$50,000 damage-deposit program was established with the Calgary Real Estate Board (another of Smith's interests) kicking in the first donation of \$10,000. CUPS and the Red Cross handled applications with the loans being paid directly to the land-



**Sharyn Brown, the first CHF staff member.**

lord; Sharyn Brown, the first CHF staff member, dealt with everything else. At the August 29 meeting there was a long discussion about how to administer the fund and whether it should be used to cover utility deposits as well. Almost immediately the CHF applied for its own charitable status. Two years later it still hadn't acquired it mainly because Revenue Canada had problems with the damage-deposit program. The government argued that if clients could repay the deposit, they weren't impoverished, therefore in the government's eyes the CHF wasn't a charity.

Art Smith was almost in shock at the reasoning, recalls Currie, especially as only about 20 per cent of the loans were actually repaid. In the end, the CHF felt it had to give the program away, especially as it had become totally "unmanageable" for Brown to run it. At the end of 1999, the CHF divested it to what was then called the Mennonite Central Committee Employment and Development (now Momentum), which already had experience with micro loans. MCC handled the damage-deposit loans until 2007 when the province got into a similar program in a big way.

By the fifth meeting on July 24, 1998, things were moving along. Paul Dawson announced that the city planned to amalgamate its three housing authorities and that the money saved, up to \$1 million annually, could be used by the CHF to invest in social housing. Then Gillian Lawrence, also from the city, outlined three areas of critical need - 1,800 people on the social housing waiting list, 1,000 shelter users and 300 leaving domestic violence. This was not a blip, said Lawrence, who also expected even more people to migrate here. It was discussed how to address these needs with an accommodation committee checking out different potential shelter

sites. Dawson pointed out, “no low-end units are currently being built,” to which Currie replied, “the market will not build below market rents.”

“This is exactly the gap that has to be filled,” added Dawson. The problem in a nutshell, then and today.

From the beginning there was so much going on and so many matters that required attention that Currie felt a bit like a juggler with too many balls in the air. It was difficult to keep track of everything. That first year, while the CHF continued to meet monthly to plot the way forward, many of the people who had been on the Laing-Hawkesworth Ad Hoc Committee were not involved in these discussions; the networks were still in place but a channel for the members’ energy and commitment had disappeared. After the birth of the CHF, an approach was made to the board to establish an outlet for “agencies and grassroots community involvement.” The result was the Service Planning and Community Action Committee co-chaired again by Bonnie Laing and Bob Hawkesworth, giving the group continuity.

In March 1999, it became the plain old Community Action Committee, otherwise known as the CAC. Other agencies involved included a cross-section alphabetically from Alpha House Society to the YWCA of Calgary. According to Hawkesworth, despite the efforts of the CAC and the foundation’s principles of inclusion, the next few years were marked by an absence of people experiencing homelessness on the CHF board, a loss of voice that was lamented in several arenas.

Ably led by the Progressive Conservative MLA for Calgary-Bow, Bonnie Laing, for many years, the role of the CAC was discussed and refined at CHF board meetings. When she stepped down from the board in 2006 she was named volunteer of the year. Currie said, “Calgary, Alberta and indeed Canada owe her a great debt,” adding that she had helped shape the vision of how Calgary would address homeless issues. “Since its inception Ms. Laing’s contributions to the foundation have been incalculable. She helped define the Collaborative Granting Process, developed critical partnerships with every major agency and organization serving the homeless, and built the Community Action Committee into the powerful force for change it is today. Ms. Laing’s leadership on matters touching homelessness and health in Calgary is a model we

can all strive to emulate. In fact her true strength is in sharing that leadership and passing it on to other energetic and devoted men and women."

However in 1999 there was a great deal of soul-searching about the connection or lack thereof between the foundation and the CAC. The CAC felt that the CHF was muscling in on its turf and ignoring their collective expertise. Wondering if the energy to solve the homeless situation was dissipating, Currie tried to calm things down by saying that the work of solving homelessness had to carry on into the future.

Today, the CAC with 10 sectors - Aboriginal, addictions, community voices, families, immigrants, interagency, mental health, seniors and special needs, women fleeing violence and youth - has as its vision, "Ending homelessness in Calgary through community empowerment." With its collective voice it still recommends direction and strategy to the foundation; in fact it is the main channel of communication between service providers and the CHF. It also provides ways for agencies serving similar clients to network and collaborate. However, many prominent members wonder out loud if its present form hasn't outlived its usefulness and whether it should be demolished and then resurrected in a way that more accurately reflects the current realities in Calgary.

Smith had raised the possibility of a premier's roast as early as June 1998, but it wasn't until 2000 that Ralph Klein felt the heat with his eminence grise, Rod Love, as one of the roasters. The aim was to raise both funds and awareness with the public. Despite his man-of-the-people persona, Klein wasn't looking forward to the dinner - he hated that kind of thing, recalls Verhun, but in the end he loved it. It was downstairs in the Convention Centre and the assembled company had paid a chunk of change to attend and had donned their black ties.

As they sat at the tables, they wondered what delectable items would be on the menu. Suddenly a procession of chefs appeared bearing trays. "What the heck?" thought Verhun. Then the head chef spoke, telling the guests that for everyone gathered, a similar dinner would be served to an equal number of people in need. When the lids came off, the meal proved to be turkey with all the trimmings and the person at each table whose birthday was closest to Ralph's was elected to carve. "It was very, very powerful," says Verhun.



So successful was the premier's dinner that the tradition continues to this day as a fundraiser for the CHF. While the menu has varied with dishes like meatloaf making an appearance, the principle was always to cater to those who might have gone hungry as well as those with cash to spare. The first year, tickets cost \$175 and it netted about \$68,000; the best year ever was 2004 when tickets jumped to \$200 and the event netted \$202,000. Over time, it morphed into a two-hour cocktail party, springing busy Calgarians for the evening and also reducing overheads.



**Alison Redford joins The Heebeee-jeebees on stage at the premier's house-warming party in 2011.**

In 2011 with tickets now up to \$250, it netted \$145,000 and the highlight of the evening was new Premier Alison Redford seizing the mike and singing with The Heebeee-jeebees. Total net gains for the 10 years are approximately \$1,337,600 and untold publicity and awareness.

By the 1998 December board meeting, headway had been made in several areas:

- A total of 44 families had been helped with damage deposits to the tune of \$15,150 and \$546 had been repaid.
- Amy Makar of Turner Valley made the first unsolicited donation to the CHF; the records do not state the amount.
- A planning workshop organized by Verhun had come up with five goals – expanding community awareness, increasing the housing supply, Aboriginal services, implementing the plan and creating an umbrella system.
- Burnet Duckworth and Palmer LLP were offering \$100,000 in cash and a further \$100,000 in legal services over five years.

- The city was about to expropriate land for the Calgary Drop-In & Rehab Centre's new building and the Salvation Army, Fresh Start Recovery (an addiction treatment centre) and the Boys and Girls Club of Calgary's Avenue 15 were all seeking funds to expand their work. At that time, the emphasis was on emergency housing, although by the middle of 2000 Currie was openly wondering how to raise money for housing.
- In September Art Smith served notice he would step down when a suitable replacement was found.

Ruth Ramsden-Wood, president of the United Way at that time, says one of the big hurdles was the lack of public awareness and the general attitude that "they" deserved to be on the street. The CHF board was always struggling to raise awareness and to combat NIMBY. The issue arose meeting after meeting as the board grappled with ingrained attitudes of the public and politicians. When Currie approached various oil companies in 2002 for sponsorships to a fundraising event, a typical reply was, "Tell them to get jobs!"

Ramsden-Wood remembers a Calgary politician, who has been both an alderman and an MLA, asking, "Why don't they get a job?" completely oblivious of all the possible barriers like physical or mental health issues, substance use, or post-traumatic stress disorder. "I went to Cash Corner and picked one up and hired him," said the politician, who then recounted how the man had told him that he was, in fact, very wealthy and didn't need work. Therefore, the politician concluded, everyone experiencing homelessness was like that, said Ramsden-Wood.

"I said to him, 'Do you not think that you had one with a mental illness?' He took it at face value, which was a very prevalent attitude. We had to do a lot about awareness that people were burned out by their lives; it took a lot to get those points across. This whole episode was so symbolic of what we were dealing with."

By 2003, the CHF was working with Trinity Place Foundation of Alberta to build a home for "hard to house" seniors in Victoria Park. To all intents and appearances, it was an excellent location – close to downtown and to services. It was expected to free up beds both at the Drop-In Centre and in the Calgary Health Region. Their hopes were dashed when the Calgary Stampede Board and

the community said, “Not in our backyard, thank you very much.” Another site was later found in Manchester where there were no neighbours to fret about its existence.

Although the city had conducted homeless counts in 1992 (447), in 1994 (461), in 1996 (615) and again in 1998 (988), at around the same time as the *Community Action Plan* was released, it was unclear who the people experiencing homelessness were and why they were. Brian Olson, vice-president of TransCanada Pipelines, was about to change that. He started on the CHF’s funding committee, but was quickly elected to the board in September 1999. “I want to help,” he said, “but who are the homeless?” Good question. “I couldn’t believe that nobody had figured it out,” says Sharyn Brown.

Olson realized it would be much easier to raise funds if the public could identify with the cause and that the CHF itself wasn’t sufficiently appealing to unzip wallets. Towards the end of 1999 Olson and Kay Wong, a social planner with the city, spent a lot of time working collaboratively with the agencies to get a better picture of the Calgary homeless situation, as well as how best to break it down into sectors with the CHF taking a lead facilitative role.

As the resulting report, *Housing Our Homeless*, said, “The absence of a consensus on the number



City of Calgary social planner Kay Wong talks with George Coppus.

of people who experience homelessness has made it difficult to address the problem. This knowledge, including the characteristics of the different categories of homeless people, is required in order to describe the problem to the public, the government and potential funders.”

The report defined eight different sectors: single men and women; mental health; addictions; youth; seniors; Aboriginal people; women fleeing violence; and families. The authors interviewed the leading agencies as well as the city, and a couple

of provincial initiatives like the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC), and Human Resources and Development Canada (HRDC), asking how many they served, how long the waiting lists were, the numbers of men compared to women and so on. As the numbers started to come in, Wong and Brown tabulated them for each sector to come up with totals. Although not exactly scientific and some agencies were reluctant to participate, it did provide a baseline. "It was the clearest picture we had at that time," Brown says.

The 32-page *Housing Our Homeless* was released on March 23, 2000. The very next day, the Future Search 2 conference was held to propel the community vision forward. Even at that point the foundation was able to say, "Calgary is unique in Canada in terms of the approach that has been taken – bringing together the not-for-profit, the private and the public sectors to work collaboratively on solutions." As one commentator said, "We had created this body and it was starting to be whispered about across the country." The report not only identified problems and gaps in services, it also listed solutions and goals that it believed were achievable with the commitment of front-line agencies, governments and fundraisers. The report did its job because several sizable donations were prompted by the information it contained. In fact, the Salvation Army's Reg Newbury said that *Housing Our Homeless* was a stroke of genius, in part because it helped bring agencies together.

Back in Ottawa, the federal government in the face of the public outcry was beginning to look at housing again and its role in alleviating the very visible presence of homelessness on the streets of the nation. One of the things that spurred this along was a national symposium organized by the City of Toronto in 1999. A number of Calgary delegates attended and worked closely with others to put housing back on the federal agenda. In Calgary alone, City Commissioner Paul Dawson estimated that 3,100 people were in urgent need of housing.

"Something had to happen on a national scale," says Brown. What happened initially was the announcement in 1999 of the National Housing Initiative (NHI) designed as a three-year, \$753-million initiative to "help ensure community access to programs, services and support for alleviating homelessness in communities in all provinces and territories." According to

government documents, the initial phase focused on both meeting the short-term emergency needs of people, and the need for a community-driven planning process to address longer-term needs and prevention.

Claudette Bradshaw, the down-to-earth, bilingual MP for Moncton-Riverview-Dieppe who had been elected to Parliament in 1997, was rapidly made minister of labour. Bradshaw had always had a strong interest in the welfare of marginalized people. In 1974 she started the Moncton Headstart Early Family Intervention Centre and had worked in non-profits for many years, so she was familiar with the degradations of poverty. In March 1999, in addition to handling labour issues, she also took on the position of federal coordinator of homeless initiatives, in other words overseeing the NHI. In 2004, then-Prime Minister Paul Martin demoted Bradshaw in a cabinet shuffle and the coordinator's job disappeared, never to be seen again.

Federal funds were available through the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative. To be eligible, a community had to "promote a coordinated series of programs and initiatives aimed at reducing homelessness." In order to receive funds, it had to demonstrate that the proposal qualified under a community plan, that it was part of a coordinated effort and that it was a priority for that community.

Never slow on the uptake, the CHF quickly realized that cash would start to trickle out of Ottawa again for the municipalities to develop programs. With a lot of coaching by Gerry Thompson of HRDC, the foundation quickly made a successful pitch to be the agent to deliver the funding in Calgary. But the CHF still had to demonstrate that it could meet the requirements stipulated by Ottawa. Partly to meet these requirements, the CHF enlisted the aid of two academics, Kathleen Cairns and Bryan Hiebert, who developed a model that was unprecedented in Canada and drew a lot of interest from other cities like Montreal. By the end of the day, Thompson was able to report that Ottawa was using Calgary as a "road test" for their funding program.

Already in Calgary various groups like the United Way, some government departments and some civil foundations were meeting to discuss how to pool resources and how to disperse funding in the most effective way. In 2001 the network was expanded to

include the federal government and was called the Funders Table, providing one-stop shopping for agencies. Agencies were divided into eight sectors depending on their client base and each sector worked with a committee of representative organizations. Proposals were developed and submitted to the appropriate sector that vetted them to see how well they addressed the needs. Each sector then took its qualifying proposals to the over-all sector council that rated them according to the needs of the city. Recommendations were then made to the Community Action Committee, which took them to the Funders Table.

Hawkesworth says, "This process was described as collaborative rather than competitive because decisions were made on community need. There was no quota for projects from sectors. If, for example, community need was highest in the mental health sector, a predominance of funding approvals was given for proposals in that area."

While the community liked the idea, says Brown, it was a bit slow to jump on board, but the plan went ahead anyway. The CHF was now chugging along on \$40,000 to \$60,000 from fundraising, \$1 million from the province and \$2 million from the NHI. Smith himself was active in hitting up his friends and business colleagues for donations. Lorraine Melchior, former executive director of CUPS, recalls him taking umbrage at a cheque that didn't meet his expectations. He returned it saying that "they had to belly up to the bar." While Smith could deliver an epistolary punch, he could also be graceful in acknowledgement of services rendered beyond expectations. When Melchior retired at the end of 2003, he sent her a letter, saying in part, "I know of no one who has contributed so much to the social problems of our city (a little unfortunately put, but the intent is clear) and I am delighted that there will be some public recognition of your service. I will be there on September 29 to join many others in thanking you for a huge contribution."

Much swayed by reports that many people experiencing homelessness were actually working and that a few weeks of temporary, affordable shelter would be sufficient to put them on their financial feet, \$50,000 each went to the Drop-In and the Salvation Army to build new premises, both situated at the east end of downtown. The former's development was delayed, much to Executive Director Dermot Baldwin's chagrin, by squatters on

the site where he wanted to expand, causing some caustic comment about the shelter creating new clients. While the developments went ahead, Claudette Bradshaw was a frequent and cheery visitor to the city, as happy to dispense hugs as cheques. Other agencies and those experiencing homelessness questioned whether bigger and better shelters were the answer. In private, shelter clients jeered at the notion of mats on the floor substituting for their own home, but in public remained silent worried that they would be barred from their one avenue of warmth, though not necessarily safety. The Drop-In's attractive-looking building became known in some quarters as the Hilton on the Bow and the Homeless Hilton, others tastelessly joked it should be called Seizure's Palace. Both opened in the fall of 2001 with operating agreements with the provincial government.

This was to be a potent signal of federal thinking. Even though Calgary's *Community Action Plan* had clearly identified increasing the amount of affordable, safe housing as its No. 1 priority, as had many other jurisdictions, that was not where Ottawa was putting its money. "Rather funding was directed to homeless support services and programs. The federal initiative enabled certain local projects to qualify for funding, but it did not allow housing construction projects to qualify," wrote Bob Hawkesworth in his MA thesis, *Relationships to Alleviate Homelessness*.

Meanwhile, 2002 was a busy year in Calgary with *Removing Barriers: A Listening Circle Consultation Report* issued by the Calgary Urban Aboriginal Initiative and a City of Calgary homeless count undertaken on May 17 reported there was a total of 1,737 people on the street, 441 more than in 2000. These figures could not include those who were couch-surfing or others who had a roof, but not what most of us would call a home. The count was slowly evolving. In 1992, it was merely the numbers who had spent the night in an identified facility or outside in a small part of the downtown core; in 2008 it included information on age, gender and other pertinent details. On top of that, information was also collected about the various facilities – their maximum capacity, how many beds were filled and the numbers turned away that night and why.

In June 2002 the Yakback conference for youth experiencing homelessness was held at what is now Hotel Arts, but then a less plush establishment. The young people were articulate and

enthusiastic to identify the holes in the system and the inadequacies of the shelters that purportedly existed to serve their needs. It was hard to hear teens telling any adult who cared to listen that the safest place for them was a sheltered nook in the exterior of the Convention Centre (the same building where the premier's roast was held), or that the only place where they felt accepted was with their peers in the city's back alleys. They pointed out that often they were invisible, especially if they were lucky enough to couch-surf. It was evident there was a significant number of teenagers for whom home was not a safe place. Although they went through a process of identifying priorities, it appeared that there was little follow-up, confirming some of the participants' cynicism.

Two years later, however, the CHF took on youth homelessness as a major issue because there were 650 enumerated in the 2004 count. There were twice as many males as females because many girls trade sex for shelter and so were missed. It was also believed that existing programs supported only 10 per cent of the young people in need.

When Art Smith – whose forte was starting organizations – stepped down as chair of the CHF in March 1999, he handed the reins to Currie. If Smith was the spark, Currie was the burning coal that kept the fire alight. Looking back, Currie says, "At that time, a great number of the so-called movers and shakers had come from very modest backgrounds in rural prairie provinces and the same could be said of those special leaders in the oilpatch from Oklahoma and Texas." He himself had been educated at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, located in an area suffering from severe economic hardship. Whether early hardship influenced the business crowd or not, Currie believed there was a lot they could contribute to the cause. He adds, "My international experience in the oil business and on some international committees showed me the evidence that business people in the U.S., if given encouragement to get involved, were making extraordinary breakthroughs in social issues."

Currie continued the tradition of bringing in able business people with specific skills like Darcy Verhun and George Coppus, an expert in resolving business issues using something called Systems Dynamics and Complexity Theory. As the CHF commissioned more research, Coppus led a report put out in 2002 entitled



*Societal Cost of Homelessness.* The same year, Kathleen Cairns and Helen Gardiner, both at the University of Calgary, produced the *Calgary Homelessness Study*. The 2002 study updated information contained in an earlier report by mapping the homelessness system in Calgary; identifying how individuals and families move through it; identifying gaps; and developing a profile of the population at risk of becoming homeless by fingerling the factors that might precipitate homelessness for individuals and families.

For a while Currie, “an unsung hero” of the CHF, was board chair, executive director, president and CEO of the foundation, says Verhun, all without any compensation. But by September 1999, Currie was at home resting after a heart attack and Peter Wallis became acting chair for a few months. Simultaneously, a search started for an executive director. The Kahanoff Foundation put up \$150,000 over three years to finance the position on condition the CHF raised the balance elsewhere. A diverse group of 125 applicants applied and at the December meeting it was announced that Terry Roberts was the new executive director. Along with the federal government investing money in Calgary, it also seconded a person to the CHF office, so the numbers of staff were slowly increasing.

Without a doubt new research and procedures were putting Calgary on the map as a leader in homelessness solutions, but at the street level, the numbers continued to rise and hope amongst those using the shelters was dwindling. This was captured in Linda Pratt’s challenge to more affluent Calgarians, “How would you like to spend a month at the Drop-In, sleep on a mat, eat the food there, and put up with the (cigarette) smoke?”

## Doug Traves

Doug Traves wheeled through detox three times at Alpha House and rehab twice at Sunrise Native Addictions Services, all to no avail. He recalls a counsellor who told him that she knew as soon as clients came through the door if they were serious or not. “To her, I was definitely not serious.”

The counsellor was right in that moment, but in the end she was wrong – very wrong.

In 2007, Traves left Toronto and everything that it meant in terms of homes, cars, boats and snowmobiles and where the closest he came to homelessness was reading articles in the Toronto Star. The first 18 months in Calgary with “no wife, no loans and no responsibility” were like constant Christmas. Traves did temp jobs in construction “where there was always booze and other nefarious substances,” so it didn’t really matter if he succumbed to the party spirit and didn’t show for work.

Then came the downturn of 2008. Not only was there no work, but also his back was causing him a lot of grief.

After losing his apartment, he established a routine, picking bottles and cigarette butts between Alpha House and the bottle depot on 10th Avenue S.W., most days making the cash for the 18 beers he thought he needed to survive – “12 wasn’t good enough.”

There were times when he went for stretches of up to 20 days without eating except for the lone doughnut, because he had reached the state where food repulsed him.

Then one day a force not to be denied came searching for him in the form of Alpha House housing coordinator Allison Flegg. Traves was sitting quietly in one of his haunts when she grabbed him by the ear and pulled him to his feet.

Flegg took him to Alpha House and said, “You’re staying here tonight.” Nineteen days later, he left a sober man and, better yet, he moved into his own place in a housing program. “I’ve decked it out real nice,” says Traves.

Besides a home, Traves also acquired a companion, a huge orange cat called Buddha who shadows him everywhere. “He died and went to heaven when he got me and I died and went to heaven when I got him.”

Traves credits the support he has received from Alpha House and Dr. Rita Dahlke at CUPS for helping him forge a new life and stick to it. “They bent over backwards to help and I will not go back and have them shake their heads. I won’t embarrass myself or them,” he says.

It hasn’t all been plain sailing. Addictions don’t magically disappear overnight. In the first 15 months Traves was housed, he used beer for 20 of those days in three different bouts. There’s lots of times when the beer store half a block away issues a siren call.

However, the bus stop is only another half block further on. Instead of stopping for a 12-pack, Traves hops on the bus down to Alpha House where he is now a stalwart volunteer.

He breaks from his job for a minute, looks around the cavernous main floor, and comments, “I could never have stayed sober if I were living here.”

### SOURCES

Interviews: Sharyn Brown, John Currie, Bob Hawkesworth, Walter Hossli, Lorraine Melchior, Stacey Petersen, Ruth Ramsden-Wood, Andrea Ranson, Darcy Verhun

Calgary Homeless Foundation board minutes, 1999-2002

Calgary Homeless Foundation, *Housing Our Homeless, A Stakeholder Consultation, Assessing Shelter Needs in Calgary*, March 23, 2000

Community and Neighbourhood Services, City of Calgary, 2008, *The Biennial Count of Homeless Persons in Calgary: Frequently Asked Questions*

Hawkesworth, Bob, *Relationships to Alleviate Homelessness*, MA thesis, University of Calgary, 2003

Petersen, Stacey, Fresh Start Recovery, *Community Action Committee – History Notes*

Petersen, Stacey, Fresh Start Recovery, *CAC History PowerPoint*

Scott, Susan, Calgary Drop-In and Rehabilitation Society, 2000, *No Fixed Address, Tales From the Street*

Smith, Art, private letter to Lorraine Melchior, 2003

Verhun, Darcy, fax to John Currie re: Calgary Homeless Foundation, December, 2008





## WHAT'S GOING ON?

The Wednesday before Victoria Day, 2000, when Albertans had nothing more serious on their minds than what the weather would be like over the long weekend, the Liberal opposition leader decided to use the Legislature Question Period to duke it out with the government about what it was doing, or not doing, to alleviate the homeless situation in Calgary.

"People are living in shanties built in public parks with no food and are eating by trapping wildlife and pets. Calgary is a tragic tale of two cities in one – for the prosperous and for the poor," observed Nancy MacBeth, MLA for Edmonton McClung. "Given that this government claims to have a policy on homelessness, what is this policy doing to put the Calgary homeless into homes and food in their stomachs?"

Premier Ralph Klein retorted, "This is probably one of the most aggressive municipalities in the country relative to addressing the needs and the plight of the homeless. The Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF), as I understand it, was one of the first agencies and might still be one of the first agencies of its kind to coordinate all of the activities of the homeless in Calgary."

Both MacBeth and Klein were correct. The situation in Calgary was indeed dire, but the newly formed CHF was forging ahead, even if it was dealing with a Gordian knot.

"We kept looking for the one piece of string we could pull to unravel all the tangles," says John Currie, president and CEO of the CHF from 2000 to 2004. "We kept trying to find the one big string and we didn't."

There were just too many threads that required attention and they tried to unravel them all at once.

The CHF had set up alliances with the United Way of Calgary and Area, the three levels of government (all of which loaned it staff), and the business and faith communities. The CHF had sponsored a fair amount of research and come up with a collaborative granting process. It had become the body for dispersing federal and provincial funds in Calgary, but still it was focussed on shelter rather than housing. A small initiative called the Housing Registry Network with a website, [www.lowcostrent.org](http://www.lowcostrent.org), had been established to direct people to affordable units. In the end, just over 1,100 people found housing through it before it was handed over to CUPS at the end of 2004. With the grave shortage of housing, the registry basically became an extra outlet for the Calgary Herald classifieds; many of the rental units were far from cheap, causing some frustration to those trying to use it.

With both the Salvation Army and the Calgary Drop-In & Rehab Centre opening new buildings in September 2001, board chair John Currie's mind was turning towards transitional and affordable housing. This issue was to pre-occupy the board off and on over the years. Then the board began to discover that smaller agencies did not have the expertise to make funding applications, so they promptly organized assistance, hiring qualified staff to help out. There was also a lack of understanding of Aboriginal history, culture and issues. By the 2004 count, only three per cent of the city's population was Aboriginal, but they comprised more than 25 per cent of the homeless population.

George Calliou, a board member who also sat on the Aboriginal Standing Committee, reported in 2000 that a strategic plan needed to be developed for Aboriginal people, with an awareness of their cultural views and issues, and an understanding of their requirements. He suggested a cross-cultural training session, which was held in November. Currie found it a valuable experience, but because it was put on at short notice not many people were able to attend. "Being aware and understanding the difficulties (for Aboriginals) is a duty of board members," he said. When Calliou left the board, his position was taken over by Carrie Neilson, an Aboriginal issue strategist with the City of Calgary.

By the end of 2000, there was another sign of how vulnerable

some people were. Utility and fuel costs were rising fast and putting people on minimal incomes in jeopardy of losing their homes. According to Lorraine Melchior of CUPS, 25 per cent of the 80 families they had assisted so far that winter needed financial help to clear up utility-bill arrears. When Currie wondered out loud if the foundation could bring these concerns to the province, it was suggested that they needed to know more about the homeless problem. A small group including Currie, executive director Terry Roberts and Sam Koliass, the top person at Boardwalk Properties, was detailed to look into the situation. In 2001 it became apparent the Stampede was about to expand into Victoria Park, which would close down many low-rent properties, making the situation even more urgent.

In another effort to discover who the people experiencing homelessness were, George Coppus, a specialist in planning, business process improvement and organizational performance, worked with a group of volunteers and MIT students through the first half of 2001 to try and get a better picture of them and their needs. Coppus decided there were two kinds of homeless – the chronic and the transient. The former were those who kept recycling through the system, the latter were those who with minimal assistance could overcome their problems and move on. The challenge is to find a way to manage efforts so they can have a positive effect on homelessness, said Coppus, adding that successful programs will drive down the rate of chronic homelessness. He recommended viewing agencies as a “processing system” and that the board put more emphasis on influencing public policy; conducting more research; and establishing standards.

Coppus was way ahead of his time seeing homelessness as a flow, noting the points of time people enter the system and leave it. His early work has continued to inform the CHF and to help the organization understand the mechanics of homelessness. Contrary to what everyone thought at the time, Coppus did not believe immigration into Calgary from other parts of the country was the main problem. He put his finger on the fact the lowest 10 per cent



**George Coppus and a group of students and volunteers studied the homeless “system.”**

of income earners were becoming poorer, but the rest of us were becoming richer and snapping up housing. The resulting demand for real estate meant that affordable housing was disappearing from the scene.

On May 31, 2002, the CHF board voted the Calgary Community Land Trust (CCLT) into existence under the leadership of board member Brian O'Leary. It held its first informal meeting on September 5, was incorporated in the summer of 2003 and officially launched in September of that year. The objective of the CCLT was to provide affordable housing, or as it said in its business plan, "The CCLT will be used as a mechanism to hold title to land dedicated for solving homelessness and affordable housing issues identified by the CHF from time to time." The idea was that the CCLT would hold title to and manage land that would be leased on a long-term basis to other agencies. The CCLT would neither develop projects, nor manage them.

The year 2003 was stormy, partly because the provincial homeless portfolio was transferred from Human Resources and Employment to the underfunded Alberta Seniors on April 1; some might be forgiven for finding significance in that date. Funding began to run out and Seniors Minister Stan Woloshyn was reluctant to loosen the purse strings. To emphasize the dire situation the shelters reluctantly said they would no longer fund the extra mats they had laid out nightly and would even turn latecomers away. Some of the cash-strapped minister's criticisms were superficially fair. Despite a 130-per-cent increase in funding the problem continues to grow, he said, asking why there were no sustainable solutions. Woloshyn also wondered why more of the working homeless, at times up to 50 per cent of the shelter population, couldn't be moved into housing. He failed to realize that affordable housing wasn't available, particularly in Calgary.

When shelter representatives sat down individually to discuss their concerns with Woloshyn, they came away frustrated and disappointed. The Drop-In reported that he didn't appear to hear any of their concerns, or even note their fundraising achievements. The Mustard Seed left with the impression that Woloshyn believed the crisis was all the fault of the shelters and that it was up to them to find a solution.

The same year, the city released a brochure, *Affordable Housing*



*Calgary*, that pointed out rents had risen 35 per cent since 1995 and a quarter of all households spent more than 30 per cent of their income on housing and that anyone on minimum wage flat-out couldn't afford market housing. As "Matthew" quoted in the brochure said, "I can't afford a place that costs \$600 and still get food, transportation and pay other bills. If there were more jobs that paid better, it would be easier to afford things."

Some of the board found it hard to believe the report's figure that 13,255 households had an annual income of less than \$10,000, but Carlene Donnelly pointed out that at her agency, CUPS, they were seeing 3,000 families who spent 75 per cent of their income on shelter. "We do not have an availability problem, we have an income problem,"



**Carlene Donnelly, with CUPS,  
and Bob Hawkesworth.**

suggested one board member. This was backed up by a Toronto-Dominion Bank research paper that showed Alberta had the lowest social benefits in Canada – another cause for concern among the CHF board. On top of financial concerns, there was an imbalance in mental health funding. One-third of the population requiring mental health services resided in Calgary, but only one-seventeenth of provincial mental health funding was directed at this city.

It was no wonder that panhandling had become an issue, especially as crystal meth, cocaine and crack were starting to catch on in a big way. More people needed more money to support their habit. The Calgary Downtown Business Association began to mount a very aggressive advertising campaign with graphic visuals that appeared in local publications and cinemas in the fall of 2005. It urged the public to give their spare change to agencies, rather than placing it in an outstretched hand. Richard White of the association told the board that donating to panhandlers helped keep them on the street and in the grips of their addiction. What the campaign didn't take into consideration was the chronic shortage of detox

beds and then the hiatus before getting into long-term rehab with the inevitable consequence of the person returning to the streets and using again.

As Currie said to the board, "It is very clear that we have not solved the problem of homelessness. Although amazing and good work has been done in the past five years, we are still just one week away from a major shelter crisis." There was a lot of talk about breaking down departmental silos to make the provincial system more workable, as had occurred in the domestic violence field where Minister of Children's Services Iris Evans had coaxed government departments to collaborate with each other. Despite many conversations with ministers, and even with the premier, the silo walls remained steadfastly impermeable in the case of homelessness.

In November 2003, the CHF published the *Calgary Community Plan, 2004-2008, Building Paths Out of Homelessness*. It too acknowledged the need for low-rent housing, although its mandate was to reduce, not to end homelessness. It said that Calgary had 13,875 units of non-market housing when various sources like Calgary Housing Company and Private Landlord Rent Supplement Program units were totted up. But this still left a lot of people out in the cold. "Building new transitional and non-market housing is an essential part of the solution," the plan said, having analyzed the situation, assessed the needs, and laid out goals and implementation strategies. It had 10 specific projects for increasing the supply of non-market housing in the face of the growing numbers – at that time 32.5 per cent every two years.

"We knew in the long term it (the answer) had to be affordable housing," says Currie, who was always trying to find ways to "get people off mats." Kay Wong, with the City of Calgary, had estimated that it would take \$1.5 billion to satisfy the city's housing requirements. "With those projections, we knew the CHF couldn't solve the problem and we felt that government had to step up," says Currie, but with governments dragging their financial feet, the foundation had no option but to focus on shelters, transition housing and lobbying for more action.

At one point Currie made it his personal mission to boost affordable housing, enlisting Art Smith to talk to provincial politicians to try and convince them that the lack of cheaper rental

units was a serious issue and that the province needed to fund more units. The CHF board minutes for April 2001, say: "Although the foundation does not have the power to affect change on its own, Mr. Smith has been encouraged to push as hard as he can." Despite not being officially permitted to lobby, the CHF continued to work hard with federal, provincial and municipal politicians to educate them. For example, within five or six weeks of Dave Bronconnier being elected mayor in October 2001, Terry Roberts was in his office urging that two per cent of each new urban development be devoted to affordable housing.

To the south, then-president George Bush had vowed to end chronic homelessness and reports about 10-year plans and housing-first models were beginning to trickle out of the United States. Currie, who by this time had been involved with various initiatives for about 10 years, knew they "would be the best solution," that housing should be a basic human right for all. Representing Calgary on the Downtown Business Associations' international organization, he and Roberts decided to audit results coming out of Seattle, New York, Washington, DC, and other cities that were dealing with overwhelming numbers due in part to Vietnam veterans finding themselves on the streets. By 2002 Roberts and several others were off to Washington for a conference describing US initiatives to date.

In 2003, Calgary was chosen with five US cities to participate in the International Downtown Association (IDA) homelessness technical assistance program, a process to engage local leaders in a review of a city's homeless policies and programs. Most of the work was done in March with a community forum involving about 60 local service providers, public officials, business representatives and others, site visits and a round-table dinner discussion. The panellists were impressed by the community spirit and the common belief that social problems could be solved. The report, issued in June, had some constructive comments about omissions and found fault with an unvoiced but prevalent philosophy – care rather than cure.

Other observations and recommendations included:

- A caution against agencies spreading themselves too thin by becoming all things to all people when this could be better achieved by strategic alliances between agencies.

- A serious lack of services for Aboriginal people, women and families.
- A need for an immediate unifying vision and guiding principles “that provide a framework within which the public, private and non-profit sectors can achieve the breakthroughs that are now needed.”
- Part of this “vision” should put an emphasis on “curing” homelessness which could lead to breakthroughs and a reduction in numbers.
- Enhanced provincial and federal support and participation.
- Higher expectations of clients to encourage a more rapid exit out of homelessness with fewer “relapses,” with the comment that this approach was working well in other cities.
- The creation of a non-profit housing development corporation to provide the homeless with affordable supportive housing. They noted that “pushing people out into the competitive housing market too early without supportive services can lead to unnecessary relapses.”

All good stuff, but provincial money was the key, says Currie. The report, which looks like a precursor to the 10 Year Plan, fell on deaf ears. A copy of the report was sent to Premier Klein, who passed it on to Woloshyn and that was the last anyone heard of it.

Currie also looked at what had happened to the residents of Toronto’s Tent City. Situated in downtown near the waterfront, people either built shelters, or brought tents. Some managed to operate computers and watch television by illegally tapping into the city’s power grid. While there was some crime in the encampment, some of the residents said they felt safer there than in shelters. However, the land belonged to Home Depot and, inevitably, the company decided it wanted it back on the pretext of constructing a big-box store, even though the Ontario Municipal Board had ruled against situating a store there. In September 2002 Home Depot sent in private security guards supported by the Toronto Police Service to evict the residents. What interested Currie was that soon afterwards Toronto introduced rent supplements and with that, 115 residents of Tent City were successfully supported in their own housing. “It was a major Canadian experience,” he says.

Meanwhile, problems were piling up in Calgary. The main

shelters, especially the Drop-In and The Seed, were beginning to feel uncomfortable with the funding structure. They said their voice had been diminished as the focus was moving away from absolute homelessness to transitional housing and that they wanted to work directly with the funders. There also appeared to be resentment over the fact the CHF had become a major source for information on homeless issues. To deal with what Currie termed “the serious tension,” the board tried to set up meetings with the directors of the three main shelters. The Seed and the Drop-In withdrew from the granting process, only to be told by the Alberta government that money would continue to flow through the CHF and the Community Granting Process. It became apparent, too, that the shelters blamed the foundation for the provincial funding difficulties, rather than the province. The shelters also took issue with the United Way, which in 2004 stated its priorities were families and prevention of homelessness.

In 2004, it was decided to separate the positions of board chair from president and CEO of the foundation. Roberts assumed the latter two positions, leaving Currie with the chairperson’s hat. When Currie stepped down in 2005, the CHF had handed out \$100 million to 65 projects and developed the land trust and Homeco to help tackle the housing issue. But Currie still knew these responses, if not exactly Band-aids, were at best splints for an ailing society. “We brought this to the government a number of times without success,” he says. Several themes thread through the board minutes: one is the sense of frustration at the difficulty in finding housing for people, another is the continuing efforts to bring the three levels of government together on housing issues, and a third is the sad disbelief that no matter what the board did, the numbers continued to rise.

The lack of success was all too evident on the streets. Tim Hearn, president of Imperial Oil from 2002 to 2008, moved the company to Calgary in 2005. While they were building their new home, Hearn and his wife Susan lived downtown. They had seen nothing like the mass of humanity on the street here, although they had lived in Toronto, Houston, Singapore and Dallas. “I was shocked by the extent and by the numbers,” he recalls. “It was so much in front of your face. It was very unCalgarylike and not consistent with everything else.”

Over at the United Way, whose offices were located across the street from “Cash Corner” where men have traditionally lined up for casual jobs, Ruth Ramsden-Wood, president and CEO, was delighted when Art Smith formed the Calgary Homeless Foundation. Frustrated that by itself the United Way didn’t have the muscle to get the attention of the city and the province, she knew Smith was famously friends with Premier Ralph Klein. A couple of years later when Smith stepped down, she was equally happy that John Currie took over “with a passion and a vengeance.”

The first few years of the CHF, Ramsden-Wood says, were spent documenting and surveying the lamentable picture. She recounts with frustration how the province was closing down mental health facilities, turning people onto the streets and then failing to build the promised community supports, instead ploughing money into refurbishing the Alberta Hospital Ponoka. “Thinking had to change,” she says, noting that through the premier’s roasts Ralph Klein had attracted a lot of attention to the problem, but that he hadn’t mobilized the province. “We were trying to educate the government that created it (the problem),” says Ramsden-Wood.

Around 2005 the United Way set up a small executive committee chaired by Dr. Kabir Jivraj that included Ramsden-Wood, a Calgary Chamber of Commerce representative, a communications expert and several other United Way employees. “How do we deal with this and take Calgarians on a journey getting under their skins so that we rid ourselves of the stereotypes and so that the community takes on the need to do something?” was the question they asked themselves. The answer, in part, was the “Drip Strategy,” or keeping up a steady trickle of myth-busting stories about homelessness in the media. “It took a lot to get the points across,” adds Ramsden-Wood who, having been principal of Louise Dean School for pregnant and parenting teens, had seen first hand how hard it is to struggle back from crippling abuse and trauma.

A few blocks away at City Hall, Mayor Dave Bronconnier couldn’t fail to notice the situation as homeless people, spilling out of the overcrowded shelters, used the washrooms for personal hygiene; sold and consumed drugs in Olympic Plaza; and wandered into the Central Library to find a quiet place to snooze, or to check the computers to find work and cheap accommodation, and to answer email from loved ones. He recalls Murray Nunns, head of

PennWest Explorations, phoning after he had moved his company to a new office to complain of his staff being harassed, saying it was a public safety issue. Ramsden-Wood and Eva Friesen, when she was CEO of the Calgary YWCA, were both on Bronconnier's tail to "do something." However, Bronconnier, in pitched battles with the province over various infrastructure funding issues, knew it would be a waste of time unless homelessness became a citizens' issue, embracing business, the faith institutions, academia, healthcare and social services. "It couldn't be a City of Calgary solution; it had to be a community-based solution," he says.

In the fall of 2006 Susan Brandt of Street Level Consulting was so concerned about the floods of people arriving here to find work, but unable to afford housing, that she fired off an email to 1,000 contacts across the country telling recipients, "Do not come to Calgary. There is nowhere to live."

She spoke of people who were fully employed and who were still living in their cars or on mats. "It's an experience that can crush the spirit." The email caused a flurry of media attention and CBC asked Brandt to do a commentary. She did not hold back. "We know the cost of emergency shelters is much greater than the cost of creating affordable supportive housing," she told listeners. "Now more than ever, our city must show strong leadership and take decisive action."

Still people kept on coming. In 2002, the count registered 1,737. By the end of that year, there was a crisis with the Drop-In, The Seed and the Salvation Army all operating way over capacity. In the case of the Drop-In, it was 170 people extra each night and



**The United Way of Calgary and Area's Ruth Ramsden-Wood helped spur politicians into action.**

there were safety, legal and financial concerns. The homeless count jumped to 2,597 in 2004, 3,436 in 2006 and two years later to 4,060. It was not a pretty picture with warehouses being opened across the city to shelter people so that Calgary was literally and figuratively warehousing the poor. Granted the number of facilities and agencies as well as the geographical areas surveyed had expanded over time, but as the city's 2008 Biennial Count of Homeless Persons said, "As a general trend, the growth of point-in-time homelessness still far exceeds overall population growth in Calgary."

And that was only a snapshot of who was counted on one given night. As the YWCA Calgary pointed out in its graphic report for 2006 entitled *Sometimes The Signs Aren't Always There*, the figure was "extremely underestimated when it comes to women." It talked about the many women and children at imminent risk of homelessness, including those who were living in abusive relationships, those in unsafe, substandard housing and those with insecure incomes. It also talked about the many women who couldn't be counted because they were couch-surfing with family or friends. The report quoted one anonymous woman who said, "I read in the news today. Seven hundred and sixty-six homeless women in the City of Calgary. Nobody asked me. Maybe they didn't know I was sleeping in a friend's basement with my three kids until I can find a place of my own. We don't have proper beds, but that's okay. I tell my kids it's like having a big slumber party every night. The two little ones think it's fun. I think. My older boy is just so quiet."

Meanwhile on the sidewalk, Emergency Medical Services (EMS) was taking note of the situation. It was not only costly in terms of ambulance trips, but also in the emotional impact on the people who continually had to treat what they called the "recidivist homeless population," or in the common vernacular, the "frequent flyers." Around 2002, Stephen Donaldson, deputy chief of EMS, started a mobile harm-reduction unit when the temperatures dropped. As a volunteer at Inn from the Cold and having trained Drop-In staff to use defibrillators, he was aware of the dangers of sub-zero weather. For two winters the unit transported people to the burgeoning numbers of satellite shelters and drove around looking for people sleeping rough.

In a leaflet, EMS described the health problems of the people



who used shelters for a year or more as “complex medical, mental and addiction disabilities” that are difficult to manage in shelters. “These individuals are among the highest-end utilizers of our emergency services and are often caught in the ‘revolving door’ of homelessness resulting from inappropriate discharge from public institutions back into homelessness.” According to their figures, 18 homeless people were responsible for 1,015 combined emergency responses in 2006. Of these, EMS attended on 671 occasions, resulting in 462 hospital visits with mean waiting times of 64.41 minutes. The cost to EMS was \$151,144.

Typical of these people was “Rob” who had a chronic alcohol addiction combined with hepatitis C. Due to having been beaten up in one, he was intimidated by shelters. Rob slept wherever he could – under bridges, beside fences, in office stairways and between apartment doorways. His health problems were numerous and frequently serious, including seizures and, not surprisingly, cirrhosis of the liver. After undergoing detox, he could never find a rehabilitation program that dovetailed with his release, so he frequently went back to panhandling along 16th Avenue N.W. It was the same when he was discharged from hospital. Once, the doctor with full knowledge that Rob had no address, said: “We will release you this afternoon with Percocet and antibiotics so that you can manage the cellulitis at home.”

“And on which park bench would that be, sir?” retorted Rob, whose wit didn’t always work in his favour.

To look after people like “Rob,” EMS formed the 24/7 City Centre Team (CCT) with 20 paramedics who had an understanding, training and interest in vulnerable populations and their issues like addictions, homelessness and mental health concerns. The objective was to streamline emergency responses in the city centre and to take better care of patients by building relationships with them, the agencies and businesses. When the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness was developed, Donaldson, who was on the prevention committee, said the CCT was wrapped into the plan, collaborating closely with agencies like Alpha House Society and CUPS to address the needs of this population.

In the face of growing numbers and increased pressures on agencies, it was small wonder an anonymous artist painted the words “Ground Zero” in bold capitals on the Riverside Avenue

sidewalk and the nearby pedestrian flyover where clients of the Drop-In, the country's largest shelter, often sit to sun themselves, or drink forms of alcohol more readily available at the drug store than the liquor store.

An obviously frustrated Dermot Baldwin, head of the Drop-In, told the board that the city drunk tank holds only eight to nine people, whereas his agency cares for up to 170 people a night with addictions and frequently they are dropped off by city police.

Some of the agencies, when they had time to look up from their work, were beginning to question what they were doing and where they were going – usually the answer was nowhere or even backwards.

Myron Krause, who had been out of the city for five years, was amazed when he returned to work at Calgary's Mustard Seed in 2006. "I was shocked by the numbers in the system who were working and couldn't make ends meet because of the cost of living," he says, adding that the staff was exhausted just trying to respond to the urgent needs. That fiscal year, 1,756 individuals stayed in The Seed's emergency beds, stretching the downtown facility to the seams. Krause, currently the executive director of The Seed in Calgary, and his staff began to ask a lot of questions. They had always believed they were trying to change lives for the better, not just maintain the status quo, so how could they address the problem in a more intentional way? They had people who had successfully come through their transitional housing program, but there was nowhere for them to go. What to do?

Carlene Donnelly, who succeeded Melchior at CUPS, was perturbed too. She said the direction appeared to be bigger shelters and a better plan. "I always thought it should have been the other way round. We didn't have a very good plan beyond feeding and clothing people. We were drowned in the volume." Donnelly was particularly worried about the number of chronically homeless singles and the high-risk families.

Quite fortuitously in the fall of 2006 an anonymous condo developer came to CUPS with a proposal. He had some empty apartments that would be available for six months ironically while they awaited conversion into condos. Could CUPS use them for temporary housing? The agency was supporting many homeless families who went to them in the morning after spending the night

at Inn from the Cold. All the families could stand a respite from the ceaseless nightly round of different churches, different volunteers and different facilities. It became a three-way project among CUPS, The Inn and Aspen Family Services. For eight months they supported 18 families, with a total of 24 adults and 35 children. Most had been homeless in the one- to three-month range; the longest seven years. Poverty was the biggest issue, but abuse and family violence, as well as substance use and mental health issues were also prevalent.

The parents told Liz McDougall and Brenda Simpson, the evaluators who conducted the assessment of the program, that living in shelters had had a number of “devastating” consequences including: increased difficulties in parenting; children’s health, behaviour and academic performance deteriorated; and parental stress, depression and disorientation rose due to the perpetual crisis and chaos of shelter life, the nightly moving and poor sleep. The *Housing Families Project*, as their report was called, showed that as the families led more settled lives, the parents were able to concentrate on longer-term goals such as employment, and the children’s health and behaviour also improved. A woman whose diabetes had accelerated due to the constant diet of ecclesiastical lasagne showed pronounced and rapid improvement. As one of the adults said, “I don’t feel like some crap homeless person now that I am housed.”

One of them, Tasha Brown, who found employment with CUPS, was able to save enough money through programs and grants at Momentum, an agency that helps families and individuals move out of poverty, to make a down-payment on a house a mere five years later. (See full story page 62.)

The three agencies learned a lot:

- Despite philosophical differences, agency collaboration not only worked but also proved beneficial if focussed on the needs of the families.
- Program flexibility and innovation allowed for individualized options.
- More housing advocates and locators were required.
- Rapid re-housing with different options for different needs.
- Homelessness is a children’s issue and it causes “substantial trauma, harm and damage to children.”

By June 2007, five of the families were housed in other arrangements, three had moved out of the city, one moved in with a partner, three had moved without notice and seven were on the waiting list for affordable housing through the Calgary Housing Authority, but were still in apartments, thanks to rental subsidies from CUPS. The assessment stated that homelessness, besides being a human rights issue and a failure of public policy, is at its heart a poverty issue. "For non-working families, the government of Alberta social assistance housing allowance (Alberta Works) is significantly below the average market rental costs. For the working poor, minimum wage incomes do not provide sufficient income to cover a family's basic needs (food, shelter, clothing)." McDougall and Simpson concluded that by not providing homeless children with the same opportunities as other children, they would likely be severely disadvantaged all their lives and that "a strong advocacy role is required with all levels of governments re: the need for affordable housing options for low-income families."

The project offered hope and stability to a handful of families, but it was a marked departure from conventional thought, that clients had to prove themselves worthy of housing rather than it being a basic right. Little did the participants – families, agencies, workers – know then that they were the advance party bearing good tidings for the city's homeless, along with residents at a couple of other projects like Peter Coyle House for seniors and Langin Place for men. However, before changes began, the statistics were still piling up and the casualties on the streets all too obvious.

Darcy Verhun, by now a partner with Conroy Ross Partners Ltd., who had been on the CHF board from the beginning, said they had always tried to figure out what the root cause of homelessness was in Calgary and the answer, they believed at first, was the lack of jobs. However from 2005 to 2006 unemployment was almost non-existent, down to 3.2 per cent and the number of people experiencing homelessness still increased. "What is it, what's our goal?" the board wondered. The tried to change tack, with the result, says Verhun, that they built a new plan in the hopes of ensuring every Calgarian would be safe and secure, but nothing seemed to happen. It was easy to get the public and politicians to understand output targets, like the number of shelter beds and the number of people sleeping in them, "but not so easy to get them

to think in terms of outcomes – that is until we landed on ending homelessness.”

The fall of 2006 brought it to a head. With 3,436 people utterly without a roof, it was a very obvious issue indeed. The vision then was that no one would freeze over the coming winter, but no plans had been hatched. After a bit of a scramble and a howl of NIMBY from the residents of Rosedale, the old Brick furniture store on 16th Avenue and Centre Street N. was acquired as a temporary shelter. One person who lived rough in the area observed, “Don’t they (the people of Rosedale) know we are in their back alleys every night collecting bottles? This way it will be more regulated.” In March, at the end of four months, the Brick closed down and was totally razed. It had been an expensive stop-gap with nothing to show at the end, says Wayne Stewart, who was poised to take over as executive director of the Calgary Homeless Foundation.

“Despite large efforts by a lot of different groups and the faith community, it was like a bucket brigade bailing the boat out, and we were losing ground,” adds Tim Hearn. “We knew we had to do something different.”



### **Tasha Brown**

Tasha Brown and her three children would be just as happy never to eat another sandwich, especially if it's got mustard in it. They consumed more than their fair share when they were homeless, staying by night at Inn from the Cold and hanging out by day at CUPS.

They were only without a home for three months in 2006, but it has had a profound influence on all four of them in much more important ways than their food preferences.

For starters, Brown vowed that she would never be homeless again and as of fall 2011 she joined the ranks of those who pay a mortgage, moving into her first real home. For her children, while they are much more open-minded about other people, they are also slow to trust – with good reason, says Brown.

The family arrived here from Saskatchewan when the vacancy rates were so low as to be non-existent, but Brown wanted to be closer to her brother and other family members. She was in her late 20s and her children, Delilah, Diante and Domanik were 10, 6 and 4 respectively.

Brown's childhood hadn't been easy. She was parcelled around to various foster families which, if nothing else, made her aware of bad parenting and, more importantly, good parenting skills. When her own babies arrived, she put this knowledge to work creating a loving, supportive family.

Little did she think she would have to maintain this tight-knit circle in a shelter.

Originally, Brown was going to share a house with her brother, but as the rental deal was almost sealed, the owner sold it. She then looked for another place and signed what appeared to be a lease, handing over her savings for the damage deposit. The night before moving day, she went to look at it. "An elderly couple came to the door and told me they had lived there for 20 years," she remembers.

Naturally, the damage deposit was nowhere to be found, nor were the people who had drawn up the bogus lease. Suddenly Brown, Delilah, Diante and Domanik knew the meaning of the phrase, "a paycheck away from being homeless." That cheque had been spent.

Her first night at the Inn, Brown woke up and looked over the partition in the darkened room to see a man's head stealthily creeping closer and closer. She half rose ready to protect the kids. "What are you doing?" a voice hissed. "What are you doing?" she hissed back. "I'm just the volunteer counting to make sure everyone's here."

"Man, I can't live like this," thought Brown through a cacophony of snores, snuffles and children crying. She knew they all had to be up and out by 5:30 am, but still it was hard to fall back to sleep.

With the stresses of a different church every night piled on top of the stress of being homeless, Brown watched other families fall apart.

"I could see people losing it and families breaking up. There was lots of yelling and kids starting to rule their parents." Although she tried to make life fun for her three children, Brown also made sure that they didn't walk all over her. Sometimes it was difficult when volunteers wanted to subvert her rules. The kids quickly sensed they could exploit this, but they didn't get very far.

At the beginning of October, families at CUPS were asked if they would speak to a reporter about the experience of being in a shelter at Thanksgiving. Only Brown volunteered. "How are people going to know if no one says anything?" she said.

A landlord in the process of converting rental apartments into condos read the Calgary Herald story and phoned CUPS saying he had a number of vacant apartments for six months. Would they like the apartments to house families? At first Brown turned down the offer because she didn't want to raise her kids' hopes only to have them dashed again.

The next two weeks were tough. Flu bugs hit the shelters with a vengeance and her kids started the "wave of puking" that took everyone by storm one night. There was no sleeping-in for sick children, there was no chicken noodle soup, and it was even difficult to provide a mother's comforting touch in a shelter.

In the end, Brown gambled and took one of the empty apartments. From there she moved into Calgary Housing, but her ultimate aim was her own place. With a full-time job at CUPS, it started to look more real. In 2009, she started the Fair Gains program at Momentum which helped her save money by matching her savings. After graduating, she received more help through the Owen Hart Owners' Program also run by Momentum, an organization that helps people move out of poverty.

Between both programs, Brown saved a 10-per-cent down-payment on a three-bedroom house and they moved in almost five years to the day they arrived at the Inn from the Cold. The feat is even more heroic, when you consider that she has taken in other at-risk children, including two brothers from Hungary who had been lured here by their father only to discover that he was living in a van.

"We are finally on the totem pole, on the grid. The kids and I can relax and start our lives," she says.

So, what does starting her life look like?

Brown is already saving for a truck. As it is, shopping for groceries is an all-day event and so many family activities would become more feasible with transportation. On the wider horizon Brown, who has written for various publications, would like to become an author and, as for the children, she says, "I would like them to get the education they need to do the careers they want to do – so they can pick whatever it is they want."



### SOURCES

Interviews: Dave Bronconnier, Susan Brandt, Sharyn Brown, Tasha Brown, John Currie, Stephen Donaldson, Carlene Donnelly, Lisa Garrisen, Tim Hearn, Kabir Jivraj, Ruth Ramsden-Wood, Darcy Verhun, Richard White

Brandt, Susan, Commentary for CBC, October 2006

CBC Radio, *Nowhere to Live in Calgary, Activist Tells Migrant Workers*, October 5, 2006

Calgary Homeless Foundation, *The Calgary Community Plan 2004-2008, Building Paths Out of Homelessness*, November 2003

Calgary Homeless Foundation, board minutes, 2000-2005

Hansard, Legislative Assembly of Alberta, May 17, 2000

International Downtown Association Technical Assistance Team, *IDA Homeless Study 2002-2003*, June 2003

McDougall, Liz, and Simpson, Brenda, *Housing Families Project, Interim Evaluation November 2006 to June 2007*, PowerPoint

Odney, Doug, Mastronardi, Linda, Therrien, Grant, The City of Calgary EMS Centre City Team: *Addressing the Need of Vulnerable Populations*, City of Calgary, 2006

O'Leary, Brian, 10 Year Plan – Chronological Summary, October 6, 2011

Sikorsky, Shannon, Blanchard, Ian, Donaldson, Steve, *The Impact of Homelessness on Emergency Medical Services*, City of Calgary, 2006

YWCA Calgary, *Sometimes The Signs Aren't Always There*, 2006





## TURNING THE TITANIC

So much about the success of Calgary's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness has depended on the right person being in the right place at the right time and seizing the opportunity. Take Brian O'Leary's crucial involvement. He was a lawyer with Burnet Duckworth & Palmer LLP (BD&P), one of the original sponsors of the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF), that does pro bono work for and provides a representative to the CHF board of directors. O'Leary was aware of problems on the street through his wife Ann, who volunteered at the weekly Feed The Hungry dinner held in St. Mary's Parish Hall. Sometime in 2001, O'Leary was sitting in his office when he overheard a conversation outside his door. The BD&P board representative was telling someone that he wanted to resign from the post. O'Leary walked out of his office and said, "Can I do it?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

O'Leary met with John Currie for lunch. They both came from Nova Scotia and were staunch Catholics. They hit it off straight away with Art Smith and Currie becoming role models for O'Leary. "Both impressed me as people who got things done, and they were great leaders. It was very inspiring. I put my toe in the water and was sucked into the ocean." In 2003 he became part of the group to look at establishing a land trust that would focus on acquiring land for affordable housing. The Calgary Community Land Trust (CCLT) was incorporated later the same year, with substantial funding provided by O'Leary and his wife and matching money from BD&P. The CCLT had a separate board with the vice-chair

sitting on the CHF board so that there was a link between the two bodies. However, as ever, the underlying problem was the lack of affordable units.

"I jumped in with both feet putting deals together," says O'Leary. These deals included a 28-unit Habitat for Humanity project in Dover on land donated by the federal government; another 12-unit Habitat build on land given by Home Depot; and a third erected by BD&P staff. "It was a big evolution because we were creating affordable housing," he says. "It was very exciting stuff. When you gave a set of keys to a family, it was amazing."

O'Leary had witnessed how important it was for families to have somewhere to call home; he had seen the difference between having a home and not having one.

Jump to January 2006. Brian and Ann O'Leary had gone to Seattle for a weekend winter escape. While they were checking into their hotel, Brian noticed a copy of Seattle magazine lying on a coffee table. The cover story was about the city's 127 top dentists, but what captured his attention was another featured headline: *Can We End Homelessness? (Inside the County's 10-Year Plan)*. O'Leary has kept a copy of the magazine to this day. The article by Michael Hood with photographs by Dan Lamont is frequently underscored in blue pen in O'Leary's hand. It includes sidebars with personal stories and the main elements of Seattle's plan, a city with 8,300 people homeless on any given night. It was a proverbial lightbulb moment. In fact, several lightbulbs went off for O'Leary.

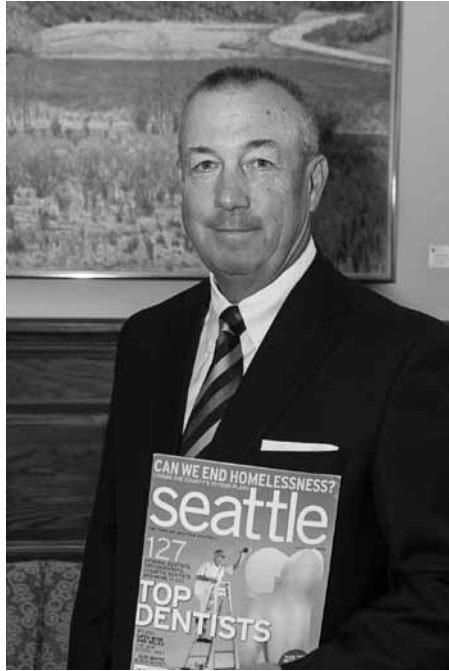
We had never talked about ending the problem in Calgary, only about managing it, says O'Leary, admitting that you probably don't end it completely, but you set up a system so that if people lose their home for whatever reason, they are quickly streamlined into appropriate housing. The second flash of inspiration was the paradigm shift of housing first, that it is much easier to make life changes in your own place than on a mat in a shelter. It was already being tried out successfully in New York, Minneapolis and San Francisco. Thirdly, he noted the Seattle plan, while in its infancy, was being steered by a local high-profile lawyer, Bill Block, who was bringing on board a cross-section of the city's influential people, including the mayor, the former state governor, the faith community with Dean Robert Taylor from St. Mark's Cathedral, funders including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and representatives from

such businesses as Nordstrom and Microsoft. O’Leary underlined the words, “It’s the first time a single entity has ever had a mandate, the political clout and the resources to pull the polyglot of faith-based, secular, non-profit and public agencies together.”

Another telling quote he picked up on was: “If you don’t have enough money for food, you can stretch it by going to Northwest Harvest or a food bank or a soup kitchen or eating cereal for dinner. You can’t do that with rent – you can’t pay 80 per cent and tell your landlord you’re not using one of the bedrooms,” says Dr. Diana Pearce, director of the Center for Women’s Welfare at the University of Washington, a nationally regarded think-tank for poverty, welfare and wage issues pertaining to women and families.

“I was totally pumped,” says O’Leary, noting by contrast in Calgary we had 140 agencies all competing and many of them with very different philosophies, and a system that was inefficient and uncoordinated. “There was no united voice so the government played one off against the other. There was no united voice to government from the community.”

O’Leary, who by that time besides being on the CCLT was also vice-chair of the CHF, photocopied the article and handed it around to everyone, but discouragingly the new ideas went nowhere. In fact, it’s not even mentioned in the board minutes. There was more talk in January about newly elected Prime Minister Stephen Harper and some apprehension about what this development would mean to funding. Looking back, O’Leary thinks the idea was too big and too hard for people to wrap their minds around immediately.



**Brian O’Leary with the magazine that dared ask the question:  
Can we end homelessness?**

But events were moving fast, faster than even O’Leary could have anticipated in his happiest dreams.

It was a bad summer partly because Maclean’s magazine had published a story saying this part of the country was the land of milk and honey and that the streets were paved with gold because jobs were plentiful. What the article omitted was that the vacancy rate was down to one per cent. Calgary was flooded with immigrants from the East in search of work and the good life. Instead they ended up on the streets and in shelters. When Dr. Stephen Hwang, of St. Michael’s Hospital, Toronto, a renowned researcher into health problems of people experiencing homelessness, came here that year he warned of the growing gap between the rich and the poor in Calgary.

Beneath the ever growing skyline was an ugly underbelly of poverty and misery. In 1995 social assistance rates were \$396 a month and 10 years later, they had increased by a paltry \$11 to \$407; new mothers and their babies were being released straight from hospital to Inn from the Cold; and with the highest provincial rate of violence against women and the third-highest city rate in Canada, the domestic violence sector was having problems finding housing for women and children. Other agencies felt the pinch too. The Mustard Seed was discovering they were unable to move “housing-ready” shelter residents into homes because there was no affordable housing in the city.

In terms of creating affordable housing Calgary lagged behind Edmonton and Fort McMurray. But the news wasn’t all bad. In fact, the CHF had prepared the way for many things necessary for a 10-year plan to end homelessness. It had encouraged collaboration with agencies like the Rainbow Lodge housing project for high-need families. With the help of the foundation and the Calgary Urban Aboriginal Initiative, a group of four-plexes in Huntington Hills close to a school was secured and operating funding was pledged by the United Way of Calgary and Area for three years. Three agencies – Métis Family Services, Aspen Family Services and Inn from the Cold – came together to run it. The foundation was also starting to talk to the Calgary Police Service (CPS) about how the police could cooperate with the agencies. When Inspector Dan Jahrig appeared at the February board meeting, Currie concluded by saying, “The CHF would like to work with police services in any

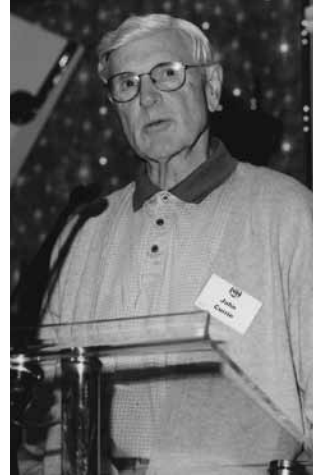
way we can to help reduce homelessness.” However, the fact remained that some agencies were more willing to collaborate than others.

The foundation had also repeatedly tried to educate the provincial government about the benefits of working more horizontally across ministries. They sat down numerous times with Seniors Minister Stan Woloshyn to no avail; then came a glimmer of hope when he was succeeded by Yvonne Fritz in early 2005. Bev Longstaff, a new CHF staff member, executive director Terry Roberts and board chair John Currie met with her. Although Fritz was unaware of the cross-departmental approach they had been preaching, they left with the sense they would be able to work with her and that she grasped the complexities of the issues. As well, Longstaff commented, “We are fortunate to have the tenacity of Minister Fritz in this portfolio.”

Later in the year, they weren’t so sure and were inviting her back to talk about the same issues and to propose an Alberta housing policy.

“Alberta really should have a minister of housing to cause the cross-departmental approach to happen,” said O’Leary presciently at the September board meeting. Many on the board were frustrated and Art Smith, who still was working his government contacts on the board’s behalf, was heard to lament that he had more sway with Ottawa than he did with his friends at the province.

Longstaff, a city alderman for 12 years, was introduced to the board in December of 2004 by John Currie as an affordable housing advisor. One of the first things she did was to meet with each alderman requesting them to commit to affordable housing for 100 people in their respective wards and got 100-per-cent buy-in to have this done by 2009. With the addition of Linda McLean, a researcher, the CHF was looking at some of the systemic issues such as the lack of housing, the need for a better coordinated addictions



**John Currie met constantly with politicians to try and educate them.**

treatment and staffing of agencies. In April, McLean's research into staffing indicated the "agencies are now in crisis." Sixty per cent of employees had been on staff for less than two years, 20 per cent of executive time was spent on hiring, and wages were so poor that 70 per cent of employees had used the food bank, but their main complaint was that there was no supervision for the risks they were taking day to day.

Meanwhile, Ruth Ramsden-Wood, head of the United Way, had travelled to a conference in Atlanta, GA, where there was an initiative led by a businessman. He had got the city to donate the old city jail, which had been turned into a triage centre for people experiencing homelessness, giving them a single point of entry into the system. Clients were allocated to appropriate areas where they received temporary housing and appropriate supports to move them into their own places. The streamlined way that people left the street really struck a chord with Ramsden-Wood, who was convinced we could find better ways to set people on their feet in Calgary.

The CHF was already well aware of 10-year plans and housing first, says Terry Roberts, who had spent considerable time trying to get the agencies to work together since he started there in 1999. "It was like herding cats," he recalls. "Everybody had their own objectives and their own view."

Roberts had already rounded up a group of six other cities – Edmonton, Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat and Red Deer – to meet on an occasional basis. The group was made up of mid-level representatives of each city's administrations. These cities, too, were bursting at the seams and hoped that by presenting a united front they might get more out of the province, as well as learn from each other. Like the CHF, they had spent time trying to educate the provincial government about homelessness and what needed to be done.

Thanks to Roberts' efforts, the Seven Cities group began attending the provincial government's Standing Policy Committee which eventually resulted in them receiving operating funds. In a few years' time this money was to prime the pump for the 10-year plans; in Calgary it was first used to initiate the CUPS Pathways program. This became the template for the way the province funds Alberta's major cities' 10-year plans to this day.

Alerted by Richard White, head of the Calgary Downtown



Business Association, that his international body was leading the way with 10-year plans in the US, Roberts began to look at what was being accomplished. Then Roberts, White and Katie Black from the City of Calgary travelled to Washington DC, to attend a conference. What Roberts clearly heard was President George W. Bush's homeless tsar, Philip Mangano, saying, "Yes, sometime, I would love to come to Canada." No other Canadians were in hearing – nor indeed in sight.

The Washington event was followed up by a more detailed conference in Long Beach, CA, after which Roberts became part of a three-member panel to evaluate the New Orleans plan. There was a lot of scepticism in Calgary and a feeling we would manage on our own, both in the agencies and at the foundation, recalls Roberts, who back then didn't fully appreciate the ability of such a plan to marshal reserves. "Everyone was feeling their way here; it was fluid and territorial; we compete in the not-for-profit for resources and media time," he says. "But by the end of my term I became convinced it was something to push even though I had a lot of questions."

Naturally, Roberts reported to the Seven Cities group on what Philip Mangano was doing the other side of the border. Red Deer, which at that time was ahead of the game in Alberta, invited Mangano to give them the scoop. Roberts, who initially felt it was his job merely to brief people on 10-year plans, was by now convinced the 10-year plans were something to push. Hearing about Mangano's visit to Red Deer, he contacted Mangano's office to see if he could squeeze in a presentation in Calgary on his way home. A date was set for September 6, 2006.

With his dark suit, silver hair and bronzed complexion that likely owed more to a lotion or a tanning salon than nature, President George W. Bush's homeless tsar didn't look much like anyone's idea of a latter-day St. Francis of Assisi, but that's precisely who Philip Mangano's inspiration was. In 1980 he saw the Franco Zeffirelli movie about the saint, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, and was inspired to change his life. Mangano quit his job as an agent manager for such entertainment groups as Peter, Paul and Mary, and Buffalo Springfield, and began volunteering at a breadline in Boston, MA. Here, he was named the founding executive director of what became the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, a coalition

of 80 agencies operating more than 200 programs developing state-wide strategies to reduce and to end homelessness.

Throughout his 2000 election campaign, Bush had preached the need for “compassionate conservatism” and the need to do something about the homeless situation in the US. By the time Mangano was appointed executive director of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness, his country was covered by what The Atlantic called “a patchwork” of federal, state, city and private money supporting 40,000 programs. Despite the plethora of agencies the situation had still deteriorated. The US had been bailing the leaky boat of homelessness, only to see more people fall in, declared Mangano. “We’re trying to disrupt this ad hoc approach,” he said. “We’re saying it needs to be strategic.”

Mangano, who is curiously uncomfortable in the presence of individual people experiencing homelessness, likes to draw an analogy between the US homeless situation in 2002 and slavery before the Civil War (1861-1865). He says that the white do-gooders had accommodated a social wrong by trying to improve slaves’ lives, without challenging the institution of slavery itself. “One could say that in 1859 the abolitionist cause was at its nadir and yet six years later slavery was abolished.” His aim was to create a similar watershed for homelessness.

When Roberts contacted Mangano’s office to see if he could squeeze in Calgary as well as Red Deer, a few days later he received the response. “Mr. Mangano would love to add Calgary to his visit.”

The people who gathered for the breakfast meeting in the Westin Hotel on September 6 to hear Mangano were a mixed group. “I was very impressed I was getting a real breakfast at a breakfast meeting – not just doughnuts and fruit,” recalls one of the attendees. Some were from the agencies, others from business and government. The response ranged from the downright hostile, to let’s wait and see, to being bowled over by the economic arguments, to what’s a US businessman got to say about human services?

The social service people mainly sat at the back; some with legs apart, their arms across their chests, scepticism and disbelief writ large across their faces. Others from the sector felt Mangano was preaching to the choir, but they saw that talking about dollars and cents would be a potent weapon to bring in support from the rest of the world. Excitement rippled through the business crowd;

they looked like they “had discovered the moon,” recalls a social worker. Roberts remembers thinking that the visit was at just the right moment to give the cause a boost and that Mangano had the credentials in the US to prove 10-year plans could work.

Mangano had brought with him a very official government PowerPoint complete with a ferocious American eagle adorning almost every slide, not to mention the president’s seal. Very near the beginning, he said that federal investments in homeless have to be research- and data-driven, performance-based and results-oriented, the sort of talk that impresses the business community. Although Mangano’s PowerPoint said there were moral, spiritual and cultural reasons to respond to the situation, he stressed the cost benefits to society.

The chronically homeless in the US comprised 10 per cent of the total, he said, but they used 50 per cent of the services (emergency medical services, psychiatric treatment, detox facilities, shelters, and law enforcement and corrections) – as much as the other 90 per cent. He also cited the far from mythical case of “Million-Dollar Murray” written up by Malcolm Gladwell in the New Yorker six months previously.

Murray Barr was an ex-marine known as Smokey on the streets of Reno, NV. By all accounts he was an endearing character who, when he was drinking, could be picked up several times a day. Often he was too intoxicated for the drunk-tank so he was taken to hospital emergency rooms. He would sober up enough to go back to the streets where the cycle would re-enact itself. Two bicycle officers, who came to know Barr well, added up how much three individuals, including Barr, had cost the system. In 10 years Barr ran up a medical bill as large as anyone in the state of Nevada. “It cost us \$1 million not to do something about Murray,” said one of the officers quoted by Gladwell.

Mangano was also very much influenced by the work of Dennis Culhane, a US researcher who found that 80 per cent of the people experiencing homelessness moved in and out of the system quickly. Then there was another 10 per cent who were spasmodic users of shelters, while the last 10 per cent were the chronically, not to mention costly users of services. In New York, Culhane had discovered that \$62 million a year was being spent to shelter this third group who numbered just 2,500. “It costs \$24,000 a year for one

of these shelter beds,” Culhane told Gladwell. “We’re talking about a cot 18 inches away from the next cot.” Mangano’s presentation showed similar figures from other cities. In Boston, 119 “frequent flyers” wracked up 18,000 emergency room visits in five years at \$1,000 a pop; in three years in Ashville, TN, 37 people had each cost the system more than \$800,000 in jail, EMS and hospital costs. The arithmetic was beginning to be loud and clear. And, because there were some good news statistics, it became even louder and clearer.

A cost-benefit study in Atlanta followed 60 mentally ill people who were in a supported housing program. In one year, decreases in hospitalization, incarceration and arrests had saved the city more than \$1 million. In Portland, OR, 35 people in supported housing had each cost the system \$42,075 annually prior to being housed; afterwards that figure dropped to \$25,776, an annual saving of \$16,299 per person.

“Results are infectious,” stated Mangano’s PowerPoint that made it all look oh, so easy.

Repeatedly doing the same thing and hoping it will work, is a definition of insanity, Mangano told the audience. The ad hoc system of uncoordinated crisis intervention clearly isn’t effective and on top of that it is expensive, much more expensive than giving someone the keys to their own place. By the time of the Calgary presentation, 224 communities in the US had seen the light and had formed partnerships to create 10-year plans based on the housing-first model to end homelessness. In 1996 Veterans Affairs in the US estimated that on any given night there were 250,000 veterans in shelters and on sidewalks. By 2006, there had been a 25-per-cent drop with fewer than 190,000 vets in a homeless situation. Part of the success story was due to vertical and horizontal collaboration from the federal government downwards and across the board in the US cities. With plenty of clues about how and where to start, it was a rousing call to action in Calgary.

O’Leary, who had been elected chair of the CHF board in June, jumped up to thank Mangano. History doesn’t relate if he discarded a few well-prepared words, or if he meant to improvise all along. Totally inspired by what he had heard O’Leary says, “I stuck my neck out two feet” and said that homelessness is not acceptable, that within two years Calgary would have a community plan and would invite Mangano back to unveil it. Fortunately for O’Leary,

the CHF's new CEO, Wayne Stewart, was also at the meeting. In all the milling around afterwards, he approached O'Leary and said, "When do we get started? We gotta get going." With a little traction like that, O'Leary says he wasn't scared any more and at the board meeting a couple of weeks later a 10-year plan was not only discussed, but also bought into by those around the table. Another able ally, the United Way, was soon on board too.

Marina Giacomini, who was then working at Aspen Family Services, says that initially she was put off by the fact Mangano looked like such a smooth operator and the consummate US politician. "That said, his message was good." Giacomini like many others from the social services sector privately questioned the desirability of focussing on homelessness rather than on the root cause – poverty, but because of the distressing situation outside the Westin's doors, she and others were more than ready for a change. Little did Giacomini know what a key player she was to become in getting many of the first programs into the starting blocks. In the end she would come to refer to it as "turning the Titanic," as we moved away from a system so old it had gone senile to another that was as yet untried but looked as though it would bring hope to some of the city's most destitute.



**Marina Giacomini,  
a key player in  
"turning the Titanic."**

Gladwell in his New Yorker article pointed out there were two sources of discomfort with the Culhane-Mangano philosophy of solving homelessness. The first involved "special treatment for people who do not deserve special treatment." For so long we had been enmeshed in Victorian ways of looking at social problems with "The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate. He (God) made them high or lowly and ordered their estate," as the hymn writer put it. In Calgary this was particularly true of the addictions treatment sector and some of the shelters that believed people had to earn the right to housing. This despite the fact the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Canada helped create, states:

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”

Some agency workers were worried that with a Calgary version of a 10-year plan they would lose their jobs, not realizing that if their agency moved with the times, they would be just as essential, but instead of handing out soup and socks they would be offering support to individuals who were safely housed. At the other end of that spectrum was Kathy Christiansen, executive director of Alpha House Society, who says, “I always thought it was weird that you shouldn’t be housed, especially with addictions; that you had to earn the right through sobriety.”

Alpha House, founded in 1981 as an alternative to the city cells for people using alcohol and drugs, operates on harm reduction principles. At first Christiansen wasn’t sure if the agency and the 10 Year Plan were a perfect fit for each other and so decided to continue to “do our thing and to stay true to the clients.” However, she did believe that working with the community was a good place to start, and therefore accepted an invitation from Wayne Stewart to sit on the prevention committee as events started to unfold.

The other source of unease was the fact Mangano’s plan was all about efficiency, not fairness to people like welfare mothers struggling to raise their children on next to nothing, or those with severe disabilities on Assured Income for Severely Handicapped tugging on ends that never seemed to meet. Those who worked in the field knew that homelessness wasn’t just about those on the streets, that there were many hidden from view, especially women and children in unsafe or overcrowded situations and that this is where in all likelihood the next generation of marginalized people would spring from, scarred by an array of detriments from bad diets and violence to social ostracism.

In some ways, the Mangano solution was parallel to Ray Chambers’ business solution for dealing with malaria as outlined in *Lifeblood*, by Alex Perry. The multi-millionaire businessman discovered that because development agencies did not have rigorous tools for measuring performance, returns on investment,

and cost-benefit analysis, nor incentives to adhere to deadlines, the drive to control and treat malaria had gone sideways. It had become more about the agencies and less about the people it was meant to help. As with aid, shelter was not paid for by the recipients so they “have little say in what they receive and no interest in what it costs,” which means that sometimes it goes terribly wrong. A good agency, whether dealing with aid overseas or housing in Canada, should have as its ultimate goal its own demise. Just as Chambers and his cohorts discovered in Africa, Calgary was to find that business could provide the “urgency and focus on results, organization, and logistics.” It may have left some agencies wondering about their survival, but others saw it was an excellent springboard into the future.

“Now of course,” says Marina Giacomini, “we should all recognize that just providing a home isn’t enough – we need to look at the systemic barriers to people ending their risk of homelessness (poverty) and we need to look at systems gaps where we could work together to end way more than homelessness but its contributing factors as well.”

Terry Roberts’ last board meeting at the CHF was in October 2006. He reported that Calgary had come a long way in its understanding, but that now we needed to ramp action up to the next level.

Without missing a beat, Brian O’Leary flashed back, “Are the not-for-profits ready?”

## Kristy Dickson

Kristy Dickson felt anxious, relieved and excited all at once as she stood before the Calgary Drug Treatment Court (CDTC) surrounded by friends, social workers and social workers who had become friends.



Kristy Dickson isn't looking back.  
"I have goals and I'm very stubborn.  
I have to complete what I start."

Judge Jim Ogle smiled encouragingly from time to time as the courtroom listened to a monthly account of Kristy's year starting in January 2011. At the outset, she had a few major wobbles and nearly quit the court program in April, but that was also the month she began to open up. For the rest of the year the story only got better, culminating with her graduation from CDTC. She squeaked through in record time, a few days less than 12 months.

Alternately smiling and looking close to tears, Dickson, 33, listened while Ogle explained that CDTC is actually a more challenging option than jail and that the ceremony recognized her courage. Formally welcoming her back into society, he said, "I'm elated by the sentence because I see a changed person."

"I'm finally free. A weight is lifted off me," Dickson thought as she made her way to a celebration at the CDTC offices.

Dickson's burden was a heavy one. As a child she was abused sexually and physically by more than one adult in her life. She ran away many times and hung out with an older crowd. She started using drugs and alcohol when she was 12; by 13 she was being pimped out.



Eventually Dickson made her way to Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, where she worked the front desk of the notorious Astoria Hotel. "It was crazy," she recalls.

One day a guest overdosed on a speed ball. Dickson dialled 911 and then went to see if she could help. In the chaos, a used needle pierced Dickson's arm and within three months she was diagnosed with Hep C and HIV. Around that time she took to using crack and needles herself.

There were other dangers on the street, like the violent men who pepper-sprayed her and beat her up, or the one who threw her off a bridge near the Talisman Centre, or the Calgary customer who screwed his door shut and then attacked her with a knife.

Back in Calgary, she continued to work the street, living in tents or crack houses and using drugs until one day she decided enough was enough and went to Alpha House to detox. The facility was full, but staff let her stay in the small medical room.

Dickson was clean for three years during which time she had two "beautiful boys," Lingo and Lucas, 13 months apart.

It turned out the boys' father was very abusive and, although Dickson went through a lot of hoops to satisfy Child Welfare, after he returned to the house and smashed the door down, the children were removed on the grounds that she couldn't protect them.

The pain of the loss cut deep, especially as there was no offer of support for Dickson in the whole process. She returned to the street dealing crack and smoking it until she sold to an undercover police officer. While out on bail, she sold to another undercover officer.

She was beginning to weary of the merry-go-round and checked into Sunrise Native Addictions Services. Before the program was over she contacted The Alex's HomeBase program and was accepted, but the story re-enacted itself with yet a third undercover officer. This time bail was denied so she was in jail while she waited to get into CDTC.

Dickson was released into Youville Recovery Residence for Women. It was tough because she had many more restrictions than the others due to the CDTC stipulations. Among other

things she was tested for drugs twice a week, had to attend three 12-step meetings a week, find a sponsor, prove she had a relapse plan, seek counselling, attend court every Thursday and a whole lot more. As the judge said, it's not an easy option.

The road was made easier by her HomeBase worker, Karen Armstrong, who used to visit weekly bringing Dickson's beloved dog, Princess.

Dickson worked hard at Youville and after six months left for a HomeBase apartment where Strong continues to support her. Around the same time, Dickson applied to and was accepted by Bow Valley College to upgrade her education with a view to taking the 1,200-hour addictions program at Mount Royal University.

On top of all this Dickson has spent many hours volunteering, often helping out at agencies like The Mustard Seed that had been kind to her in her darkest days. Currently, she is a mentor with HomeBase, about which she has nothing but praise: They have been "absolute angels to me."

She is now working towards reuniting with her sons, moving slowly and surely to this end, always putting their welfare first, but nonetheless very excited at the prospect of seeing them and holding them in her arms again.

Dickson is very clear about the importance of supportive housing for people coming out of both incarceration and addiction programs. She sees huge gaps in the system so the people inevitably go "back to square one and what they end up doing is everything over again."

This time, though, the future looks different for Dickson. Now, she's a woman on a mission to help others.

"Even though I have been through a lot, it has made me who I am today – a very strong-willed and a determined woman," she says. "I have goals and I'm very stubborn and I have to complete what I start."

### SOURCES

Interviews: Kathy Christiansen, Marina Giacomini, Brian O'Leary, Ruth Ramsden-Wood, Terry Roberts, John Rook

Calgary Homeless Foundation board minutes, 2003-2006

Gladwell, Malcolm, *Million-Dollar Murray, Why Problems Like Homelessness May Be Easier to Solve than Manage*, New Yorker, February 13, 2006

Hood, Michael, *A Long Way From Home*, Seattle magazine, January, 2006

Los Angeles Times, *The Bush Administration's Homeless Czar Talks About What Might Have Been Under Jimmy Hahn*, October 4, 2007

Mangano, Philip, *US Interagency Council on Homelessness* PowerPoint, Calgary, September 6, 2006

McGray, Douglas, *The Abolitionist*, The Atlantic, June 2004

O'Leary, Brian, *10 Year Plan – Chronological Study*, October 6, 2011

Perry, Alex, *Lifeblood, How to Change the World One Dead Mosquito at a Time*, Public Affairs, 2011





## THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

Jim Gray, oilman and philanthropist, was sitting quietly at home watching an old video that friends had taped of the CBS program *60 Minutes* when he suffered something like a home invasion by what appeared on his television screen. The program featured a piece on “bum fights,” a phenomenon that had probably been in existence from time immemorial, but had gained notoriety through videos circulating on the web for the past few years. Bum fights are staged by mainstream youth who pay homeless men to fight, or to harm themselves by doing things like extracting their own teeth with pliers supplied by the filmmaker, in return for alcohol or paltry financial rewards. Sometimes they feature youths beating up street people and there’s no pay involved at all. The videos have been banned in several countries and have been denounced by the National Coalition for the Homeless in the United States, yet their presence persists on the Internet. Gray’s friends had been shocked by what they saw and wanted him to have a look too.

In some videos packs of youths shoot the men with paintball guns, beat them with baseball bats, or even douse them with gasoline and set them on fire. One of the 23-year-old videographers told Dr. Phil in a subsequent CBS program that he “was doing a service to homeless people” by making them heroes, and that he was merely filling a need for those addicted to violence. What Gray saw on *60 Minutes*, early in October 2006, was a video from Holly Hill, FL, in which a pack of teenagers beat a man to death. It was followed by another from Calgary shot in July 2003.

Five teenagers, high on animal tranquilizers, are seen driving along a downtown alley. They stop when they spy Kelly Littlelight

unconscious on the ground. The assailants kick, punch and strike him with a metal pipe. One of them breaks a bottle over Littlelight's head. He remains comatose until an attacker urinates on him. At that point, Littlelight looks up in surprise. Laughter can be heard in the background.<sup>1</sup>



**Jim Gray, the catalyst for the 10 Year Plan.**

Like Art Smith before him, Gray rose up thinking, not in my city. And, like Smith, his action was swift and decisive.

"This wasn't the Calgary I knew," says Gray, who talked up a storm. One person told him that it was Littlelight's fault for being somewhere he shouldn't have been late at night. "I was offended by that. Everywhere in Calgary should be safe for everyone."

On Thursday, October 5, 2006, Gray's executive assistant fired off an email to a number of people inviting them to a "blue sky" session to discuss the homeless question. The original list included Roger Gibbons, then of the Canada West Foundation, businessman Harold Milavsky, Dermot Baldwin of the Calgary Drop-In & Rehab Society, and Stephanie and Brian Felesky, local philanthropists. Gray proposed a number of dates between October 12 and 31 for a 7:30 am breakfast at the Calgary Petroleum Club. "I would like to have this breakfast sooner than later, but I do realize some of you are exceedingly busy so I wanted to be able to give you as many dates prior to the end of the month as possible. Please report by return email at your very earliest convenience, as to your availability for each of the dates shown," Gray wrote. He vowed that he would keep holding breakfasts with influential people until they had an answer to homelessness in this city.

---

1 Kelly Littlelight, 34, was beaten and urinated on in July 2003 by five young men who also filmed their unprovoked attack. Littlelight had passed out in a downtown alley when they found him. Two of the men, Matthew Newman and Andrew Hilderman, were sentenced to six months in November 2004. Justice Peter Martin said the video portrayed a cruel brutality and a senseless crime. The other three teens were dealt with in juvenile court.

By the next day, Wayne Stewart, now CEO of the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF), had heard about the meeting and was angling for himself and Brian O'Leary, a key CHF board member, to be at the table. The breakfast was quickly organized for October 16, with both O'Leary and Stewart present. Gray told the gathered company about the disturbing documentary he had seen and then posed the questions: "How are we going to get a handle on the growing homeless problem in Calgary and how can we effectively respond as a united community?"

This was the cue for O'Leary to jump up from his bacon and eggs to tell the group about his idea for a 10-year plan, emphasizing the need for a "blue ribbon" committee, the very composition of which would show the rest of Calgary and, even more importantly, the province that it meant business. Gray's backing would be a huge boost. Active in oil and gas for more than 50 years, in 1973 he co-founded Canadian Hunter Exploration, one of the country's more significant natural gas producers, and served in various positions including president and CEO and chairman until it was purchased by Burlington Resources in 2001. Gray has also participated in a wide number of community projects and garnered many awards and much recognition – the Alberta Order of Excellence, an officer of the Order of Canada, honorary doctor of laws from the University of Calgary and a citation for citizenship by the Government of Canada, to name just some of laurels that have come his way.

In O'Leary's eyes Gray was the "tipping point" for the plan. "I say this because of his stature in the community and the business sector. He is a guy who can open a lot of doors and people listen to him. We (the CHF) needed to take the idea beyond our organization and turn it into a community-wide movement and Jim was the catalyst who helped make that happen."

The next day, a Tuesday, as if to underscore the need and the urgency, a story on homelessness hit the front page of the Calgary Herald. Gray sent another email to O'Leary thanking him for his "thoughtful comments," and requesting ammunition for a meeting he was holding on Friday with the president and CEO of EnCana Corp., the soft-spoken Gwyn Morgan. "I would be most grateful if you would jot down for me on one page, the salient points of your concept of a mayor's blue ribbon panel. This panel would be charged with the responsibility of reporting to the mayor at an early

date the basic elements of a comprehensive coordinated Calgary community plan to address the homeless issue of today and in the future in this city," wrote Gray, promising not to pass the notes on to Morgan, merely to use them as a speaking guide.

Gray helped the CHF make a list of potential leaders to chair the Calgary Committee to End Homelessness, people like himself who would command attention and who could bring the acumen and focus of the business world to devising a plan. With his many links, Gray then became the recruiter for the foundation; Morgan was his first target.

Later that day, O'Leary sent the promised notes giving some stats, including the fact that in the 2006 city count 145 families were reported homeless and that about 60,000 households were at a high risk of joining those already on the streets. He pointed out more than 230 US communities had adopted such plans and then he drew up a list of the kind of representatives he hoped to see on the committee, starting with recognized business leaders, the United Way of Calgary and Area president, major charitable foundations, regional health authority, the Chamber of Commerce, academia, police and emergency medical services, faith organizations and last, but far from least, representatives from emergency shelters.

At 2:57 pm on Friday, well before O'Leary left his Burnet, Duckworth and Palmer LLP (BD&P) law office for the weekend, he received a short but jubilant email from Gray. "Great meeting with Gwyn. We are obviously talking about one of his 'hot' buttons. He wants to talk over our strategy with Pat Trottier, his wife. He'll get back to me next week. I'll be surprised if he chooses not to become engaged." In the end, Morgan didn't bite, but Gray continued on his recruitment drive, assembling a list of people who had strong reputations, lots of energy and who headed up a big Calgary organization.

Gray was quick to buy into the idea of a 10-year plan, says O'Leary, and because he liked the idea of the business community leading the charge, he was more than willing to help by acting as a liaison. Gray also made a very strategic point about involving the mayor. Knowing the mayor was locked in battle with the province for infrastructure funding, Gray proposed turning the mayor's blue ribbon committee into a communities leadership committee, which proved to be excellent advice. Mayor Dave Bronconnier had been



adamant all along that it couldn't be just a City Hall initiative; the decision also freed the committee from the constraints of any one level of government and their history of funding fights. However, Gray knew that city involvement was crucial, at least to endorse the plan.

Perhaps the first person to approach Bronconnier was his friend Daryl Fridhandler, a BD&P colleague of O'Leary's who had attended one of the breakfast meetings. Fridhandler briefed Bronconnier informally prior to an official delegation when O'Leary and some other repre-



**Dave Bronconnier with Tim Richter:**  
It couldn't be just a City Hall initiative.

sentatives met the mayor and a couple of aldermen. It wasn't the first time homeless activists had approached Bronconnier, but previously they did not have a plan in hand that he felt was both workable and humanitarian. By this time Gray and the CHF had their shortlist of business people they deemed potential chairs for the committee to end homelessness. Although he didn't know it, Steve Snyder, president and CEO of TransAlta, was the hot favourite. It was a name that spoke volumes to Bronconnier, signalling this was not just to be a City Hall solution, but a community-based solution with enough muscle to speak effectively to the two levels of senior government holding the purse strings.

With City Hall located across from Olympic Plaza and close to shelters and services for the homeless, Bronconnier had observed the unending stream of people and was very aware of what he called the revolving door of services. "Why aren't we solving a problem instead of pretending it doesn't exist?" he wondered. "The do-nothing approach is not cost-free - we are paying for it in a different way. What is the most effective way is also the most sympathetic." Bronconnier knew that Calgary had its own versions of Million-Dollar Murray, the almost mythical homeless man in Reno, NV, written up Malcolm Gladwell in the *New Yorker*, and

he felt that the “most expensive taxi service in the world,” or the excessive use of police cruisers and ambulances, was a terrible waste of tax dollars.

With a plan that would embrace business, academia, the healthcare sector, social services, the faith community, and government, Bronconnier said to count him in. “It was a quantum leap in the right direction,” the mayor said, although he knew that if the province didn’t choose to hear the call, it might not come off.

Meanwhile, O’Leary was going from strength to strength, perhaps realizing that the more he talked about it the more real it became or, as Stewart said, “Once you say it out loud, you gotta live up to it.” He kept on selling the plan to anyone who would listen, including 800 to 900 people who bought tickets on November 7 for the annual premier’s fundraiser that year entitled, Hats Off To Ralph! “It was an opportunity for a whole new approach with a community plan and strong leadership,” he recalls. “No one threw tomatoes at me.”

On November 16, O’Leary went very public with a signed editorial in the Calgary Herald, entitled *A New Strategy to End Homelessness*, in which he demolished the stereotypical image of a “middle-age drunk” and replaced it with children, teenagers, women fleeing violence, the addicted and the mentally ill, people released from incarceration and the working poor – people we all might know. He quoted Baldwin of the Drop-In, saying the city was in an “epidemic of despair in the emergency shelters.” Drawing on the city’s community spirit and renowned volunteerism record, O’Leary then appealed to readers to make the city an even better place by supporting the plan.

“We cannot rely solely on government to solve the problem of homelessness. Our community must come up with its own long-term plan to deal with this issue. We must apply new thinking to develop a long-term plan to end homelessness in Calgary – a plan developed by all sectors of our community. We must no longer accept the reality of people in our city with no home,” wrote O’Leary. “The ultimate product of the community planning process will be a plan made by Calgarians for Calgarians to solve one of the most pressing problems faced by our community. . . . We must end homelessness once and for all time.”

That summer Wayne Stewart was out of town on holiday when

he received an urgent message from his daughter to call his good friend Bev Longstaff. When he got hold of her, she said, "There's a job you've got to do and you have to get back here to do it." CHF board member Longstaff knew that with CEO Terry Robert's resignation, they were on the hunt for a replacement. "I'll be happy to talk when I get back," said Stewart. Talk he did. Although O'Leary was in Europe, Stewart met with the board members who were in town and decided to take the position. "How long for?" he asked. "Knowing you, you will decide when you are done," they said. Stewart and O'Leary didn't actually meet until it was confirmed the former had accepted the post.

Stewart was to become a key person in setting up the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness. One of those multi-talented figures with degrees in subjects as diverse as engineering, business, political science, religious studies and philosophy, he had been a senior manager at Shell Canada for 20 years before moving to the non-profit sector where he had already served as executive director of the Calgary Foundation and project director of HomeFront, an agency devoted to domestic violence resolution. Stewart considers his forte is leading organizations through change and, as singer Bob Dylan said, times were a-changing fast and furiously. Officially confirmed, but not yet ensconced as the CEO, Stewart went to Philip Mangano's first breakfast presentation, attended by 40 or so people, on September 6. As he heard O'Leary thank Mangano, saying they would invite him back at the end of the year at which time Calgary would have a plan, Stewart thought, "That's interesting, now I have two jobs. Oh, God, what have I got into!"

A few minutes later O'Leary came up to him and said, "Do you think we can do it?" Without hesitation, Stewart replied, "Yes." It was a decisive moment and sealed the fate of some of the city's most destitute people.



**Wayne Stewart took a lead role in creating change.**

From that point onwards O'Leary and Stewart were in lock-step, trying to turn the shelter model on its head by implementing a city-wide collaborative effort with housing-first principles enshrined at its core. "It really resonated with me," says Stewart, whose own church hosted Inn from the Cold. "I had been rumbling around shelters for a long time and could not believe that people could get back on their feet there. . . . It was a no-brainer."

O'Leary and Stewart knew that it was important to get the right person to chair the committee. Quite by chance, Jim Gray had bumped into Steve Snyder in Toronto's Royal York Hotel and had sounded him out. Then back in Calgary, he and Ruth Ramsden-Wood of the United Way went to see Snyder to prepare the way for a more official expedition with O'Leary and Stewart on December 1. Snyder's corner office overlooks 11th Avenue S.W. and in those days an observer didn't have to stretch his neck unduly to see the line-ups that wove around the block waiting for meals at The Mustard Seed.

The alley behind the shelter, where often drugs were dealt and young women sold, had become an unofficial dormitory for the shelter, with rows of bodies sleeping on flattened cardboard boxes. For some it was an embarrassment, for others intimidating and for yet others, unaware of the true picture of homelessness, it was a source of anger. "Can't those lazy bums find work!"

As Snyder looked out of his window he used to wonder why the line-ups didn't go away. He knew from the media that there was a lot of effort being put into eradicating homelessness, but still those people snaked down the sidewalk. It appeared to be an intractable problem.

When O'Leary and Stewart came to see Snyder, his first response was, "No, I don't know anything about it. I'm an observer, I don't know the facts. I'm not qualified. I'm just a business guy." They told him there were plans that were working in more than 200 communities in the US and that with access to those plans they were confident Calgary, too, could create its own solution, but a solution also required someone high profile to spearhead the initiative. "We need a more visible member of the community; someone who can attract other people and focus us," they said.

"I knew then they had me," says Snyder. However, he begged for a day's grace to talk it over with his company and his wife.

Although it was an intimidating challenge, Snyder couldn't turn it down partly because of "the gravitas of the group." He knew there were high expectations and he worried that when all was said and done the plan would end up on the trash heap. On the plus side, he knew a sea change was required because it was quite apparent the status quo was not working and he sensed in Gray, O'Leary and Stewart a "chance, a hope and a willingness to do something different."

Snyder, like Stewart, is a man who thrives on change. Before he joined TransAlta in 1996, he headed up Camco Inc., GE Canada Inc., and Noma industries Ltd. After taking the TransAlta helm, he guided it through the province's deregulation of the electrical industry. It metamorphosed from an integrated, regulated, Alberta-focussed company into an international wholesale electricity generator and power marketer. When Snyder phoned back the next day, he was up for the challenge.

While he felt they had a bit of a blank slate, Snyder also knew that a social solution wouldn't appeal to a broad spectrum of the community; that in this city the demand would be for a performance-based plan that would ultimately save taxpayers' money. He also knew that it had to be acceptable to the social services sector, which was almost overwhelmed by the numbers and the depth of need. The fall of 2006 was turning out to be exceptionally cold and with unprecedented numbers on the streets, it was all too much for the weary social workers.

"We give ourselves 12 months (to prepare the plan,)" he said. "If we can't do it in 12 months, we should disband and turn it over to someone else who can do it."

As the tumultuous year drew to a close, Jim Gray hosted another 7 am breakfast meeting on December 8 in Viking B Room at the Petroleum Club, this time with a wider cast of characters including O'Leary, Ruth Ramsden-Wood and Kabir Jivraj, a United Way board member. Heather Douglas, president and CEO of the Calgary Chamber of Commerce, had been invited but couldn't make it; however Eva Friesen, now heading up the Calgary Foundation, was a "yes." For the first time, Tim Richter, a senior executive at TransAlta, was on the guest list.

About a week later, Jim Gray, billing himself as chair of the Canada West Foundation, a local think-tank, published an article in

the Herald detailing his six-week journey from the night he had sat down to watch *60 Minutes* to the development of the plan to end it all. His horror at what he had seen fired up the words:

“Is this the Calgary we love? Is this the caring, thoughtful Calgary we brag about? Does this event characterize the quality of life we want for our children, for ourselves, for the citizens of our city and for the disadvantaged? Once again, we are faced with the urgent plight of our homeless people. How will they survive the winter? This annual exercise is dehumanizing for them and a terrible embarrassment for the rest of us.”

Once again winter had caught Calgary by surprise and with many migrant workers and overflowing shelters, the city opened the ground floor of the Calgary Stampede Grandstand as a warming shelter for up to 300 people. Gray said this annual panic was unacceptable and then announced that the CHF and the United Way had embarked on a long-term solution based on successful 10-year plans in the US. To help grasp the full dimensions of the situation, he recited a litany of statistics that moved from the dire and increasing need here to the apparent miracles that had been wrought south of the border with the accompanying cost savings. “It would be reasonable to estimate that the total homeless population in Calgary consumes between \$25 million to \$30 million of community services a year. Considering that our total homeless population has increased by one-third in two years, it is fair to assume the cost could double in the next five years,” Gray warned.

Upfront, he said, the plan would require “substantial” investments, but in the end it would deliver both improved quality of life and reduced annual costs. Saying the current crisis was a call to action, Gray added that it was a good time of year to resolve to do better and not to tolerate homelessness any longer. “We can lead the way in Canada by developing a plan to address this deplorable situation. Let’s go from panic and failure to success and quality of life for all.”

Looking back, Gray says he was the catalyst, comparing the initiative to a space rocket with him acting as the initial blastoff and Snyder taking the plan into orbit. “When he said he would do it, I had done my bit. I take no credit for what resulted,” says Gray, who talks at length about the role of volunteers in Calgary. “That’s what I love about this city, the difference is that it was done

by community because our community has great power when it is focussed, exercised and makes up its mind.”

Gray wasn't the only person who felt the need for action. When the biennial homeless count had come out earlier in 2006, registering a 32.3-per-cent increase in numbers over 2004, the United Way had also felt it was time to kick-start Calgary. A total of 3,436 people were found that night in shelters or sleeping rough. It was too much for Ramsden-Wood and her staff to countenance. Together with the city, they had started to plan a community summit. Pat Rice, a manager at Calgary's Family and Community Support Services, was asked to support both organizations preparing for the event. As the 10-year-plan movement began to coalesce, the United Way took a step back and the community summit began to morph into something completely different. Rice, Stewart, Richter and a few others like Bernadette Majdell from Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation and Lana Wells at the United Way, formed an ad hoc committee to start working on a Calgary plan.

But it was already too late for some of those who had no place to go. Death stalked the streets as the whole province froze in the grips of the cold spell, sending the mercury down to -30C. Even though agency workers in Edmonton and Calgary hustled to provide shelter and warm clothing – 215 jackets were given out in Edmonton over the weekend of November 25-26 – it was neither enough nor in time to save the lives of the most vulnerable like Alvin Elif Constant, or two people found frozen to death inside a broken-down school bus parked in Spruce Grove, AB.

Constant, known as Wandering Spirit, died on November 24, just two blocks from the doors of Calgary's Mustard Seed. He was 60 years old. Because he wasn't carrying any identification, it took almost a week for the police to locate and notify his grief-stricken family in Saskatchewan. Shelley Mike, his niece, said on Facebook that Constant never stayed in one place for long and that she could count everything he owned on the fingers of one hand. Although transient, Constant was also generous and willing to hand over his last \$5 to anyone who was in greater need.

Mike's lament gave homelessness a face, not only by posting Constant's photo, but also through her words which portrayed him as a loving uncle and a gifted artist. She bravely exposed the nerve endings of her family's pain and loss. “Was he one of the many who

were turned away from the shelter that night? Was he on his way to the shelter and tired out? Where was he going? Was he wearing a jacket, socks, gloves, a hat? What were his last thoughts?" cried Mike, who wished she had taken up her threat to tattoo her name and address on his arm. "My heart is broken."

Born on the small impoverished James Smith Reserve northeast of Saskatoon, Constant attended residential school, but he had always found solace in his art. He had majored in art history at the University of Saskatchewan, studied painting in Edmonton, and moved to the West Coast to paint, but for some reason took to an itinerant life selling his art as he went. For some years he painted near Victoria Harbour, selling his work to tourists disembarking from cruise ships; in Vancouver his sidewalk gallery was on Robson Street; and in Calgary, according to the Herald, he sold paintings that sometimes were still wet, going from office block to office block.

Mike, too, grasped that we are all part of the solution because the homeless aren't a breed unto themselves; they have families and they are connected to the wider world. "Somebody loves those people on the street, somebody cares where they are, no matter who they are or what they had done, somebody loves them," she wrote. "The people you see on the street don't wake up one day and decide to go to live on the street, there's a story to be told, the decisions they made, how it's affected their entire lives, if you just take a minute to stop and listen to what they're saying, you'll understand why they are where they are."



## Maggie

“You can’t win for losing,” says Maggie.

She laughs at the ironies life sends her, but she also is clear that many of the barriers facing her have been erected by the system that says it’s there to help her.



Maggie: Finding her way back into society, with support from HomeBase.

Take her rent. Currently, her basement suite is \$795, yet she only gets \$323 from Alberta Works. If she weren’t subsidized by The Alex’s HomeBase program, she would have to take in a lodger and then “I’d be in shit; I’d be in trouble.”

There’s no way that \$323 is enough for her to live on. It’s a bus pass and some food, says Maggie, 46.

She glosses over her early life, saying it makes her angry to talk about her childhood. In her words, “it was a bad upcoming.” Subsequently on the streets, she slept in back alleys, picked bottles, ate out of dumpsters and

was despised by the few people who happened to notice her.

Just over a year ago, a passerby spotted a battered and bruised, comatose body in a snowbank and phoned 911. For a time Maggie was an unconscious “Jane Doe” at the Foothills Hospital. Then the Downtown Outreach Addiction Partnership (DOAP) team was called to see if they could identify the patient.

Sure enough, someone recognized Maggie’s ring. They took her to Alpha House, where she started on her recovery program which was followed by more treatment at various places, including Henwood Treatment Centre in Edmonton and Sunrise Native Addiction Services in Calgary.

“When you are on the street, there’s nothing else to do but drink and drug and get lost in the fucking spiral so that

you can't get out," says Maggie, adding that people shoplift or do whatever they have to do to keep the supply of numbing substances coming.

"The government doesn't understand. They don't understand how people want to get themselves out, but they have to cheat their way out to get the extra money they need. They keep expecting us to do something different with our lives, but they won't even give us the extra money to get our IDs. How can we get IDs when we don't have money?"

That's a good question, because without official identification, there's no hope of social assistance and very little chance a person can turn their life around.

Maggie's not entirely sure how she ended up in the HomeBase program. They showed up at Alpha House after the hypothermia episode and that was it, she says. However, she's glad to be housed, especially while she undergoes the lengthy chemotherapy-like treatment for hepatitis C. It makes her tired, sad and sometimes a little crabby. "It's like sitting in a hole and going into a deep depression. I try to keep my mind off things," she says.

If it weren't for the safety of her apartment, Maggie knows she would start using again. All the work she did at Henwood would be lost, and her year of sobriety would probably never have happened. It's just too difficult to hang onto those gains when you are vulnerable and have nowhere to lay your head in safety.

But for a while there were still question marks in her future. Initially Maggie thought the HomeBase program only lasted for a couple of years. Then what? What would happen to her dream of going to school to do addictions counselling?

"I don't want to make plans because if I don't have a place to go, what's the sense of having plans?" she says. "I don't know what's in store for me. I will need help to find a place that's affordable. Where am I going to stay for \$323?"

Reassured that HomeBase will be there for her as long as she needs it, she's more determined than ever to turn her street experiences into a force for the good and to help other "wounded" people find their way back into society.

## SOURCES

Interviews: Dave Bronconnier, Shelley Mike, Brian O'Leary, Steve Snyder, Wayne Stewart, Jim Gray, Pat Rice

CBC News, *Homeless Man Criticizes 6-Month Sentence*, November 18, 2004

CBC News, *Sentences in Beating of Homeless Man Appealed*, December 31, 2004

CBC News, *Albertans Hustle to Help Homeless as Cold Snap Continues*, November 26, 2006

CTV, *Pair Jailed for Beating Calgary Homeless Man*, November 17, 2004

Calgary Herald, *He Lived An Amazing Life*, December 14, 2006

Gray, Jim, *Homeless/Stopgap Measures Just a Snow Job*, Calgary Herald, December 14, 2006

Gray, Jim, and O'Leary, Brian, private email correspondence

O'Leary, Brian, *10 Year Plan – Chronology Summary*, October 6, 2011

O'Leary, Brian, *A New Strategy to End Homelessness*, Calgary Herald, November 16, 2006





## BOLDLY GOING WHERE NO AGENCY HAS GONE BEFORE

**D**ecember is a busy month, but when Steve Snyder, president and CEO of TransAlta, makes a call to Tim Hearn, president and CEO of Imperial Oil Canada, there's always time to listen. This wasn't a business matter; it was more of a philanthropic question. Would Tim serve on a new leadership committee to end homelessness in Calgary?

Hearn's wife Susan was already trying to galvanize a group of women to do something about the situation, so he was very aware of it and also because "it was just so much in front of your face." Hearn also knew that a lot of people had put a lot of effort in, but to no avail. "I knew we had to do something different," he says. Hearn accepted, and not only joined the leadership committee, but also sat on a subcommittee looking at housing. At the beginning of the deliberations he put the executives onto the sprint track with the words, "If we take two years to develop a plan, it's too long. We will look like a bunch of fat-cat CEOs not looking too excited about a critical issue." Point taken.

Jim Gray, the oilman who had stirred up the business community about the situation, knew his job was finished when Snyder agreed to lead the initiative. He has famously said that he didn't leave his fingerprints on the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness. It has been



**Tim Hearn:**  
"I knew we had to do  
something different."

observed, however, that he certainly left his bootprints on it. Snyder took over the recruiting drive, which continued fast and furiously throughout December 2006, to form the Calgary Committee to End Homelessness (CCEH). He didn't want it to be an average group, but rather the brightest the city had to offer. Initially he promised the work would be all over and done in 18 months, which made it an attractive proposition. After Hearn had spoken, they agreed to a scant 12 months.

No sector was left untapped from Ken King, president and CEO of the Calgary Flames, to Nashir Samanani of the Aga Khan Council for the Prairies, and Rick George CEO of Suncor, to politicians from three levels of government and agency representatives. Bishop Fred Henry, who had fallen out with Art Smith over the use of lottery funds because "they don't fit with helping the homeless," jumped on board again. Henry recalls that, like others, he was enthralled by the vision of ending it, not just reducing it, in 10 years.

"You want to *end* homelessness?"

"Yes."

With that Henry threw his mitre into the ring. The concept, as described, looked creative and yet it had already been tried and tested in other cities. It was also in keeping with Henry's adherence to the gospel of walking with the people you are trying to help. "From a faith perspective, it was obvious," he says. "You take the exodus out of slavery, the exile returning from Babylon, Jesus bringing the good news to the poor. It's what it's all about." It had another virtue, too, in that it looked less likely to perpetuate institutions set up for emergencies like food banks and shelters that were supposed to disappear once the crisis was over.

Having agreed to help, Henry found himself on the CCEH, a group of about 30 individuals formed in January of 2007. Supporting it were six other committees – prevention, housing, services, communications and outreach, implementation and research. There was quite a bit of cross-pollination, with some people appearing at more than one table, but all working hard to put together a Calgary-made plan at breakneck speed.

The first meeting was held January 9, 2007, in the TransAlta boardroom with 16 people round the table and six regrets. By that time there had already been meetings with all three levels of government and the city's commitment was signalled by the



**Bishop Fred Henry was enthralled: “You want to end homelessness?”**

presence of Mayor Dave Bronconnier who welcomed everyone and offered human and financial support. He also agreed to bring data on the Calgary situation to the next meeting so that the CCEH could figure out the scope of the problem. Bernadette Majdell from Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) had researched US plans and what was happening in Red Deer, which at that time was ahead of Calgary. She gave a presentation based on her findings. The meeting was only an hour and 15 minutes long and members dispersed with Snyder’s words ringing in their ears, “We need to make the great leap forward.”

For a fledgling group they had already moved a few centimetres forward. Through December an ad hoc group including Majdell, Lana Wells from the United Way of Calgary and Area, Pat Rice from the city and Tim Richter, director of government relations at TransAlta, had been working feverishly behind the scenes to prepare the way by cobbling together the skeleton of a plan lifted from the best that they could find in the US. In 2006, after the homeless figures for that year came out, the United Way had decided

it should become involved by organizing a Calgary summit. Rice, who had worked for the city's Family and Community Support Services for many years, was contracted to put it together. As the CCEH began to emerge, the United Way cancelled its summit and Rice was seconded to the ad hoc group.

Richter had been volunteering at St. Mary's Feed the Hungry dinner for three years and was on the United Way's public policy committee. He had met Wayne Stewart, the foundation's CEO, through a Chamber of Volunteer Organizations board. He doesn't recall how he ended up at two of the Jim Gray breakfasts, but they set something in motion. Richter was at a point in his life when he was ready for something different, but he certainly wouldn't have predicted that ending homelessness would be his next move. Until that time, he describes himself as a "marauding do-gooder who was largely unfocussed."

The plan not to reduce homelessness, but to end it, grabbed his imagination, just as it had Henry's. "I was seized with the idea: it was gutsy, it was different and instinctively it looked as though it was an idea that could make a difference," he recalls. First Stewart asked him to work as a project manager for the 10-year plan with the potential of taking over at the CHF. "I saw it as a once in a lifetime opportunity to make a significant difference," says Richter, who was on the brink of marrying a woman with two young boys. Fortunately, Victoria Bailey's values were in line with his and she was more than willing to take the huge gamble that they could manage on a much reduced salary. For three months Richter held two jobs – his TransAlta post and project manager of the plan. When asked why, he says, "Some of us are just wired funny." In April, with Snyder's blessing, he moved full time into the non-profit sector and two weeks later celebrated his marriage.

The minutes of the CCEH are, to say the least, dry and terse, not indicative of the calibre of the minds and sharpness of the discussion. Snyder likens the process to a group of employees chatting at the bar and suddenly they stumble on the solution to a work problem. At the end of the night no one can remember who came up with it because it was modified and refined throughout the evening. He knew the stakes were high and sometimes wondered if, when all was said and done, they would find themselves on the trash heap.

Richter often found the meetings stressful. "It was fascinating,



dynamic and nerve-wracking for me to be with the best and the brightest people who had tons of experience in homelessness and business. I knew for a fact I wasn't the smartest guy," he says, but there was no doubt in his mind about the kinetic energy of the assembled Type As. "It achieved a miraculous balance. No one person was able to dominate the conversation. There was a good balance of heart and head in the room."

At times, Richter recalls, "I felt like a chuckwagon driver barrelling around the track hanging on for dear life, trying to get the plan out of the door." One of the great assets the business sector had was focus, so when that chuckwagon looked as though it were going off course, the galloping horses all pulled back in the right direction. He had every confidence that their model was a good one, the smartest people in Calgary were at the table and the agencies were on board. "It was pretty hard to screw up."

Strongly swayed by the economic statistics coming out of the US, the CCEH was convinced by housing first. Time and time again, cities south of the border reported that it cost less to house their chronically homeless than it did to keep pushing them through the revolving doors of the legal and medical systems, and there were statistics to show there were similar people with similar costs in Calgary. By housing them it was felt Calgary could also build an economic argument that would be very persuasive to people who held the purse strings – business and the Alberta government – to push forward to end homelessness, not just ameliorate it.

There was some thought about changing the mandate to ending poverty, but many of the business people felt that would never get anywhere, says Snyder. There was a lot of debate on the CCEH, but in the end, it was decided not to "dilute the mandate." Another virtue of having high-powered corporate types was that they were used to thinking big, planning and investing in projects like a billion-dollar power plant that would last 40 years. They were well aware that you can never muster all the data at the outset because Year 1 will look very different from Year 40; therefore you design the project with room for evolution. This meant that when the 10-year plan was getting bogged down, the business sector didn't let perfection become the enemy of the good. Instead, they created processes for the plan to improve and adapt over time.

Although Richter was working with people who were

undaunted by big, complex projects and with skin-tight deadlines, sometimes the CCEH asked challenging questions. Not to be outdone, Bronconnier would throw a curve about wider city concerns. Often, though, Bishop Fred Henry would stop them in their tracks by clearly stating the right thing to do. Then they were back to the drawing board. An unexpected benefit, although in retrospect it seems fairly obvious, was the insight the non-profits and the corporate worlds gained about each other. Many of the non-profits regarded business people as “those rich bastards in the towers.” They began to see that most of them were on the CCEH for altruistic reasons and, indeed, many because they had some connection to the street like a family member with addictions or mental health issues, or a sister fleeing domestic violence. When the microscope was reversed, the corporate world discovered the non-profits operate at a level of scrutiny that they would consider crippling and their administration costs are so low as to be impossible in the world of oil and gas deals.

Despite this mixing and mingling with agency representatives on subcommittees – the tentacles of the main body of the CCEH – the non-profits didn’t all jump on board. Not all were like Pat Nixon, then head of The Mustard Seed who is reported to have said, “This parade is moving and it’s playing music that I like.” The agencies can be divided into three groups: those who fell in almost immediately, partly because they had been thinking along these lines anyway; those that took a wait-and-see attitude; and those termed the resisters who dug in their heels, perhaps fearing the elimination of their jobs as they knew them. Many of the middle group of leaders like Stacey Petersen, executive director of Fresh Start Recovery, a program for men, soon saw the benefits.

Initial reactions from people used to the sobriety-first model were often along the lines of: if you house someone who is using and who has lived under a bridge for 10 years, they will trash the place and it will become a flophouse for their buddies. Or, as one CEO said, “It will just be a shit show; we’ll be replacing furniture weekly.” They were swayed for different reasons – perhaps it was the human rights issue; perhaps the economic figures convinced them; or they saw that, despite everything, the problem was not going away.

In Petersen’s case, the ah-ha moment was seeing the PBS

documentary, *Finding Footie*, part of the *Home At Last* series on the Now program. It was a powerful insight into the life of Edward Doyle, aka Footie. He used alcohol and paced the streets to temporarily block painful memories from his youth. His “bedroom” was behind the baseball bleachers in a park. Then Pathways, a New York City housing program, caught up with him and the documentary traces his progress. At the end a sober Footie is asked how he feels. “Hopeful,” he said. “Hopeful that I won’t feel ashamed anymore.” If the timing of the documentary – early 2007 – was a godsend to the cause by changing hearts, the financial statistics changed minds.

Petersen soon came to realize that housing first keeps people alive long enough to choose treatment for their addictions. “At the end of the day when a man or a woman locks the door behind them and they are safe and not worried about being stabbed, assaulted, or ripped off, (that) is when they choose to seek help because they have hope and dignity,” he says.

One of the important factors that enabled the CCEH to move fast was seed funding right at the outset. Wayne Stewart recalls estimating that they required \$300,000 for staffing, research, consultants and other basic needs. Once again, Brian O’Leary, a partner in Burnet, Duckworth and Palmer LLP (BD&P), dug deep and gave \$25,000, but not just that, he also persuaded BD&P to match his contribution. Then Harvey Cenaiko, a retired police officer who had spent years walking the downtown beat, stepped in. As a Progressive Conservative MLA for Calgary-Buffalo, Cenaiko had been the province’s solicitor general and minister of public security until December 2006. He was now sitting on the CCEH as the provincial representative. Each MLA at that time was allocated a discretionary \$75,000 out of lottery funds. Cenaiko and three other MLAs, at his behest, donated their share to the cause. Finally, the federal government also chipped in.

“We had our money to hire (staff); we became ‘recipient whores’,” says Stewart, “and off we go.”

In fact, the CCEH was already off and running. By January 4, a four-page position paper had been prepared outlining the key messages, giving the background for such urgency and detailing some of the successes in the US. It also contained a Q & A section tackling pertinent issues, for example:

**Q. Is it realistic to think that homelessness can actually be ended?**

A. There are over 3,400 people homeless in Calgary; we're not willing to accept that. Our approach marks a significant shift from managing homelessness to a community-wide effort to end it. And we have every reason to believe we can succeed – while Calgary's homeless population has grown on average 30 per cent every two years for a decade, other communities in the US using a similar approach to ours, have been reducing homelessness.

Snyder and Stewart, the main spokespeople at that time, were well briefed for the media conference to announce the formation of the CCEH and their vision of a 10-year plan. It was held in the TransAlta lobby on January 9, the same day as the initial committee meeting. The location was symbolic, showing that the initiative was community-driven rather than agency- or city-driven. This was very important because it told the world it was more than a bunch of concerned do-gooders hitting up business and government for more cash; it meant fresh eyes were looking at a festering social sore and they wouldn't be bound by the red tape of any existing organization or level of government.

"Ladies and gentlemen, all of us are here today to announce the creation of the Calgary Committee to End Homelessness. The committee is comprised of leaders in our community. Leaders in business and philanthropy and faith and health and all three levels of government who have come together as a community to stand up and say that we will no longer tolerate the homelessness of so many of our fellow Calgarians," Snyder told the 50 to 100 people assembled, including the Calgary Herald, the Sun, radio mikes and TV cameras.

"It's clear to us that despite the tireless efforts of hundreds of staff and thousands of volunteers in social agencies, the public service and our charities ... that the status quo is not working. The current processes cannot keep pace with this growing problem," Snyder said.

Bronconnier thanked Snyder and said that solving homelessness would require a range of solutions, from support for those with mental illness and addictions, to affordable housing as well as skills training. "It's important to ask people who are big thinkers to look

at the challenges.” Cenaiko was present on behalf of the province, which under new Premier Ed Stelmach had just embarked on its own affordable housing task force, but no elected representative turned up from the federal government.

Some non-profit staff were more than a little sceptical that “a bunch of businessmen” could come up with a solution that had so far eluded them. And, according to the Herald of January 10, some of the shelter users themselves took a wait-and-see stand. “It’s a lovely sentiment,” John Harris, 61, was quoted as saying. A resident of the Calgary Drop-In & Rehab Society for four years, he was unsure whether the problem could be eradicated given the length of time agencies had unsuccessfully devoted to it.

Richter likes to say that he hasn’t had an original thought since he began working with the CCEH. While not the full truth, it is true that he and everyone who was involved in the plan cherry-picked their way through reports and plans emanating from the US. Quite by good fortune, someone at the city had attended a conference in the US where they had picked up a business card for Keri Bedell, an associate capacity builder with the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH). As Pat Rice was searching for someone to help construct a plan, her colleague handed her the card saying, “Give her a try.”

In December Rice contacted Bedell to organize a visit to Calgary. In Rice’s words, Bedell turned out to be a “lovely young woman” who was both knowledgeable and a good communicator. She was happy to hold the ad hoc committee’s hands as they worked their way through what had to be done. Checking her records, Rice is amazed at the constant flow from her computer to Bedell’s and back again. “She was very good to deal with,” says Rice.

On the afternoon of January 24, Bedell flew into Calgary. She landed at 1 pm and was picked up by Rice. By 3 pm she had already been briefed and was meeting with Snyder and Richter.

Bedell was a woman on a mission. Her job was to provide communities around the US with “technical assistance through research analysis, training and direct onsite support of their efforts to develop and implement plans to end homelessness.” Now she was bringing that expertise and experience to Canada, more specifically to Calgary.

After dinner with Stewart and O’Leary at Hotel Arts, Bedell

was allowed to retire, or more likely, to prepare for the big day in front of her.

She hit the deck running on January 25 at 8:30 am with a meeting more than three hours long at McDougall Centre to learn more about Calgary's progress and to field questions from some of the major players, including John te Linde from the city and Trish Cameron from the Canadian Mental Health Association. They identified and clarified some of the key issues. Then at 11:45 they broke for lunch with the CHF board, the Community Action Committee and the 10-year plan project team, formerly the ad hoc team but now officially ensconced in its role. This truly was a working lunch with food for the body and the mind. Bedell took all the guests through a PowerPoint presentation giving an overview of 10-year plans and how to build them.

The slides depicted no haggard faces, no panhandlers' signs and no quotes from the down and out, or even the happily housed. There were plenty of bar graphs, pie charts and statistics. Bedell led them through a number of specific plans, all demonstrating different ways communities as diverse as Anchorage, AK, and Broward County, FL, had tackled their situation. Then it came the time to get the juices flowing in Calgary. Decide who needs to be at the table, who's doing what and when, Bedell said. What is Calgary's situation and its needs? She showed them some strategies around such things as emergency and systems prevention, outreach, shortening stays in shelters and, very importantly, data collection.

Much of it was very US oriented and some of it was of no use here, such as a slide entitled *Additional Resources*, none of which were applicable to Canada. Any other city might have rejected the concept as being "too American," but Calgary with its close business links to the US and fuelled by a huge sense of urgency wasn't put off that easily.

By 1:15 pm, the napkins balled up and the last cup of coffee drained, the assembled guests and Bedell were busy tailoring a draft plan for the next six, 12 and 18 months, identifying key elements and dates. When people had a question, Bedell could tell them how various US communities had handled it, so that the best option could be studied for implementation in Calgary. Philip Mangano had devised a document, *The 10-Year Planning Process To End Chronic Homelessness In Your Community*, that was basically a 10-

Year Plan For Dummies. One of the key sections was the 10-step outline:

- Commit the jurisdiction to developing a 10-year plan.
- Identify stakeholders.
- Convene a working group.
- Gather research and data on homelessness.
- Define your community's homeless problem.
- Develop strategies to address these problems.
- Solicit stakeholder feedback and finalize strategic plan.
- Create an action plan to implement strategies.
- Announce and publicize the plan.
- Implement the plan.

Bedell coached them through these stages and their main components. At around 5 pm a basic draft plan and an organizational chart were complete. Everyone put their notebooks away and Bedell was allowed to return to her hotel to relax and to regroup for another early morning start.

On January 26, the same people who had been at the McDougall Centre the previous day were gathered by 8:30 am in the Trans-Alta cafeteria. They had two hours to debrief with Bedell, to ask any questions that hadn't previously popped into their heads and to pinpoint and discuss further actions and decision items. By 11 am, Rice was driving Bedell to the airport to catch her flight back to the US.

Richter had mixed feelings. "I remember feeling really excited about what was possible," he says. "I recall around then I began to make the mental transition to homelessness from electricity lobbyist. I didn't have an agreement with the CHF yet, but I knew this was what I wanted to do. I was also pretty worried about how much I didn't know." He was worried, too, by the lack of Calgary data because they were, to a large extent, relying on the city's homeless counts that were only a snapshot of one night every two years. They did not begin to factor in the hidden homeless, people who were couch-surfing, living with their pimps or in overcrowded, unsafe situations. Moreover, teasing through other community plans, Richter had no idea how and why some of them had arrived at their conclusions.

Rice says it was a real eye-opener to see a whole new set of

possibilities for dealing with homelessness and “great fun” to be part of something so significant. “At times it felt like we were holding hands and jumping from one cliff to the next.” Although Bernadette Majdell was more familiar with the field than most, she too approved of what she had heard. “She (Bedell) was quite helpful as she was able to point out the learnings and the gaps of the 10-year plan process from other jurisdictions. It gave us the opportunity to directly learn from others.”

The February CCEH meeting increased the pressure. Until that point, 18 months was the plan’s due date, but at Hearn’s urging, it was adjusted to January 9, 2008. They had 11 months left. The meeting also heard a summary of the city’s research, which gave the committee enough information to move forward. It was decided that if further data were needed, to gather it on the fly. Stewart outlined the proposed organizational structure that included the leadership committee, an executive committee, a full-time project manager and five working subcommittees – prevention, housing, services, implementation and communications. It was adopted there and then.

The subcommittees were set up so that the chair was also a member of the main committee. Sometimes it was because they were knowledgeable and in other cases it was because they were interested in the topic. The co-chair was always someone working in the field and much of the work fell on their shoulders. For example, Dr. Pam Thompson of The Alex co-chaired the prevention committee; Majdell at CMHC, the housing committee; Stacey Petersen of Fresh Start Recovery, the services committee; Tim Moro of Ipsos Reid, the communications committee; and the United Way’s Lana Wells, the implementation committee. The research team included people from the city, the United Way, the University of Calgary, Vibrant Communities Calgary and George Coppus & Associates. In all about 77 volunteers from public, private and non-profit sectors were now enlisted in the cause.

“It was important to bring into the fold everyone who needed to be there, bringing diverse viewpoints and perspectives,” says Majdell who was pregnant with her first child through most of the year. One of the virtues of having so many people on board, she adds, is that the plan became dinner conversation around many influential tables, preparing the way for its eventual release.



Rice and Bedell worked hard to provide orientations and terms of reference for each of the subcommittees, having them ready for their first meetings around the middle of March. For example, the mandate of the prevention committee was: “to engage key stakeholders, identify solutions and develop the necessary strategies, plans, benchmarks, timeframes and actions to ‘close the front door’ into homelessness as part of Calgary’s 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness. This committee should address as a minimum: emergency prevention, systems prevention and ensuring adequate income.” For emergency and systems prevention and adequate income, Bedell outlined in the orientation the critical elements, effective examples from the US, and what was already happening in Calgary. Bedell gave each committee follow-up and commitments. She asked the prevention group to invite more strategically chosen people to join it in order to extend its reach; to obtain more information on government benefits and a living wage; to develop an inventory of services; and so on.

Without missing a beat the subcommittees all reported to the next CCEH monthly meeting on March 20. The addictions sector already had a strategy in place that was outlined by Petersen. After a few questions, Snyder directed the subcommittees to review it to see what should be adopted as part of the over-arching plan. Other notable comments came from the services committee that warned many agencies were operating in “crisis mode,” and from the communications committee that saw the need to “reprofile” the homeless because the stereotypical person is “only the tip of the iceberg.” To improve the data, Richter had begun work on something called a homeless management information system. To get this right, it would take far longer than anyone had anticipated and would be a recurring theme for several years.

Finally, Snyder asked the subcommittees to identify some “quick wins” for the April 19 meeting. This became an important part of the plan’s strategy. But at this point everyone was gearing up for a community summit on March 23. It was to be Pat Rice’s swansong; her contract was over, but everyone was further along the road than anyone could have imagined – or hoped.

In early March, Bedell had supplied Rice with a possible list of speakers for the summit. Out of about a dozen names, Nan Roman, president of the NAEH, was chosen to give the keynote

address to the 320 people gathered that sunny Monday morning at the Stampede grounds. Some were curious, some were invested in homelessness; and some were looking for real solutions.

Emceed by TV personality Barb Higgins, the crowd heard Roman describe what could be done. She was followed by Sharon Stroick from the city, who again outlined the Calgary situation. After a welcome coffee break, Rob Hess from New York City, Marge Wherley from Hennepin County, MN, and Heather Lyons from Portland, OR, were on stage for a panel discussion. After lunch, people gravitated towards one of three breakout sessions around the themes of prevention, services and housing, where semi-formal focus groups were held and the results reported back at the end of the session. Some of the ideas and direction that emerged from these groups were later incorporated into the subcommittees' work.

Two days later, Bedell, who had been in town for the event and had also managed to sneak a trip to Banff, sent an email (complete with attached photo of the Rockies,) addressed to Majdell, Rice, Richter and Stewart:

Hi everybody,

I just wanted to follow up with you all about the Summit now that I'm back at the office.

First of all, I have to say that I am SO impressed. You guys pulled that off very quickly and I thought the day went really smoothly. I heard nothing but positive feedback from the community members that I spoke to and the committee members that I saw and caught up with that day.

It seemed that a lot of guests who were new to the idea of 10-year planning were excited by the panel speakers, so I hope that you feel that they were useful. I thought the connection between their successes and possibilities for Calgary was really crystallizing for people in the afternoon. I know that a lot of great ideas were being generated in the prevention session, and I trust the others were productive too.

Rice's reply in part said:

As I think you likely know, United Way's financial support to this project (and therefore my involvement) is winding down at the end of April. They had extended their support and my assistance for

a couple months, while the project manager and other staff were appointed, committees established and (the) summit completed. I have really enjoyed being a part of the project and will be so excited to see how it develops and will miss my involvement . . . A huge part of my excitement about this project has been working with you and learning from you – you have brought so much to it and we would be nowhere close to where we are without your knowledge, realism and fantastic consulting.

At the April CCEH meeting there was an “intensive discussion” about the pros and cons of secondary suites prompted by city planner Michelle Broadhurst’s presentation on the land-use bylaw. Chris Bedford of Karo Design presented a proposal for the website, which was universally liked. It put a face on homelessness, provided facts and allowed better communication with the community – the three priorities.

Another important face was revealed in the May release of *All Our Sisters, Stories of Homeless Women in Canada*, by Calgary writer Susan Scott. The gendered lens underscored how homelessness is often a completely different experience for women and children who tend to be hidden from view and who also tend to elude the official counts.

As spring moved into summer, Philip Mangano was back in town for a housing conference in May and to confer with the CCEH. The monthly committee meeting again discussed secondary suites, although it was acknowledged that there would have to be a lot of work around “rampant NIMBYism.” The June meeting lasted 2½ hours but worked its way through a mountain of material, including a review of the vision and mission and even housing first as a concept. Richter reminded the group that homelessness would still occur at the end of the 10 years, but the aim was to reduce shelter stays to seven days as opposed to months, or in some cases, years. Then it was announced that information-gathering meetings with people experiencing homelessness were being organized and that Sam Tsemberis, a clinical psychologist who founded New York’s Pathways to Housing in 1992, would be here in August to outline how to set up a similar program in Calgary.

As an outreach worker, Tsemberis had met many people experiencing chronic homelessness who also had mental health

issues and addictions. “When we started, we were committed to listen to what the client wanted on their own terms. We weren’t thinking solely about housing,” he says. “This was a totally consumer-driven idea. We asked and they wanted housing first.” Interestingly, Richter was hearing exactly the same thing from a wide variety of people in his Calgary consultations.

To be eligible for the New York program, clients had to be homeless and to have a psychiatric condition. Clients, like Footie in the PBS video, are supported by an Assertive Community Treatment team that pays house calls and helps with everything from budgeting to psychiatric treatment, all depending on the individual. To the nay-sayers, Tsemberis was able to provide stats that showed 85 per cent of those housed remained housed, despite their complex and multiple issues. He calculated that housing and support cost \$22,500 USD a year per client, whereas a shelter bed cost \$35,000. “Why wouldn’t you do this?” he challenged.

Like Bedell before him, Tsemberis was kept busy on his August 14-16 visit. The CCEH saw every minute as an opportunity to learn; they also wanted a Calgary agency to take on a pilot Pathways program almost immediately to demonstrate that successful housing first programs weren’t just a New York phenomenon. It would give Snyder one of his “quick wins.”

Tsemberis delivered several presentations and workshops on Pathways to organizations like the Calgary Health Region. One meeting was targeted at representatives of agencies that might take it on, including The Alex’s CEO Shelley Heartwell. Tsemberis discussed ways it could be organized in Calgary and the chances of successfully transplanting it. One of the problems he saw was the lack of affordable housing in scattered sites across Calgary, a key element because it downplays the chance of NIMBY, often the death knell for half-way houses and small shelters.

The Alex was already involved with the 10 Year Plan with Dr. Pam Thompson co-chairing the prevention subcommittee. Although the agency hadn’t yet taken on housing, the Pathways model interested the aptly named Heartwell because of its multidisciplinary approach and because The Alex’s medical programs already served the same vulnerable population. As she sat in McDougall Centre listening to Tsemberis, she scribbled notes for a plan and a budget for a Calgary Pathways.

“I showed it to him after his talk and he said that it was exactly IT,” she says.

What Heartwell didn’t realize was that CCEH was anxious for a speedy demonstration that housing first could work and that, after the initial investment, it would save money. A few days later, Richter phoned Heartwell. “Is The Alex interested in leading the way? If so could you write up a proposal in a week?” There was \$1.5 million in the kitty.

Heartwell looked at some of the other Pathways programs, refined her scribbles and appointed Thompson to lead the Calgary version. Described as an “exceptionally bright, capable and energetic physician,” Thompson had worked in the homeless field for many years. The second week in September, the money was in place, staff were hired throughout October, and by December the first of 60 clients was found a home. The Canadian version differed from the US model in that it included doctors as well as psych nurses in the Assertive Community Treatment team.



**Shelley Heartwell,**  
CEO of The Alex.

The Alex team of seven clinicians with different areas of expertise was asked to help slow the revolving door for people with conditions like bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. The program is based on a harm-reduction model so that clients do not have to give up drugs, alcohol or behaviours frowned on by society. Instead, the team helps individuals define their own needs and then supports their recovery. “It was a paradigm shift. We didn’t have preconceived ideas of what it should be,” says Heartwell. “We got it because we were small and nimble and we went for it. We weren’t part of the entrenched system, but we had been round long enough that we had a decent reputation.”

A year later The Alex added a second team, also with a capacity of 60 clients. It was designed to provide housing, healthcare and social services to those involved with the criminal justice system. Traditionally, they are released onto the street with no money, nowhere safe to stay, and few, if any, supports. Instead, the team steers them into their own apartment and provides support in a similar fashion to the mental health team.

The Alex holds the leases for Pathways clients and if there are problems with the landlord, staff move fast to sort them out. If the client is asked to leave one apartment another is found for them. Very quickly, the stats started to tell a good story. By 2011 there had been a 67-per-cent decrease in brushes with the police and 37-per-cent fewer EMS contacts. Almost half the clients were involved in a vocational or educational activity and 94 per cent had retained their housing. It helps that, if there is contact with emergency services, someone from The Alex can be there to support them.

"The reward is priceless when an individual or a family comes back from under the bridge," says Sam Kolias, chair and CEO of Boardwalk Rental Communities, which has given over five per cent of its suites to subsidized housing from the beginning of the 10 Year Plan. Kolias, on the lower rungs of lists of Canada's 100 wealthiest people, adds, "The victories are so sweet."

Thompson worked long and hard to break down barriers, to educate the media and to connect with various arms of the provincial government. The clients, too, required some orientation because in Pathways they are assigned a team, not an individual worker. "Some of the clients struggle because they are used to the same person," says Heartwell. "For others it has worked very well."

Although the CCEH didn't meet officially in July and August, work continued apace. The August Community Update announced a series of public consultations grouped around various topics like frontline workers, women and homelessness, affordable housing options, youth, and immigrants and refugees. "The feedback and information received by participants will be integral to the development of Calgary's 10 Year Plan." Readers of the update were also exhorted to contact their alderman to express support for the legalization of secondary suites.

In a speech to the Canadian Housing Renewal Association (CHRA), Snyder said that in 2001 secondary, or unofficial rental housing, made up 41.3 per cent of Calgary's rental stock, but that all these suites were technically illegal and therefore not subject to inspections. Legal secondary suites are cheaper to create than building apartments and a significant short-term contribution to alleviating the housing crisis, he said. Calling for the regulation of secondary suites, Snyder added, "This is where the selflessness, an open mind and courage come in. Calgarians will need to keep

an open mind to secondary suites in the neighbourhoods – which shouldn't be too hard since they are already there."

Laurie could have told the CHRA all about illegal accommodation. She arrived in Calgary in September 2000 with her partner and three boys aged 7, 5 and 5 months. They moved here so that the older two boys could be closer to their birth father. To begin with, they stayed in one room at the house of Laurie's partner's brother. Laurie was the only sober adult in the mix.

That was the first unsuitable place. Laurie was then "housed" in a townhouse with no running water and no floor covering. Three fake landlords extracted rent. The real landlord evicted them. Then they lived in a tent at a campground; next they illicitly bunked down with another woman at a second-stage shelter; it was followed by a basement suite subject to sewer floods; then another basement suite with mice and mushrooms; she couch-surfed illegally with a friend; and took over an apartment with a blocked kitchen sink and no joy from the landlord. This is just one woman's experience when she wasn't at Inn from the Cold. Clearly, there were too many unregulated suites out there and people living in them were below anyone's radar.

Through the summer, the working committee and Richter, with two staff members, steamed on at many levels. Office administrator Shannon Dougherty teamed up with executive assistant Loree Clark, who was described by Wayne Stewart as a "bull in a china shop keeping Tim (Richter) on track." Their greatest assets were various toolkits, two in particular: one came from the National Alliance to End Homelessness and the other was Mangano's from the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. Both were US organizations, but they had enough flexibility that they could be adapted to Calgary.

By the time everyone was back at the table in September, Richter was able to report that he and Stewart had had a good briefing session with Ray Danyluk, minister of municipal affairs, and Yvonne Fritz, associate minister of affordable housing and urban development, on a number of topics ranging from the CCEH's progress to cost-benefit data of housing first. He also sounded them out on things the province could do like increasing income supports, clarifying legislation around inclusionary zoning and providing incentives for affordable housing. Richter reported that the

ministers had both become supporters of 10-year plans and housing first. "Danyluk was engaged, interested and asked good questions," Richter told the committee. "They both have a real desire to take action and to be seen taking action."

When Fritz was appointed to her newly created post on June 23, she called housing the "hottest issue" in the province. The issue had dominated the spring session of the legislature, even though \$63 million had been allocated to Calgary for affordable housing. "With it being seriously the No. 1 issue for Albertans, it has a very high priority with this premier," she said. Promising words, indeed.

At the other end of the social spectrum, CCEH staff had organized six public consultations. It was an eye-opener for people who had never had contact with marginalized people and who had no idea of the indignities and the hoops that the system imposes on them. It was particularly poignant for Richter who had a new family of two sons. He wondered what it would be like if they were sick in the middle of January and there was nowhere to take them but the Devonian Gardens, or if they cried in the middle of the night, waking everyone up in the church basement. He came to understand that the shelter system was set up by providers so they could give what they had to give, not what the clients needed – a home.

Again and again, they heard the need for a home where people would be better able to sort out their problems. "It was moving, challenging, insightful and a blinding glimpse of the obvious and yet the system wasn't set up to provide homes," Richter recalls. There are certain people who linger in his memory like the Aboriginal youth "who had seen more in 17 years than I had in 40," and a single mother trying to parent against all odds in the shelter system.

Fears about the plan were beginning to gnaw away at Richter as he dug through the research. He began to realize not only how little he knew, but also how little the experts knew. "Sometimes the desire to curl up in a fetal position was nearly overwhelming, but I kept hammering away," he recalls. Part of the problem was that he had to craft a plan that would speak to the CCEH business people, appeal to the agencies, and also do the right thing by people experiencing homelessness.

Snyder constantly reassured him that in big, lengthy projects, there is never enough information so you do the best, making the



most reasonable assumptions and setting it up so that it can adapt. "There is no possible way in 2007 you will know what 2015 will look like," Snyder repeated. This advice moulded Richter's plan into three broad phases: getting out of the gates, deeper systemic changes and the tidy-up period.

Plans were also underway for the first Project Homeless Connect scheduled for November 22. The idea was that with 500 charitable organizations and government departments offering services it was hard for workers to find their way around the system, let alone clients. On top of that there was very little communication between the agencies. For one day, 50 service providers and 150 volunteers would gather under one roof with everything from free haircuts to home-finding services - one-stop shopping. The September CCEH meeting approved it on a one-time basis with an evaluation to determine the necessity of future ones. In the end, the first Homeless Connect was held January 26, 2008, at the Calgary TELUS Convention Centre. It was such a success that it continues to the present.

The meeting also heard from Heartwell and Stephen Donaldson, deputy chief of EMS, about the Pathways pilot program. The CHF had already designated funding from Alberta's Outreach Initiative Pilot Project - the result of Terry Roberts' work with the Seven Cities group. It was estimated that it would cost less than \$30,000 a year for each client. Participants would be required to pay one-third of their income towards their rent. On the streets, the same individuals cost Calgarians more than \$100,000 each in services. The committee approved, agreeing to "communicate the great news story once the plan is polished."

Once this was done, Mayor Dave Bronconnier updated the committee on various municipal-provincial initiatives and the effect they would have on Calgary communities, stressing that one-time capital funding would not be sufficient to solve the problems and that a long-term commitment was needed. In response, Snyder outlined a plan to have small groups composed of committee members to discuss some of the issues raised.

As summer merged into fall, more public consultations were held with immigrants and refugees, people with disabilities, seniors and families. This last group had some perceptive things to say about the system. It "only treats components of the family, not

the whole unit, and that there is a charity model towards homeless families – not a lot of caring or compassion.” They asked for more flexibility and fewer cookie-cutter solutions and, above all, for housing first with more affordable safe housing.

Richter was still wrestling with the plan. Part of his strategy was to take the findings of the various subcommittees, flesh them out, add best practices from other jurisdictions and then feed them back to the subcommittees for comment and approval. For some of the subcommittees, just wrapping their heads around the idea of housing first was a sufficient challenge; it proved to be a valuable acclimatization period. As a result of the struggle to find information, when the plan was up and running Richter lured Alina Turner away from the United Way for her stellar research skills. “I want you to be less like a professor and more like a detective,” he told her. “I need information I can act on to help the plan adapt.”

It was an anxious time for Richter, but on the plus side he wasn’t encumbered by any preconceptions of how things should be done, which helped him “believe in the impossible – there’s a certain optimism born.” He also had no vested interests when he heard how broken the system was from the participants in the community focus groups. Often their stories were very different from the agencies’. Repeatedly Snyder reassured him. “Don’t tie yourself in knots. Do the best with the best information you have.”

Richter took comfort, too, from the Portland planners, at that time the model above all others. The people behind it confessed that it had almost fallen apart because there was so much friction and controversy. As in Portland, the process in Calgary was “ugly, stressful and complicated.” The housing strategy was a particular headache because the subcommittee had lots of ideas, but was struggling for a number of reasons. There were some great options, says Majdell, citing suggestions like Lego-type housing. But they had to temper them with reality. “We had to adjust innovation to be respectful.” Also, it was hard to do the math to figure out what might work and be cost effective.

Eventually Richter called in a consultant, Glenn Lyons, to draw in more information from the prevention and services sectors and to turn it into something coherent that would be acceptable to Calgarians. Lyons spent most of October and November analysing proposals to understand the potential cost, and with the assistance

of George Coppus, part of the CCEH research team, to see if housing would indeed be cheaper than shelter. “It wasn’t perfect,” says Richter, “but it was the best we had and, again, we built in room for adaptation.”

At the October CCEH meeting Richter reviewed a presentation he had produced for the members outlining the key conclusions, principles and “eight big ideas.” Some were uneasy that the “big ideas” would be seen as a direct challenge to developers, social service agencies and all three levels of government. However, Richter was able to show that he was working with all the groups and that most of them were on board, including Minister Danyluk who “has recently and repeatedly mentioned housing first in the legislature.”

In fact, by the end of the year, the Alberta government was steering its own boat in the same direction – good news indeed for Calgary because their lofty aims would not be achievable without provincial support and cash. In January 2007, Premier Ed Stelmach had sent out a provincial task force on affordable housing which gleaned some important data. Thirty-five days after the report was received, the province released the unheard-of sum of \$285 million in new funding for affordable housing and homelessness. As the snowball rolled onwards late in 2007, Stelmach and Yvonne Fritz, who was by then housing and urban affairs minister, announced Alberta was ready to embark on its own 10-year plan.

“I am confident we are on the right track and we are starting to see early progress as a result of our investment in solutions that address housing and homelessness,” said Stelmach in a Q & A in the CCEH’s August Community Update.

After a lot of late nights and long hours, the pace was picking up.

Early in November, Snyder and Richter met with the subcommittee co-chairs to finalize their contributions. The CCEH met twice



**Premier Ed Stelmach:  
\$285 million in new  
funding for affordable  
housing.**

that month, mainly to go over the draft plan. On November 8 they picked through the 11 principles, which turned into 12 by the time the plan was announced; the five strategies; and a series of charts drawn up by Coppus which showed that, if unaddressed, homelessness would soar off the page by 2020 with figures somewhere around 18,000. Costs too would take off in the same direction.

There was still quite a bit that had to be ironed out, for example a homeless management information system had not yet been devised, or as the minutes said, “details of this system seem a bit vague.” The CCEH had rejected work done by Richter and a consultant, which proved to be a good thing because it enabled Alina Turner to start afresh and get it right further down the road. When the meeting ended everyone was reminded that the contents of the plan were strictly confidential.

On November 26, Richter took a draft version to a meeting with all the subcommittees. Thankfully, it met with an extremely enthusiastic response and he was able to present it to the CCEH four days later. Mayor Bronconnier worried that personal responsibility wasn’t emphasized enough and that if the plan worked as well as the projections predicted, Calgary would become a magnet for homeless people. On top of that, he felt it was unfair that poor families didn’t have access to “these freebies.” It was resolved that other cities must be encouraged to develop their own plans to prevent an influx here.

Again, as the committee worked its way through the 11 principles, the notion of personal accountability came up. Some weren’t so happy with this; as one outreach worker pointed out, for some of the most chronic cases personal responsibility had long since gone out of the window, otherwise they wouldn’t be where they were. However, the CCEH intended to indicate that all of us hold some responsibility and that by housing people they are being given back the element of choice in their lives, which ultimately implies responsibility.

The third strategy to ensure adequate, affordable, supportive housing and treatment capacity also sparked a lot of comment about the effect on developers and what the city could do to help in terms of incentives to developers and different ways of acquiring land. The discussion on who should implement the plan continued into the December meeting, with the pressure mounting. As the minutes said, the “decision about the implementing body must be made

soon because if the Calgary Homeless Foundation does become the implementing organization, they will need time to re-organize and address a number of governance, funding and staffing issues.”

After the CCEH had inspected the first draft, Snyder sent it to the TransAlta communications team which groomed it, ironing out inconsistencies, and generally whipped it into shape.

Around the same time, Richter and the Calgary Flames’ Ken King, a seasoned and genial communicator, participated in *Wild Rose Country*, CBC Radio’s province-wide, lunch-time call-in forum where “we reconnect and engage in smart conversation about what matters to Albertans today.” After host Donna McElligott briefly interviewed them the lines were open to listeners. “Most of the questions were along the lines of: can you really do it and how does it work?” There were a few listeners who, unaware of the dynamics of mental health and addictions issues, posed the old chestnut: why can’t they get a job? But for the most part, the foray into the public realm went really well.

Word was out that the plan was almost ready. Twenty-eight people, some not seen in a while, turned up for the December meeting to inspect what was likely to be revealed in January. It was one of the longer meetings, stretching on for three hours as people brought out their fine-tooth combs and asked searching questions. Richter reviewed the changes discussed at the last meeting, including more details on how costly doing nothing would be. The role of long-term sustained funding and housing was batted around because there would never be enough money from government and the corporate sectors for what the CCEH wanted to do. Financial creativity was at a premium. Fast-forward another few years and the CHF would create a social enterprise position to come up with new ways and opportunities of generating housing money.

The group discussed whether it was appropriate to address some of the public’s loudest concerns that mainly revolved around visible symptoms like panhandling and public intoxication. It was decided that, while housing first would decrease these manifestations of homelessness, the plan wouldn’t take ownership of them.

The CCEH wrapped up by debating implementation; most specifically which body would take charge after the plan was announced. It was already recognized that there should be a single point of accountability, but should it be the city, the province, a new

organization, or should the Calgary Homeless Foundation morph into something else? It was an increasingly urgent question.

Finally, it was decided that once again the plan would be revised and then reviewed by subcommittee chairs as soon as possible. The revisions would be circulated to the leadership committee by January 3 or 4 in order to get feedback to Richter prior to the CCEH's final meeting January 11.

Working up to the wire before his first Christmas with his new family, Richter and his team did one-on-one consultations with people who were, or who had experienced homelessness to elicit their reactions to the plan. With a sigh of relief, Richter presented a revised draft to the leadership committee on December 19. Finally, he was able to concentrate on buying gifts and other seasonal activities.

People on the street, however, were more worried about staying warm. As early as September and October, the Drop-In was so full it had to turn people away, according to an article in *Fast Forward*, a weekly newspaper. Steve Matchett was interviewed sitting outside the shelter. He was quite explicit about being homeless in sub-zero temperatures, saying, "It's shitty."

Even though the plan was coming together, the homeless situation had attracted international attention. Miloon Kothari, the UN special rapporteur on Housing, toured Canada for two weeks in October 2007, after which he declared the situation a national crisis. He specifically spoke about Calgary where "about half the people who stay in shelters have jobs." And, according to *Fast Forward*, things weren't getting any better here. The newspaper quoted two gloomy reports. One, put out by the Poverty Reduction Coalition under Jim Dinning, a former Tory cabinet minister, said a growing number of Alberta families weren't making enough to pay for their basic needs, especially single mothers with children and single people with disabilities. The other was a City of Calgary document predicting that if government didn't do a better job of supporting families, approximately 19,000 households in Calgary would be at risk of homelessness in 2008.

"I hope there is a radical shift in government policy," Kothari told the *Toronto Star*. Little did he know he was to get his wish in at least one city and then an entire province.

## Don

Recently, Don's two children came over to celebrate his son's 21st birthday. At the door, the son gave his father a hug and a kiss.

Nothing unusual about that you might say, except for the fact three years ago Don was totally estranged from his family, hiding at the Salvation Army too terrified to put his life together.

The story begins about four years ago, or maybe further back, when Don was your regular working guy. Then he fell victim to a series of random violent attacks. He was in and out of hospital for a year and, as he dryly says, "somewhat destitute."

He found a place at the Salvation Army where he holed up, crippled by post-traumatic stress disorder. Although he managed to take an addictions program there, he was so low that he used to wonder about the point of keeping going. Then one day he was referred to The Alex's Pathways to Housing program.

"I was somewhat nervous, or a lot nervous, actually earth-shatteringly nervous," he says. He didn't know what it would be like to live by himself anymore, nor did he want to screw up this opportunity to get back on his feet.

Pathways helped Don select an apartment that was close to relatives, a coffee shop, a grocery store and on good bus routes. It was tailor-made for him and it was available.

Don, feeling very panicky, moved out of the Salvation Army's Centre of Hope. Then the first major hurdle emerged. Pathways hadn't had time, as promised, to set up the furniture. The first night, they just put the mattress on the floor. Anything unscheduled was enough to spook him.

"I hardly slept at all. It was not a very pleasant start to the whole thing," says Don, who had nothing of his own. "I didn't feel secure. Will it last? Will I do something to get kicked out?"

This fear has been exacerbated when rowdy groups of people have entered the building and roamed the hallways. The shouting and banging brings back horrific memories of the brutal attacks and all his insecurities. He has been known to sleep in his shoes and clothes just so he's prepared in the event of a home invasion.

When Don first moved in, it was like pulling teeth to persuade him to meet with his Pathways worker at the coffee shop half a block away, and there was always the possibility of a total melt-down. It took a long time for him to even hang a picture. Then one day his worker brought the hooks round and it became his weekly homework to put one more piece of artwork on the wall.

“I still have my moments,” says Don, but they are increasingly fewer and further between and he knows that he can rely on Pathways to help him find a way through the dark times.

Don and the worker spent a lot of time building their relationship and in time he started to reconnect with his family. Now he’s the main support for his widowed mother, in fact he’s closer to her than ever before. “I need to be there for her,” he says. “But it’s more something I look forward to.”

His son and daughter, 17, love to hang out at his apartment and he enjoys cooking for them, which never would have happened without a nice, stable place, says Don. “It makes me feel whole, the way I was before.”



## Michael

Michael is an upstanding member of society. He spends a lot of time baby-sitting his nephew so that his sister-in-law can work. When he's not being Uncle Michael, he's at the gym preparing his body for a more rigorous career.

It's a far cry from the young man shooting at demons in his mother's Halifax, NS, basement.

As a teenager, Michael began to hear voices. He knew nothing about mental illness and had no idea whether his mind was playing tricks or not. It came to a head one night around 2002, when the demons were particularly insistent.

He had a gun, so he started shooting at them. Then he passed out. When he woke up in his mother's basement, his back was covered in scratches. He went upstairs to ask his mother whether she had heard anything.

"No."

When he told her what he had been doing she didn't believe him, even though there were empty shells on the floor which he felt proved his point.

She told him to go to hospital to get checked out, but the only thing that concerned the medical staff was whether Michael had a gun or not. He left. He then phoned his uncle, a pastor, to seek his advice.

"Open your heart up to God and ask for help," came the word.

A gentle, kindly person, Michael did as he was told. Since that day he hasn't seen demons. Voices, however, bad and good, continued to plague him. The bad ones urged him to hurt people; the good ones decreed the opposite.

"It was very frightening because I didn't know if I was the only one in the world who heard them and I couldn't talk to anyone about it," says Michael. "Then I had a vision from God. He told me to come out West."

Originally, he went to Vancouver, where the voices ceased, but as soon as he arrived in Calgary they returned and Michael started to hang out with the wrong crowd.

The voices were destroying his life. He felt terrible because

his family didn't want him; they couldn't deal with his sickness. His self-esteem was down in the dumps. Every night, he rode the C-Train until he was kicked off. Then he stumbled to the nearest bench where he slept until dawn.

Eventually, Michael was taken to hospital where he was finally diagnosed with schizophrenia. He was in his mid-30s and it was the first anyone said to him that he had a mental illness. It was a relief to hear that he had a medical condition. He stayed on the psychiatric unit for a year before he was introduced to The Alex's Pathways, a housing-first program with a section for people with mental illness and another for people involved with the justice system.

Two years ago, his worker took him to an apartment. Despite the inevitable apprehensions, it was one of the happiest days of Michael's life.

"In hospital I always had a roommate and the nurses checked in every hour on the hour," he says, so being alone was a little bit daunting. "But with the help of God and medication" it's all good.

Pathways, too, has played a huge role. They found his apartment, helped him get his healthcare card, provided him with a family doctor and, very importantly, with the services of a staff psychiatrist who has helped Michael fine-tune his meds. He's moved from a person who could hardly utter five words in five days to an eloquent young man with hopes for the future.

"It's like watching someone come back to life," says his worker, Karen Poffenroth, who adds the Pathways program is only \$30,000 a year per client – the equivalent of a month in hospital.

Michael dreams of having his own small concrete business, which is why the gym work-outs are so important, as well as the employment training program he's also started.

However, for the time being, he has another important job – taking care of his nephew before and after school. Twice a day, without ever skipping, Michael crosses the city by public transit to ensure the little boy doesn't miss the school bus and to keep an eye on him after class.

Michael teaches him his ABCs and his numbers and for light relief they play video games, read and play more video games.

“There is no word that can express the way I feel for my own place,” says Michael. “It is so good.”

## SOURCES

Interviews: Tim Hearn, Shelley Heartwell, Fred Henry, Sam Kolias, Laurie, Bernadette Majdell, Brian O’Leary, Stacey Petersen, Pat Rice, Tim Richter, Steve Snyder, Wayne Stewart

Bedell, Kari, *Developing A Plan to End Homelessness*, PowerPoint, presented January 25, 2007

Calgary Committee to End Homelessness, Position Paper, January 4, 2007

Calgary Committee to End Homelessness, draft minutes for monthly meetings January, February, March, April, May, June, September, October, November, December, 2007

Calgary Committee to End Homelessness, Kari Bedell’s agenda, January 24-26, 2007

Calgary Committee to End Homelessness, invitation to lunch with Kari Bedell, January 25, 2007

Calgary Committee to End Homelessness Prevention Sub Committee Orientation, March 13, 2007

Calgary Committee to End Homelessness Prevention Sub Committee Terms of Reference, March, 2007

Calgary Committee to End Homelessness Community Summit agenda, April 23, 2007

Calgary Committee to End Homelessness, Calgary’s 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness, January, 2008

Calgary Herald, *Fritz Appointed to Housing Post*, June 23, 2007

Campion-Smith, Bruce, *UN housing envoy scolds Canadians; ‘Radical shift in policy’ needed to tackle crisis, official warns after visit*, Toronto Star, October 23, 2007

Email exchange, Kari Bedell and Pat Rice, April 25 – April 30, 2007

Guttormson, Kim, *CEOs Promise Homeless Solution*, Calgary Herald, January 10, 2007

Klaszus, Jeremy, *Homeless Brace for Winter*, Fast Forward, October 25, 2007

Klaszus, Jeremy, *Calgary Families Barely 'Surviving,' Says Report*, Fast Forward, October 25, 2007

NOW, PBS TV, *Finding Footie*

Scott, Susan, *All Our Sisters, Stories of Homeless Women in Canada*, University of Toronto Press, May 2007

Snyder, Steve, speaking notes for Calgary Committee to End Homelessness announcement, January 9, 2007

United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, *The 10-Year Planning Process to End Chronic Homelessness in Your Community, A Step-by-Step Guide*, undated



## WE HAVE A PLAN

“We have to add the word ‘hope’,” said Steve Snyder as the meeting was wrapping up. For 2½ hours the subcommittee chairs of the Calgary Committee to End Homelessness (CCEH) had been hammering out the last details of the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness in Calgary. It was January 11, 2008, and the announcement was set for January 29, just a few days over the year they had allotted themselves. As everyone picked up their papers and prepared to leave, Snyder’s parting shot was: “The plan is a call to action to the whole community, not just the CCEH.”

In truth, there wasn’t much left to do. Tim Richter, plan manager, and Wayne Stewart, CEO of the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF), were still to meet with the aldermen individually to run them through the essentials and to elicit endorsements; changes to the CHF board were discussed so that it would be poised to implement the 10 Year Plan; there was a debate about “the optics” of investment upfront to save money down the road and various other “word-smithing” items – all comparatively small compared with the concept of hope that Snyder was trying to instil.

There was no hope, however, for Jeffery Allen Marple, 45. On February 15 he was attacked in a shelter where his brother was also staying. He was punched in the face and head and when he fell to the floor, his assailant straddled him and pounded away. Marple died in hospital from his injuries. In one account, Marple, who had once owned a trucking firm, was attacked for the simple reason that he snored. As the city’s homeless count was to reveal later in May, the numbers did not halt just because a plan was in the works. In all, 4,060 people were enumerated in the count; 3,195 in

facilities and 569 on the street. (A few years later when the facility numbers were scrutinized, it was realized that some of the people were actually in permanent housing, so the total was decreased to 3,601. Nonetheless, in 2008, people were acting on the premise that it was 4,060.)

Prior to the announcement of the plan, Richter travelled to Ottawa to brief the Prime Minister's Office, the minister of human resources and social development, and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. Besides keeping politicians in the loop, Richter had also been in constant touch with people like Philip Mangano, executive director of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness, or more colloquially, President George Bush's Homeless Tsar. The day the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness in Calgary was released, the Calgary Herald ran a story with Mangano's reaction to it peppered with words like "bold" and "innovative."

"If this plan is implemented the way it is written, you will see in the next few years the number of people on the street, the number of people in long-term shelters, begin to be reduced," said Mangano who had pioneered many similar plans across the United States. "Calgary has decided to stop managing the crisis and to begin ending the disgrace."

It was cold that winter and rents in Calgary were termed "seriously unaffordable," resulting in crammed shelters, so interest was high the day of the official launch upstairs in the Pekisko Room of the McDougall Centre. In fact the weather was so frigid that the media conference, organized for 8:30 am, didn't start until 8:55 at which time Richter welcomed everyone including: Yvonne Fritz, the provincial housing minister, a clutch of other MLAs and aldermen, Police Chief Rick Hanson, Roman Catholic Bishop Fred Henry and the media. Then Snyder unveiled the ambitious plan.

Some of the plan's main points included:

- Eliminating family homelessness in two years;
- Retiring 50 per cent of emergency shelter beds in five years;
- Eliminating chronic homelessness in seven years;
- Halting the growth of homelessness and stabilizing the homeless count at 2006 levels by 2010;
- Delivering a 12.5-per-cent annual decrease in total homeless population starting in 2010;



**Steve Snyder:** Money had been thrown at the issue for years to no avail.

- Reducing the maximum average stay in an emergency shelter to less than seven days by 2018;
- Reducing the economic cost of homelessness;
- Asking for just over \$2 billion from government and the private sector to create over 11,000 affordable housing units;
- And obtaining another \$1.2 billion from the government to help with things like rent supplements, treatment beds for mental illness and addictions, and for rent supports.

In an interview with the Herald, Snyder said that money had been thrown at the homeless issue for years to no avail. “We need to break that cycle.” At the media conference he said the way to do that was to pay for programs that work, which in the end would be much cheaper. “It was a magic day,” says Wayne Stewart, pointing out that with “the impressive leadership team” Calgary had formulated its plan in nine months compared to the usual two years in the US. He recalls the media wondering if they were dreaming in Technicolor, pointing out that even Jesus had said the poor will always be with us.

Marina Giacomini, who at the time worked at CUPS, remembers the news reports partly because she had an unusual view of herself on TV – the back of her head. Later in the day she was interviewed by a reporter who was quite combative, not truly buying into housing first. Giacomini recalls telling her that it was a good plan, but she had some trouble with the focus on the very vulnerable and chronically homeless when there were so many families struggling to keep a roof over their heads. “But we have to give it a try.”

In fact, housing first was already being given a try. CUPS was following in the wake of Hennepin County’s Rapid Exit program in Minnesota and had found places for six families in its first month of operation. Richard Mugford, on staff at CUPS, and Angie, a young mother who had found a home through the program, both spoke at the launch. Mugford was aware of opposition to the plan but was already seeing results. He was also heartened by what transpired that morning. “What I heard was that it was a community plan and that a lot of people were willing to change. I thought, ‘This should be interesting.’ But a lot of people weren’t so sure.” The Alex, too, was ahead of the game having started the Pathways to Housing program in December. By the middle of February they expected to have six people in their own apartments.

“I think it is amazingly ambitious, but absolutely something we need to do,” said Pat Nixon, executive director of The Mustard Seed. “The biggest issue is going to be: can it be sustained? The only way is if all three levels of government shake hands and come together.”

The plan already had a commitment from the province. Monte Solberg, federal minister of human resources and social development, had no problems endorsing the approach but wanted to inspect the specifics more closely. Mayor Dave Bronconnier said he would introduce a motion at the next council meeting to look at the recommendations that came under the city’s jurisdiction, including secondary suites.

“That doesn’t mean we’re going to move forward on all of them, what it does mean is there’s been a community report with some recommendations. We want to take those seriously and see how we can move forward as quickly as possible to enact the ones we can as soon as possible,” Bronconnier explained. In fact, the city didn’t endorse the plan until July 3, by which time it had identified specific actions it could take, although it had not acted on any of them yet.



An unsigned piece in the Calgary Herald clearly spelled out the responsibilities of the whole community. "The province has the constitutional responsibility, Ottawa the deep pockets, and the city probably the most important role of all. Local government set rules for development and zoning for such things as secondary suites, transitional houses, treatment centres and other vital support services. Such initiatives, though, often result in NIMBY opposition from property owners, fearing a loss in their investments. For the strategy to blossom, NIMBYism must be eliminated." In other words, we all have a role in caring for our neighbour.

For Richter the day was both good and bad. The plan was launched, but could they implement it? "There was a lot of satisfaction and relief that the plan was done and out of the door, but there was also the realization of the hard work we still had to do. It was a huge weight of responsibility," he says.

If the truth be told, the CHF was in a bit of a financial jam. There was a little money left from the Outreach Initiatives Pilot Projects that the Klein government in its last days had doled out to the Seven Cities group, but the foundation needed a team to implement the vision and, without cash, Richter couldn't hire let alone find office space for staff as the CHF was beginning to burst out of its digs in the McDougall Centre. Within weeks, Rick George, president and CEO of Suncor, came through with a donation of \$250,000 for three years. George was soon followed by gifts from Canadian Oil Sands, Imperial Oil, Nexen and TransAlta.

Meanwhile, the CHF as it turned to implementing the 10 Year Plan knew it was in for some big changes. At the end of October 2007, board chair Brian O'Leary was diagnosed with leukemia and had to drop out for chemotherapy. He was temporarily replaced by co-chairs George Coppus and Anne Maxwell, who valiantly held everything together while the plan was formulated. In November they created a team and started to make arrangements for the necessary changes to implement the plan.

In the interests of refocusing the foundation and keeping the momentum going, it was decided some of the CCEH board should move onto the CHF board. However, that would have made it a large, unwieldy body, so about a half-dozen of the CHF board stepped down and members of the CCEH flowed in, thus "retaining the flavour," as Richter said. It also shifted from being an operating

to a governing board with more of an oversight role under the chairmanship of Tim Hearn.

"I have the greatest respect for the contribution of the Calgary Homeless Foundation over its 10-year history. As the foundation moves forward with its new mandate of implementation of the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness, we will be taking an important step towards ending homelessness," said Hearn. "I look forward to working with governments, members of the private sector, the agencies who serve people in need of homes and all Calgarians in ending homelessness."

At the same time it was decided to streamline operations. There were two separate bodies under the CHF, HomeCo and the Calgary Community Land Trust (CCLT), both with their own board and both meeting monthly. The former was to boost the development of affordable housing, but because it had no money it was basically going nowhere.

"I did nothing but prepare for meetings," recalls Wayne Stewart, who rolled them into one under the CCLT title. While it was still a separate entity, the CCLT now had the same board as the CHF and met directly after CHF board meetings, making everything much more efficient and capable of dealing with the fast-moving complex situations it would encounter.

Most of these changes officially took place at the April 29 board meeting when Hearn seized the opportunity to stress that the status quo would not take the CHF to the goal of ending homelessness, that change was essential. "The board must ensure that we are implementing the 10 Year Plan and not creating a new plan as we continue. The plan is an excellent one, however as we continue, from time to time, we may need a course correction," said Hearn, pointing out that a lot of difficult work had already been done within and by the community.

Under the CEO and staff were four advisory committees with the skill and knowledge to advise staff:

- Resource Development Committee to handle fund development.
- Project Review Committee to advise on housing projects and real estate.
- Government Relations and Communications Committee.

- The Community Action Committee, now headed up by Rev. Anna Greenwood-Lee, and representing 80 agencies that would be key to eliminating homelessness.

Stewart's triple-headed role during the formation of the plan had been to keep the organization going, to provide support to Richter and the CCEH, and to clear barriers. However, he had never wanted to stay long; he perceived his role as piloting organizations through the seas of change, not managing the day-to-day business. He had always recognized Richter as his replacement and acted accordingly. In fact, there were words to that effect written into Richter's contract when he became manager of the planning process. "I had joined with the understanding I would replace Wayne," he says. There was a minor "burp," Stewart recalls, when some of the board said, "We should look and see what's out there."

"That's ridiculous," retorted Stewart. "You will never find anyone better and all you will do is piss Tim off." Stewart's words prevailed.

However, after the hot-house atmosphere of the past year, Richter needed some time off, so Stewart held the fort while he was gone until April 15 when the transition took place. At the board's request, Stewart hung around until June in a coaching role. He had every confidence in Richter because, from the beginning, he had instructed him to "produce a plan that is capable of being implemented because you are going to be it. I'm not interested in a plan that will sit on a shelf. It's not easy, but it must be capable of implementation. And, no crazy schemes."

The province was about a year behind Calgary in creating its 10-year plan, which meant that there was an 18-month lag before the cash arrived here. "It was a real challenge to put money to good use, to design programs and to put money into the community," says Richter. For the rest of 2008 and part of 2009, the CHF ran on the Outreach Initiative Pilot Projects (OIPP) money that was tied up in Rapid Exit and Pathways, and donations until the province kicked in a healthy \$13 million in the mid-summer. The next two years "we were building up to scale and ramping up programs," says Richter.

Although Richter pointed out to the board that funding was not expected until the province had completed its plan, Hearn didn't



**Project Homeless Connect has brought help to thousands over the years.**

see this as a reason to sit around waiting for things to happen. “We will move ahead,” he said. “It is incumbent on us to shore up all funding for first-year projects while governments get their houses in order.” Some of the targets included 850 units of new affordable housing; housing 100 people experiencing chronic homelessness; creating a comprehensive land strategy; and working with the domestic violence sector to ensure fewer women became homeless on leaving a shelter.

The first thing to do was to hire staff with the capability to transform the vision into reality. Martina Jileckova, who had joined the foundation a few years ago, helping Bonnie Laing with the Community Action Committee, was promoted to vice-president of housing. Alina Turner, who had been with the United Way of Calgary and Area and who had worked on the 10 Year Plan, jumped ship to become manager of research and public policy; in other words, to figure out how to turn a number of disparate initiatives and agencies into a cohesive system. Sheridan McVean arrived to do publicity and Marina Giacomini came over from CUPS as manager of rehousing to kick-start some of the programs.

Giacomini remembers they were all housed in the McDougall

Centre almost on top of each other in little cubicles. “It was wonderful; I loved it. You could hear what everyone was saying.” Almost as soon as she and Turner were hired, there was a board meeting and a tour of the premier’s office which gave the CHF staff a sense of connection to the powers-that-be. “I loved that building,” Giacomini reminisces. “I felt really special (working there) and I felt sad to leave.”

But leave they did. There was very little privacy and just not enough room for everyone to operate well. Hearing of their cramped conditions, Sam Koliadis of Boardwalk, who was still on the CHF board, offered them space at nearby O’Neil Towers that gave them plenty of room for expansion as well as offices for staff.

In April and May, two events occurred that helped boost Hearn’s calls for action. At the end of April the first Project Homeless Connect, a one-stop shopping opportunity for people experiencing homelessness, was held at the Calgary TELUS Convention Centre. More than 50 agencies and 100 volunteers brought assistance to 600-700 people, about a hundred more than estimated. Six doctors saw 100 patients; many others received help with retaining or finding housing and obtaining new ID, while 80 people received haircuts. It was considered a great success and the second was held the following November.

As conceived the plan came in three phases: 2008 to 2011 creating rapid, visible and meaningful change; 2011 to 2015 building a homeless-serving system to end homelessness; and 2015 to 2018 fine-tuning everything so that the system becomes sustainable. “It was bang on,” says Richter, looking at the results at the end of Phase 1. “We were building momentum and we became aware after the second year that we would need to evolve.”



**Alina Turner worked on the 10 Year Plan at the United Way before jumping to the CHF.**

Despite the lack of cash, there was a flurry of activity in the first year. Almost immediately the CHF inherited the Brenda's House project proposed for the old Ronald McDonald House off 17th Avenue S.W. from Inn from the Cold. The CHF board was very excited about moving families out of church basements into a place where sick children could stay in bed and parents could have privacy and the freedom to look for housing and jobs. Brenda's House became a collaboration between the Brenda Strafford Foundation, Children's Cottage Society, Aspen Family Services, CUPS and NeighbourLink. Increasingly, collaboration was becoming the name of the game. "We were learning stuff like crazy," recalls Giacomini.

Very soon the CUPS Rapid Exit program was housing 100 families a year with three staff, but Richard Mugford still recalls the first mother they housed. "Seeing the look in the woman's eyes, I just felt that true thank-you. It was such a great feeling." Today that mother has a job and her seven-year-old daughter, who went through CUPS' One World program, is doing well at school. Stability in housing is a basic need and once provided it helps with other issues, says Mugford. But they also began to realize that for most people it wasn't enough, so Rapid Exit brought in all kinds of different supports to create a wrap-around service.

When Pathways for Singles was added to the portfolio, taking on 225 people in its first year with a staff of five, it was "a heck of a lot of work." Even so it wasn't enough. Outreach workers were complaining that when they had a client who wanted housing, nothing happened. The promise of housing was almost too successful: within four months the program had a waiting list of 700 people. Some despaired of hearing anything, others faded away deciding it was yet another empty promise. "There was a huge frustration," says Mugford.

Soon CUPS found that other agencies like Alpha House and Aspen Family Services were coming to them because of their home-locating expertise. It's been a balancing act playing fair by both the clients and the landlords, says Mugford. Developing relationships with landlords like Boardwalk, Gil Management and Dean MacKenzie, who "has worked his tail off," has been the biggest learning curve for the CUPS team.

CUPS executive director Carlene Donnelly puts it a little differently. "We are operating like a business, only with human

capital and we don't generate a profit. And we are forcing front-line workers to run a business while balancing a human need." She also worries that agencies haven't done enough to prepare their clients for the change. "We haven't done a good job of taking the evolution to the clients and told them why the system is changing and why the expectations are higher," she says.

However, Donnelly is happy that the plan has knocked down some of the walls between organizations and made agencies more professional and accountable with measured outcomes. And she is more than happy to be heading up an agency surfing the crest of the new wave that rolled in with the plan. This feeling is repeated by Lisa Garrisen, who was involved with the small pilot housing project at CUPS in 2006. At that time, she was fortunate enough to attend housing-first presentations in the US and returned "excited beyond belief" by what she had seen and heard.

"We knew they (the CHF) were writing a plan, but it was nice not waiting; the two things were happening at the same time. We didn't waste any time." The formal evaluation of the earlier housing project by Liz McDougall and Brenda Simpson supported what Garrisen observed and what the mothers told her – housing was a very important part of securing their lives on a solid foundation. After the 10 Year Plan came out, Garrisen was CUPS' Rapid Exit program director under Giacomini and with Mugford on staff. At first they housed families and then they started to work with singles, which provoked a lot of hostility.

Garrisen recalls leaving meetings in tears because of the hostile reaction to certain single people being housed, provoking comments like, "He's not houseable. Don't house him." What made it difficult was the fact they had no poster children to advance the cause. "It's still a battle in the singles sector," she says.

Meanwhile, The Alex was having good success with the Pathways to Housing program for people with mental health issues, which CEO Shelley Heartwell had sketched out for Sam Tsemberis when he was in Calgary talking about his New York project. It started with a trickle late in 2007. A year later the province's Safe Communities program was looking at ways to halt the churn of people from incarceration onto the street and back into incarceration. The idea was that supported housing would cut back on the numbers and, seeing the success of the first Pathways,

The Alex was asked to open a second one with a justice specialist on board. The combined figures for both programs speak for themselves:

- 67 per cent overall decrease in Calgary Police Service contacts
- 37 per cent overall decrease in EMS contacts
- 94 per cent of clients have retained their housing
- 47 per cent of clients involved in some vocational and/or educational activity
- Currently, five clients have graduated from the program.

“Very few are asked to leave,” says Heartwell. “The whole idea is that we will work with you.”

In 2009, Marina Giacomini put out the word that she had funds for a new initiative to house the city’s most vulnerable people. Heartwell ignored it because The Alex had just started a youth health program and she didn’t feel they were ready to take on more. When Giacomini taxed her, she replied, “I can’t write the program the way it’s written, I don’t have enough resources.” A week later she was at the foundation meeting with Giacomini and Richter, who indicated they wanted The Alex to do HomeBase, as it was to be called. “We are stretched so thin, I can’t find the resources to do it,” replied Heartwell. The foundation twisted her arm, saying they would help her find staff and she could start with “only” 50 clients.

The next hurdle was that there was no one qualified to take on the HomeBase leadership. “I know just the person,” said Giacomini. “Lisa Garrison at CUPS.” In short order, Garrison was the program director with Ken Swift the team lead. Within a month Giacomini informed them that the number of clients would rise from 50 to 100.

There were no fears that it would be impossible to find that number of vulnerable people. Giacomini had already done her homework. In late 2008 and January 2009 she had sent teams of social-work and mental-health volunteers down the alleys, along the river banks and LRT tracks and under bridges armed with questionnaires and cameras to take people’s pictures so they could be found again when housing opened up.

Inspired by research done by Dr. Stephen Hwang of Toronto and Dr. James O’Connell of Boston, Becky Kanis, director of innovation at New York’s Common Ground, had devised a tool that



she described as a mortality risk calculator. Common Ground had already successfully housed many people in New York using this vulnerability index or Rehousing Triage and Assessment Survey (RTAS).

On a -16C January night she and Giacomini joined the Calgary teams that were out from 2 to 5 am scouting for people. Among some of the prime indicators listed by the doctors were: more than three hospitalizations or emergency visits in a year; more than three emergency room visits in the previous three months; aged 60 or older; cirrhosis of the liver; end-stage renal disease; history of frostbite, immersion foot, or hypothermia; HIV / AIDS; and co-occurring psychiatric, substance abuse, and chronic medical conditions.

Some people didn't want to have anything to do with the questionnaire. As one woman quoted in the Calgary Herald said, "What the hell? No, you are wasting my time. I don't have time for a survey." Others were only too pleased to state their need for a home. In January, out of an estimated 570 people sleeping rough, they obtained particulars from 135. Thirty-five were deemed most vulnerable, which meant they had a mental illness, an addiction and another health issue like cancer or heart disease. "They are most likely to die in a short period of time," said Giacomini.

One of the interesting things that emerged was that Kanis, who had assisted with similar surveys in eight North American cities including Los Angeles, New York, Nashville, Portland and Washington, DC, found the rate of violence against the homeless very high here. "It's darn near close to twice the rate found in other places," she commented.

Until that time, says Giacomini, we had been working on a first-come, first-served basis, which meant that if someone was unconscious under a bush, they tended to be ignored. "Outreach isn't intervention unless it's used as an engagement tool." Giacomini also talked to people in the Remand Centre and her list was growing longer and longer. "I was feeling desperate. I had a slideshow of homeless faces because I had their pictures. A couple died, one in a bus shelter. . . . Almost everyone had a physical injury, a black eye, a cut. Hardly anyone looked healthy. . . . I would see these faces. They all wanted someone to help, love them and to give a shit. People weren't feeling like anyone gave a shit."

It was at that point she found the \$500,000 and started to twist

Heartwell's arm. HomeBase was created based on a program in Los Angeles called Project 50. The name was changed in Calgary to sound less like a seniors' facility.



**Lisa Garrisen heads  
up HomeBase.**

After a "blind date" with Heartwell, Garrisen decided to take the job in June 2009. She and Swift spent a couple of weeks planning the program and hiring staff. They looked for people with a degree, training and experience. Most of all they looked for values. "At their core, do they believe that people deserve housing, however difficult, unpleasant their baggage? Are they passionate, stubborn and persistent? Do they have compassion and care about people? If their sense of social justice isn't genuine, then the clients feel it and know they are not supported."

By July 30 the first client was in their own apartment.

The underpinning tenets of HomeBase are that the client is the author of his or her own life and to restore to them their dignity. Too many times the clients have been told that an agency or a worker knows what's best and that, if they don't do it their way, they will be kicked out, says Garrisen. "They have been told for so long and so many times that they are not deserving."

It may sound like a small detail, but it's a telling one. Garrisen and her staff are very careful about the language they use to describe HomeBase clients. A homeless woman is a mother who has experienced homelessness, an addict is an artist who uses. Even though they are housing some of the most highly barriered people with severe physical and mental health issues and often addiction struggles as well, 97 per cent remain housed in their own apartment and 88 per cent tell staff that they feel more optimistic about their lives. As one of them commented, "I've come a long way since living downtown - which is what it's all about!!!"

None of this would be achieved without collaboration with other Alex programs and other agencies so that HomeBase clients have access to the best resources for their individual needs. There is no sense of "one size fits all." Another key component is community building. Clients are encouraged to reach out to each other and to forge links to the wider world beyond the agency.

“It’s being a pioneer. It’s very satisfying. I love it. I love that what I do makes a difference and love that the clients are doing cool things. It’s amazing,” says Garrisen.

At Alpha House in the downtown core, housing coordinator Allison Flegg is just as enthusiastic as Garrisen about housing Calgary’s most marginalized citizens — people with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, brain damage, low cognitive function and trauma, and an array of serious physical health issues. When she arrived here around 2007 with not much more than a psychology degree from Guelph University and her car, she was struck by the way the homeless were treated. “They were just given a bunch of sandwiches,” she says. “I had no idea to the extent people decline from addiction, mental health issues and the stigma. It’s shocking. But I fell in love with trying to help.”

Alpha House executive director Kathy Christiansen had watched the Calgary Homeless Foundation conversion to Philip Mangano’s idea of housing people rather than sheltering them and had participated on the Calgary Committee to End Homelessness’ prevention subcommittee, feeling that it was a good way to start. However, she wasn’t sure how Alpha House would, or even could, fit into the foundation’s grand vision, fearing that it lacked the grassroots voice that her agency holds dear.

Opened in 1982 as a response to the number of men and women on the streets using drugs and alcohol, and as a diversion from the city jail cells, Alpha House has both a shelter and a detox facility in the same building. All along, they knew the merry-go-round of ticketing people without any resources was counter-productive, so in 2005 Alpha House partnered with CUPS to create the Downtown Outreach and Prevention (DOAP) team which, funded the first year by the city, took its harm-reduction philosophy to the streets. The team works closely with the police, EMS, bylaw services and Calgary Transit to offer an alternative response to people intoxicated in public. Its vans are now a familiar sight in the centre of the city and transport about 1,000 people a month. The expanded version is now funded by the CHF.

“Let’s do our thing and stay true to our clients,” Christiansen told her staff, determining to start up the programs she already had in mind with, or without, foundation cash. “There was so much transplanting from New York. I knew intuitively that things would

shuffle out and what would work, would work and that we should allow time and the CHF to figure it out.”

The relationship between the foundation and Alpha House has grown and solidified and with financial help from the CHF, the agency has started DOAP Encampment, an outreach team that in collaboration with the police and bylaw services approaches people sleeping outside and helps them obtain housing and stabilize their lives.



**Allison Flegg**

At the end of 2008, Alpha House initiated its own housing program using CUPS as a home finder and staffed with one person – Flegg. By 2009, two staff were funded by the CHF, which now provides the money for “a significant team” of housing specialists.

Flegg initially worked on the DOAP team, but she found care management on the streets very difficult for most of her clients. In 2008, she and Mugford, from CUPS, came up with an informal arrangement. She well remembers the first person they housed. He was in hospital because of a heart attack and had run out of options because he was still drinking and he wasn’t ill enough for a care facility. All he needed was a place and a little help with the rent. He moved in two days after Christmas. Flegg was so excited for him that she had to brush her tears away.

“He’s succeeded really well. He’s still housed and he helps his girlfriend with her two disabled children. He’s working on and off and looking after his medical concerns,” says Flegg, adding that his drinking has greatly reduced over time. He’s had some help with budgeting and reminders to keep appointments but, she says, he’s a good example of “those guys who manage straight away.”

Some people take longer to get used to the idea of housing. But Flegg rejoices in the smallest advances – someone booking their own dental appointment, or after a party in their apartment turning themselves into detox rather than going AWOL. The fact that it is often two steps forward and one backward is still forward motion. Many of her clients are used to crisis and sometimes inadvertently create it to test her and her staff. They expect her to tell them to go away if they screw up. Instead, Flegg, like other workers, says,

“We’ll stand by you regardless of the consequences and at a certain point they become accountable.” She understands their anxiety about whether they can cope and the loss of their street friends and the adrenaline-fuelled life, but she says those losses are mitigated by their new-found sense of dignity and safety, and she sees their confidence growing as they are freed of the homeless label.

“It’s not a pill,” says Flegg, who has housed over 200 people. It’s all about being flexible, building individual supports, having faith in the clients and appreciating all the small changes. She likes to tell the story of one man who had a self-inflicted brain injury and who used Alpha House to shower and change. Nothing seemed to work until he was housed with two other people. These two figured out that he got into real trouble when he drank vodka, so they took his picture and showed it to the local liquor vendors, instructing them to sell their room-mate nothing but beer. He was a transformed man; the clients had figured it out.

Like other front-line workers, Flegg says there are big gaps in the housing spectrum because some people just don’t fit into market housing and need supports 24/7. Her dream is a 50-bed, harm-reduction building with staff available round the clock for those with severe mental health diagnoses and who are using various substances. “I could probably find more than 50 to go in right now,” she says.

As Aaron, a client, says, “they are changing lives for the less fortunate who never had a chance. They are giving them something they never knew – a home.”

It’s not just the newly housed who benefit. Calgary becomes a healthier city as we look after those who were left behind and, in the end, it costs society a lot less. Brenda Simpson and Associates did a case study for Alpha House on the social return on the combined investment for the DOAP teams and the housing program. For starters, in 2009, 23 clients in the housing program were able to reduce their use of emergency services from 627 contacts with police/EMS/hospital in the three-month period prior to housing, to just 42 contacts in the three months after being housed. Alpha House reckoned that the social return on every dollar invested was \$5.38. Put another way, the social value created by the DOAP team is \$1,181,081 and by the housing program \$1,098,553 and yet the combined investment is a mere \$425,113 a year. It’s clear we all benefit.

Since the publication of *All Our Sisters* by Susan Scott in 2007, there had been talk about the needs of women, but not a whole lot of action. Calgary had very few beds in an all-women shelter, just the YWCA's Mary Dover House. For women who had been sexually abused and beaten, it could be very intimidating to run the gauntlet into mixed shelters and to talk to male staff about things they considered personal, even something as simple as asking for sanitary supplies or picking up underwear from the clothing room.

In July 2009, the YWCA of Calgary started going through the CHF for its funding contracts and staff began to think about what housing first might look like and what it might mean to clients and staff at Mary Dover House. They questioned everything and changed how they operated, even the language so that counsellors became care managers and they started to use the H word. "We didn't think about ourselves serving homeless women. We used every word but the H word. When we started using the H word it was really empowering. It allowed us to apply for funding," says Cynthia Wild, director of social development for the YWCA.

In the spring of 2010 the CHF's Marina Giacomini began to cook up a plot with the YWCA. "I didn't want women to be the forgotten/hidden piece of the homelessness story anymore," she says. She began to talk about an apartment building just for women where their needs could be addressed and where they would feel safe. Using as ammunition the book *All Our Sisters* and the women's vulnerability, she made a compelling argument that women want and need a different environment.

She gathered a group of interested parties around a table at the CHF office. As a result Giacomini, Wild and Garrisen went to look at a few Vancouver projects, including Mavis/McMullen Place on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. This oasis in the storm of the Eastside became the model for Calgary. Initially it was suggested that the tenants here be supported by HomeBase.

"No," said Giacomini. "If it's a women's building we need a women's organization."

She arm-wrestled her way to success and, in the spring of 2011, the Ophelia (named for Mary Pipher's book, *Reviving Ophelia*, not Hamlet's betrothed) in Lower Mount Royal held its official opening, although the YW had been moving women in since the fall. They had no trouble filling the 15 apartments that, in their former life, had

been execu-suites for business people. It was quickly followed by a second smaller block in Bridgeland also supported by the YWCA.

The Ophelia was able to provide women with safety, community and pride of ownership, say the support workers. "They are a support to each other. In our building they are safe and have some balance. They know their neighbours. They don't have to hide; they are just a bunch of women sitting around laughing." In its first year, two women moved to other housing but were still supported by the YWCA, one returned to a shelter, but most stayed on at the Ophelia. In the housing-first model, say the staff, the women get stabilized and then they "drive their own vehicle." Again and again, the women housed at the Ophelia mention the fact they feel so secure.

"We are safe, the rules are clear and we know who's in here," says one, but it could almost have been all of them. "Most of us are happy to be safe."

Part of the YWCA's approach is transitional housing at Mary Dover House downtown. It gives the women time to process, to rest, to nourish body and soul and to obtain an income from Alberta Works. "The time to think is under-rated," says Wild, noting that most, if not all, the women suffer a complexity of issues. "The stories are unbelievable," says Wild, citing one woman who disguised herself as a man to protect herself in the city's shelters. "How grateful they are to be safe and welcome."

As Garrisen says, it takes exceptional people to work in these conditions. The YWCA's community housing team lead Gail McNeil-Oliver says the ability to stand in someone else's shoes is essential. You cannot be judgmental; you have to have a sense of humour so that you can laugh with the women; you have to be an advocate and to know the system inside and out; and finally you have to be flexible so that you can go with the changes.

All told, the YWCA now supports about 36 women, mainly in the Ophelia and Bridgeland, but some sprinkled in the community. The CHF is looking at purchasing another building in the same area as the Ophelia.

Although women's homelessness is not as visible as men's, the women who moved into the Ophelia were every bit as vulnerable as the men, although perhaps in different ways. Due to its success and benefits of supported housing, it has become a precursor for other similar projects for people with chronic problems, says Tim Richter.

It taught the CHF a lot about the need for supported housing and how it can be applied more broadly across the population.

Although Calgary had developed programs for people discharged from incarceration and the medical system, still others were being released from addictions treatment with nowhere to go but onto the streets and into the shelters. “We recognized a gap in the system. There’s no way a person can get better on a mat,” says Richter. In interviews conducted with individuals experiencing homelessness in 2008 and 2009, the CHF found that 85 per cent of them reported substance use issues and 58 per cent were receiving treatment for addictions. This inspired a collaboration with Fresh Start Recovery Centre, which had already begun Stage 2 housing in 2007, for its own program grads with 24 beds.

In 2010 the CHF and Alberta Urban Affairs came up with \$785,000 for Fresh Start’s Keys to Recovery program, serving people with addictions coming out of treatment from their own facility and from nine other agencies, including Alpha House, Aventa, Calgary Dream Centre, Oxford House, Recovery Acres, Servants Anonymous, Sunrise Native Addictions Services and Youville Recovery Residence for Women. It houses and supports 75 people scattered through the city.

“When I finished my recovery program, I didn’t know where I was going or what I was going to do or where I was going to live,” said Robert, 57, who had spent 14 weeks in treatment at the Centre of Hope. He was accepted into Keys to Recovery, where he received housing and the necessary supports.

“Thank you Fresh Start for a chance at a new start,” said Robert.

“The great part about this program is that it is a collaboration among nine agencies that know how critical having a safe, affordable home with the right support is to their clients’ ongoing success,” commented Richter.

Looking back on those first few years of the 10 Year Plan, Giacomini likens the situation to a forest fire. After a while, a forest starts to lose its vigour with all the trees and other plants competing for resources and she feels it was the same way with the shelter system. “Then every 100 years or so there is a forest fire that burns the shit down that’s not healthy and there is enough heat that some seeds germinate. You plant the seeds of possibility and then move on.”



## Cindy

Cindy is very fond of her door; it means a lot to her.

If you think this is a little odd, consider her life. Homeless off and on since she was 12, her existence has often been fraught with danger. She has fled incredible violence and now, safely behind that door, she has the luxury of finding out who she really is and moving forward.

Living in a small apartment block for women owned by the Calgary Homeless Foundation and run by the YWCA of Calgary, Cindy feels safe when her front door closes behind her. It's the first time in years.

"It gives you a chance to get back on your feet. It's what we all want. You don't wake up in the morning saying, 'Hey, I'll be homeless today,'" says Cindy, who for reasons of safety does not want her real name used.

Cindy was born on a reserve near a major prairie city, but she was quickly fostered out to a woman who gave her a lot of love and a sound work ethic. She wanted to adopt Cindy and her siblings, but her birth mother wouldn't let go of them.

To this day, Cindy knows that she was loved; however, she didn't feel she belonged in the foster home. "Nothing was ever easy and I always felt different," she says. She was different too at school, where there were only a couple of First Nations children. Then some more were bussed in from a reserve, but they also looked down on her because she lived in the city.

At 12 she made up her mind to leave. "It (the foster home) was never meant for me to be there, as much as she loved me." This was when she started to run and she became very good at it.

At various times she was put into a juvenile detention centre and made a provincial ward of the court, but she just kept on running from every situation. For a time she travelled



Cindy's front door gives her a chance to get back on her feet.

with the Native People's Caravan, taking part in demonstrations and occupations.

When Cindy became a mother to two daughters she settled down to raise them. Although her own education was sharply curtailed, she maintained a belief in its power to lift people out of poverty. She ensured that both girls stayed on track and, when one became pregnant, Cindy was even more vigilant ensuring that she finished high school.

Now adults, both of Cindy's daughters are doing well. One is a high-ranking civil servant and the other works in a pharmacy. She is rightfully proud of them and her four grandchildren. "Apparently, I'm the best grandmother ever," she laughs.

Cindy's own life, however, didn't progress as well, and she ended up in Calgary in a very abusive relationship. One day she woke up knowing she was about to get "one hell of a licking." She dealt with the situation the only way she knew how, by deciding to run. This time running paid off.

She phoned the Distress Centre, which told her to go to the YWCA Sheriff King Home, a domestic violence shelter. After her time was up there, she moved into another YWCA facility, Mary Dover House. At the two places she was able to grieve for her partner, whom she loves to this day, and to start the long road back into society. Even though she misses him, she says her life is better without him.

Cindy was thrilled when she was offered one of the last suites in the apartment block. She's not sure why she was so lucky, but she's grateful. She's also grateful for the kind of support she's had. "They have such awesome services. I'm just blown away by that. I would never have come this far without the YW."

When Cindy was in rehab, and afterwards when she was in hospital for six weeks, the YWCA held onto her apartment for her. "They told me not to worry about anything," she says. "Just do it."

On the streets and with her abusive partner, Cindy had to be on top of everything. "You have to be tougher than they are, or they will rob you blind. Everyday you have to be tough and I was tired of living my life like that," she says.

Behind her door, Cindy relishes the safety and the opportunities a home brings and the fact her neighbours all look out for each other. She knows it's not forever, though.

"Other women need what I have," she says. "I want to move out, but I'm not giving it up until I'm ready."

## SOURCES

Interviews: Kathy Christiansen, Carlene Donnelly, Allison Flegg, Lisa Garrisen, Marina Giacomini, Shelley Heartwell, Richard Mugford, Brian O'Leary, Stacey Petersen, Tim Richter, Wayne Stewart, Alina Turner

Calgary Committee to End Homelessness *Ten Year Plan Unveiling Summary*, January 29, 2008

Calgary Committee to End Homelessness January 2008 Update

Calgary Committee to End Homelessness, Special Meeting of Subcommittee Chairs minutes, January 11, 2008

Calgary Homeless Foundation, *T.J. Hearn assumes the chair of the Calgary Homeless Foundation board of directors*, media release, February 25, 2008

Calgary Homeless Foundation, *Project Homeless Connect Brings Over 50 Agencies Together to Provide Services to People Experiencing Homelessness in Calgary*, media release, April 25, 2008

Calgary Homeless Foundation, *City of Calgary Endorses 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness*, media release, July 3, 2008

Calgary Homeless Foundation, *Calgary Takes the Lead to Re-house and Support Those Leaving Treatment Programs*, October 12, 2010

Calgary Herald, *A Homeless Plan With Potential*, January 30, 2008

Derworiz, Colette, *Program Began in New York to Identify the Most Vulnerable Homeless People*, Calgary Herald, January 5, 2009

Derworiz, Colette, *High Rate of Attack on City's Homeless*, Calgary Herald, January 5, 2009

Guttormson, Kim, *US Advocate for Homeless Raves about Calgary Plan*, Calgary Herald, January 29, 2008

Guttormson, Kim, *Homeless Solution Will Cost \$3.2 billion*, Calgary Herald, January 30, 2008

Scott, Susan, *All Our Sisters, Stories of Homeless Women in Canada*,  
University of Toronto Press, May 2007

Slade, Darryl, *Man Jailed for Manslaughter at Homeless Shelter*, Calgary  
Herald, January 21, 2012

Van Rassel, Jason, *Homeless Shelter Killing Unprovoked, Say Police*, Calgary  
Herald, February 16, 2008



## THE ALBERTA ADVANTAGE

During the cuts of the mid 1990s, Alberta led the provincial pack in hacking away at social assistance, even showing Mike Harris, premier of Ontario, a thing or two about balancing budgets. However, what was good for the treasury was not so good for individuals and almost instantly we started to see more people on the streets— but they were the tip of the iceberg. There were many more, particularly poor families, who were on the threshold of becoming homeless, only surviving by living in conditions that no one in their right mind would call a home. They were dependent on food banks, on their families and friends, and on the kindness of strangers.

Besides federal and provincial cuts, several other factors had propelled Alberta towards disaster. Since 2001, the province had registered a 10.4-per-cent increase in population, partly spurred by the strong economy; this rise was double the national average. In 2006, 8,900 people were waiting for subsidized housing and the lists were growing longer. Back in 2002, the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) said 106,000 people were in need of core housing and since that time housing had doubled in price. The Royal Bank of Canada reported in 2006 that rents went up 50 to 60 per cent in Calgary and 40 per cent in Edmonton. On top of that, the number of subsidized units had not grown in Alberta for five years. Although 11,000 people were considered to be outright homeless in the province, the figures showed that many more were in trouble.

Alberta was an unlikely candidate to become the first Canadian province to bring in a 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness. It didn't even have a separate housing ministry. It was predicted that, if

unchecked, the number of people tramping the alleys and lining up at shelters would be 21,000 by 2010. On a visit to Canada in July 2007, Miloon Kothari, the United Nations special rapporteur on adequate housing, warned that we were becoming complacent to the human plight.

"You (Canada) had a history of very progressive housing policies which were summarily abandoned in the mid-'90s and the consequences of that are tragically here for all of us to see," he said.

Kothari would probably have been surprised to hear that on March 16, 2009, Alberta became the first province to endorse a provincial 10-year plan. And that in August 2010 it received a prestigious Institute of Public Administration of Canada (IPAC) Gold Award for the plan, which shifted the role of government away from managing homelessness with emergency shelters to providing housing and support to break the vicious cycle into which so many had fallen.

The province had always provided funding for emergency space, says Robin Wigston, former assistant deputy minister of housing and urban affairs. "We made sure there was enough room for every single person, but that didn't mean everyone got to the door." Daily statistics were delivered to his desk every morning and his biggest fear in cold weather was that he would arrive at work to discover that someone had died on the streets. "It was a scary thing."

Of course, the plan didn't suddenly materialize. There were many grassroots moves to draw the provincial government's attention – and money – to real solutions. Initially organized by Terry Roberts, the former CEO of the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF), a group of seven major cities had banded together to pool ideas and to present a united front to the government. Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray had become used to collaboration and in 2007 the first three of those cities were working on plans. Without government money, however, the plans would not have gone beyond being mere fantasies.

Enter Ed Stelmach.

Ralph Klein had been premier of Alberta for almost 14 years when he officially handed in his resignation as party leader on September 20, 2006.

Although King Ralph was happy to participate in roasts to raise funds for the CHF, not much else had happened to alleviate the growing homeless numbers in the province.

When his successor, Ed Stelmach, was sworn in as premier on December 14, 2006, CBC News Edmonton reported that he took the reins “at a time of multibillion-dollar surpluses and no provincial debt, but plenty of issues to deal with when it comes to managing the province’s explosive growth.” One of those issues was homelessness aggravated by the number of people who had come to work in the oilpatch that was reputedly spouting gold from the ground. Stelmach, who had arrived from behind to capture the leadership of the provincial Conservatives on December 2,



Ed Stelmach and Sharyn Brown at the premier’s annual fundraiser.

said, “What Albertans can expect from me is to keep my word and to keep an open mind. And I promise an open, inclusive Alberta government that puts Albertans first.” And he did.

The opposition, however, was sceptical of any great change. Kevin Taft, the Liberal leader at the time, remarked, “It feels like we are going to have more of the same. Even the same language that we’ve had from this government for a long time, and I guess that’s to be expected from a premier who sat in cabinet for so many years and had such a low profile.”

As a boy growing up on the family farm near Lamont, AB, Stelmach used to wonder about the destitute men walking along the country roads. They often stopped at his parents’ door and requested food in exchange for doing a few chores. “What put that person in that position, where was his wife, did he have children?” the country boy wondered. “It stayed with me all through life. All of us who have good homes are in a much better position than the homeless,” says Stelmach. Although always a farmer,

Stelmach added politics to his life in 1986 when he was elected as a county councillor for Lamont. In 1993 he successfully ran for the Conservatives in Vegreville-Viking, which later became Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, and held a number of portfolios including intergovernmental relations, transportation and infrastructure before becoming premier.

It didn't take long for the breezes of change to riffle down the corridors of the Legislature. Through December Wigston and his staff, spurred by the increasingly tight rental situation in the province, especially in Fort McMurray, were busy assembling a task force to look into housing. Stelmach had seen the figures mounting and even as he took over he knew he would have to find a way to deal with the societal issues confronting his government; issues that were visible not just in Calgary, but in Edmonton, Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie too. He wanted a strategy and a plan.

By February 1, 2007, the province had appointed the Alberta Affordable Housing Task Force and it was announced to the media that it wanted to hear from groups and individuals. "We are asking municipalities and agencies and groups that directly work with affordable housing and the homeless – and Métis housing – to come to the meeting and make presentations. In the afternoon portion, we have open discussion where any individual can come in and make a presentation," said Ray Danyluk, minister of municipal affairs and housing.

Under Len Webber, MLA for Calgary-Foothills, the task force was to focus on solutions for homelessness and affordable housing, including subsidized rental and home ownership. Fifteen other people sat on the task force including Calgary's indefatigable proponent of 10-year plans and housing first, Brian O'Leary. From February 16 to March 2 – 45 days – through winter weather it travelled to nine communities where it heard from seniors, Aboriginal people, students, immigrants, people with disabilities, women leaving violence and those with mental health issues, to name but a few. In all, more than 1,400 Albertans made submissions either in person, via email, or by letter.

It was becoming increasingly clear to the task force that housing, or the lack of, wasn't something that had happened only to the person dumpster-diving or picking bottles in the back alley. Students and the elderly as well as many low-income families were



being affected by rising rents and the shortage of rental stock. It could be happening to your son, your mother, or your sister. "It became personal," says one Alberta civil servant.

"Affordable housing was an issue all over the province," recalls O'Leary, declaring the situation a mess, with far too many ministries involved but none of them talking to each other. On the ground, he said, "Communities were struggling and the volunteer sector was stretched to the limit." As the report tersely said in the executive summary, Alberta's housing shortage is "a crisis."

Never one for missing a platform, O'Leary said the task force was a "perfect place" to start talking about housing first and 10-year plans and to influence others from across the province like Red Deer councillor Tara Veer, Edmonton councillor Karen Leibovici, Madelyn Todd of the Urban Development Institute – Alberta, and Kathy Watson from the Canadian Home Builders Association. If the title of the report – *Housing First, An Investment With Return In Prosperity* – is anything to go by, O'Leary's words did not go unheeded.

When the statistics and the stories started to come in, Stelmach was startled by the breadth and the depth of the problem. Like most people he was still thinking in stereotypes – the single male with an addiction – but the task force was hearing about young families who had moved here looking for work with no skills and no resources and in some cases not even a valid driver's licence. They also heard about seniors working well past 65 to maintain their housing, and students in dire distress. When he was minister of infrastructure, Stelmach had received requests for shelter funding but he had noticed that there were few coherent plans, "they were all over the map," and he didn't think shelters would assist the type of people coming before the task force.

The task force came up with three different sets of recommendations: responding to the current "urgent" situation; setting priorities to remove barriers and to improve access to affordable housing; and defining better ways for the future. There embedded in the second section as No. 1 priority was "develop a 10-year Alberta housing plan," plus a secretariat that would be responsible for the plan. As yet there was no mention of housing first as a policy. The third section, however, did urge cutting "red tape and the 'bureaucracy of poverty' that creates barriers to access

for people.” It also set out many ways that provincial legislation as well as structures could be amended to support change. The first on the list of “urgent” priorities – establish a homeless eviction prevention fund – was to become a lightning rod in the next few months.

In the April budget, the government responded to the task force, allocating \$285 million to address immediate needs and some of the shorter-term ones. A 10-year plan was not approved at that time. Highlights of housing monies in the budget included:

- The new Municipal Sustainability Housing Program was given a budget of \$100 million per year, for three years.
- Capital Enhancement to increase affordable housing received a further \$96 million in 2007-08.
- Homeless support got more than \$35 million, an increase of \$13 million.
- The Provincial Homeless Initiative received \$6 million, an increase of \$3 million.
- Rent Supplement Program received more than \$33 million, an increase of \$14.3 million.
- Support to Housing Providers and Special Purpose Housing was allocated close to \$43 million, an increase of \$4.3 million.
- The new Affordable Housing Program, including \$45 million allocated to Fort McMurray for 300 affordable housing units.
- The Off-Reserve Aboriginal Housing Program’s budget for the year was \$16 million.
- The new Homeless and Eviction Fund received \$7 million.
- The new Alberta Transitional Housing Initiative received \$2.5 million.

One of the things that Stelmach had learned in politics was that if you want to initiate successful change, you have to inject proper resources – not dribs and drabs of cash. He also knew that if you want something to take effect, you have to get your whole organization behind it “because if you don’t, people will try and trip you up.”

On top of that Ken Faulkner, who ran the premier’s office in Calgary for 4½ years, says Stelmach always listened carefully to

local leaders when they brought forward solutions to problems, especially when they didn't have a vested interest in the results.

Stelmach's declaration that dealing with homelessness would be a priority for his government must have come as something of a shock to some of his cabinet colleagues. Here was the arch fiscal conservative who as a minister even turned down a government car, handing out money for rent supplement programs. But over the years, Stelmach had watched the revolving door of people swinging through various systems and out again onto the street and realized it was an unproductive, expensive response. "People don't expect a Conservative government to attack societal issues, but it's commonsense; scraping people up off the street (only to fall back down again) is nonsense."

Under Stelmach's first budget, the new \$7-million Homeless and Eviction Prevention Fund (HEPF) was set up to help Albertans "who may be at risk of losing accommodations due to rent increases and to assist newcomers to Alberta who may need temporary assistance until their first paycheque arrives." Employment and immigration was the department responsible for income support and emergency funding, so it took over the administration of HEPF. Little did the front-line workers know what had been unleashed.

Once again the dire need was illustrated. The HEPF started off with \$7 million. Throughout the year the government had to keep topping it up. By July 2008 it was up to \$43.5 million with 10,000 claims a month. In December 2008 it had hit \$121 million. It was "crazy" busy for the front-line people managing it, says one of those people. They felt battered and bruised as those desperate to save their housing clamoured for help. Line-ups outside government offices started at three or four in the morning and things became so stressful that there was a high staff turnover and many took early retirement. However, it had shown Albertans that there was a real problem. As the Calgary manager for community housing support at Canadian Red Cross said, it "really speaks to how vast the problem is, not only in Calgary, but across the province."

While the opposition muttered that rent controls would have been more effective, the Tories had learned a lesson – that a better approach was required and in their books it wasn't rent controls; it was a 10-year plan to deal with homelessness. On June 22, 2007, Yvonne Fritz was made associate minister of affordable housing,

under Danyluk's municipal affairs ministry. MLA for Calgary Cross, Fritz, besides being a seasoned politician, had a nursing background and an understanding of social issues. Stelmach believed in her ability to pull in people from different ministries, which he said was crucial, and he also knew she had the determination to get the job done.

Meanwhile down in Calgary, Steve Snyder, chair of the Calgary Committee to End Homelessness (CCEH), and Tim Richter, plan manager, were busy working on Calgary's plan. Even though the CCEH didn't officially meet in July and August, for some people it was the summer of perpetual motion. They knew that without provincial assistance their plan would not come to fruition. The city didn't have the kind of cash required and the federal government clearly wasn't about to cough up. They had already convinced Fritz that 10-year plans worked and that, perhaps, the province should create a secretariat to support initiatives around the province.

In a calm moment, Richter and his friends Bradley Chisholm, Danyluk's executive assistant, and Ken Faulkner skipped out of the McDougall Centre to a nearby Second Cup for coffee and a casual chat. Inevitably, conversation turned towards Calgary's 10-year plan and the excitement and the stress it was causing Richter. That day it was the excitement that predominated. If there was a plan for Calgary, why not the province?

"It was changing the conversation from a problem to something aspirational," recalls Chisholm. "We knew Ed Stelmach was there (in the premier's seat) for bigger reasons and we knew it was a big piece for him."

On a hot September day, Stelmach was in Calgary to make a major announcement at SAIT. Fritz and Snyder had asked for a meeting with him while he was here and were granted 30 minutes between the end of his speech and his return to the airport. They were led up some stairs that looked like a fire escape ladder to a small, stuffy storage room where they waited. As soon as Stelmach sat down, Snyder drew out a piece of paper and started to scribble diagrams explaining the effectiveness of 10-year plans both in human and economic terms. The catch? They required funding upfront before things could happen. Fritz knew that, to be effective, the province had to commit for more than a year or even five years, which might not be popular when the province was beginning to

plunge into a downturn that eventually saw the price of oil drop from \$105 to \$37 per barrel and 78,000 jobs vanish almost overnight.

Snyder, of course, had done his homework and had all the facts to back up the request for \$1 billion over 10 years. It took him 20 minutes to outline his case. “Will this work?” Stelmach asked. “Yes, it will,” they assured him. At that point Stelmach raised his eyes from the pieces of paper and looked at them.

“It was a defining moment,” recalls Fritz. “I get goosebumps even now. I will never forget that moment; it was a political highlight.”

As Chisholm put it, “Ed’s big shoe had dropped.”

Basically, Stelmach committed there and then to make something happen. He realized that it wasn’t his job to be cognizant of all the details. It was his job to give direction. “This is a priority, let’s deal with it,” he said. Fritz knew this meant the process was set in motion to work with the Treasury Board to release funds. “I give full marks to Ed Stelmach because he embraced the proposition,” says Snyder.

It might not have been such a hard-sell as Fritz and Snyder believed, because from the beginning Stelmach knew it had to be coordinated under one authority. “I was very determined to find the resources,” he adds.

On October 29, Stelmach announced an Alberta secretariat for action on homelessness, led by Fritz. The appointees, as yet unannounced, were to develop a provincial strategy to end homelessness in 10 years. The premier and Fritz both knew that initially the problem would require a huge cash commitment and that it would be necessary to cut across ministries, breaking down the walls between them so they could cooperate for the benefit of those trying to reach services.

“We recognize the diverse challenges ahead in addressing the issues around homelessness,” said Stelmach in a government release. “I have every confidence that through the leadership of associate minister Fritz, the secretariat for action on homelessness



**MLA Yvonne Fritz led the secretariat for action on homelessness.**

will be very successful in completing its work. This is an ambitious goal, but one I believe we must pursue to help those in need."

It wasn't just the Calgary figures that compelled them. In Lethbridge, the homeless population had doubled from 2005 to 2006 and in Edmonton that year there were 2,600 on the streets. Reports coming out of Fort McMurray about accommodation problems were horrific, including news stories of teenagers swapping sexual favours for a bed. Then there was the anecdotal stuff. In November, Stelmach recalls attending a ceremony in Edmonton marking the 1932-33 famine in the Ukraine, known as Holodomor. Afterwards he stepped inside City Hall where someone was playing the piano. Who was playing so beautifully? he asked Bruce Cruikshank, his security guard who had previously walked the beat as a police officer in downtown Edmonton. Cruikshank explained that the musician was a homeless person who had been on the streets for years and that he often dropped by City Hall to play the piano for 10 minutes, and then left quietly.

"I was very curious what had happened to someone with talent like that," says Stelmach. "It makes you wonder what happens, where is the turning point?"

The creation of the secretariat was in a way a turning point for Alberta because it changed the way things were done, combining everything under one authority and putting the money in the right places. Morphing it into a secretariat gave it more independence than a department. Finally, it rubber-stamped the power of the committee that created the provincial plan and which was, very importantly, also charged with its implementation. Fritz, who was still under Municipal Affairs Minister Danyluk, recommended that he not change anything the secretariat put together.

Fritz had already met many "outstanding leaders" around the province and was very aware of the need for funding when she sat down with one of Danyluk's executive assistants. He assured her of their support and in half an hour they had sketched out the bare bones of a plan. Through the last months of the year, Fritz and civil servants like Marcia Nelson, the deputy minister, and Wigston, the assistant deputy minister, worked hard to put together a high-powered group.

On January 23, 2008, the committee line-up was unveiled. With Snyder at the helm, it consisted of 10 others from across the province

with strong leadership backgrounds, knowledge of the issues and relevant experience. "It needed a body to champion it, not just civil servants, people from the real world," recalls Bradley Chisholm. Besides development and implementation, these "community powerhouses" were to work closely with municipalities to support their community plans. The announcement confidently asserted that the strategy would produce more than 11,000 affordable housing units over the next five years.

"I am determined to act on this important issue to help those most in need," said Fritz.

On March 13, 2008, Stelmach overhauled his cabinet, creating 23 portfolios. Some people moaned that it was bloated, but others like Calgary Mayor Dave Bronconnier commended him for his balancing act of representing all Albertans, including the cities. Part of this change was the appointment of Fritz to be minister of housing and urban affairs. After 30 years, the province had a minister first and foremost in charge of housing. Fritz was now in a position to lead the charge. Danyluk remained at his old post of municipal affairs.

Starting that month and going through the spring and summer of 2008, the committee and the civil servants worked to piece the provincial plan together. Once again, it was a cut and paste job taking the best from other jurisdictions. Snyder brought with him all the knowledge and expertise acquired in putting together Calgary's recently released plan. They also went to the US again. When they arrived in New York, they were interested to discover that its plan had been based, in part, on Toronto's 2005 project, Streets to Homes. Committee members travelled to Alberta's seven key cities to learn about their unique challenges as well as people and groups working in the field of homelessness.

"It was a really good board, but a lot of work fell to the staff," recalls Wigston, who said that through June and July they had two-day working sessions every three weeks. "I was involved every single minute; it was quite a process." Snyder too found it a heavy and sometimes vexing load, not being used to bureaucratic ways, but in the end he was glad he had taken it on. "It would be unfathomable to be in that position (homeless), so it was hard to let go."

"It was successful because everyone worked together," recalls

Fritz, praising the team for its wisdom, compassion, vision and commitment.

Aware of the power of words, the secretariat strove to write its report in comprehensible, straightforward language. It outlines the need and the change of direction from shelters towards housing first. Then it goes to great pains to say why it makes sense over and above being the right thing to do. It calculated that it would cost the province a hefty \$6.65 billion over 10 years to continue the way it was heading. However, if 11,000 individuals and families moved out of homelessness it would cost only \$3.316 billion and the savings would likely be even higher. They were able to illustrate this with heartening stories from Calgary's infant Pathways to Housing program. So successful was the case that the government didn't change a word when the report was sent to them in October, a mere six months after the committee had first rolled up its sleeves, says Wigston.

A Plan for Alberta, Ending Homelessness in 10 Years, was presented to the public with a \$3.3-billion price tag on March 16. It was based on housing first and coordinating programs such as income support, employment help, and addictions and mental health treatment. Investments were to be focused on three key areas: rapid rehousing, providing client-centred supports and preventing homelessness.

A happy-looking Fritz posing for the cameras said, "I can tell you emergency shelters will no longer be a housing option where people go into an emergency shelter and stay for a period of time. This plan to end homelessness is about changing homelessness . . . and it's where people may stay in a shelter for seven to 21 days, you know on a short-term emergency basis as they're rapidly rehoused, and that is a significant difference."

Michael Shapcott of Toronto's Wellesley Institute responded as though he could hardly believe his eyes. "Alberta's plan – the first of its kind among the federal government and Canada provinces and territories – builds on top of a record of dramatic increases in affordable housing investment in recent years. Alberta cut provincial affordable housing investments in the early 1990s, as did many other provinces, but has dramatically increased investment in the past couple of years," he wrote. "The news has surprised more than a few housing advocates, who don't expect the Alberta



government to be blazing the lead on critical social policy issues such as affordable housing.”

The Alberta media was on the whole very positive in its coverage, noting with approval that the provincial plan dovetailed with those already in existence: Calgary and now Edmonton and Red Deer. The Alberta public, without such a good grasp of the situation, wasn’t quite so happy. Responses filed in the comments at the end of online versions of the stories were sometimes very distressing for government workers. It was a no-win situation, says one of them looking back. No matter what you do, there’s always someone who’s unhappy.

Yes, we took some criticism, says Stelmach. The person driving a BMW down the street would think, “Just move them some place else so that I don’t have to walk over him; just get rid of the nuisance.” But that’s not how you deal with an issue, he adds. “If we hadn’t implemented the plan, then what would it be like today?”

Yet, there were others who were extremely happy. Stelmach and his wife Marie were moved when they travelled around the province to meet people who were newly housed. In 2008, when Calgary had already announced its plan but the province was still in the throes of pulling one together, they visited The Alex’s pilot Pathways to Housing, where they met a former child soldier and a woman who had grown up on the streets of Canadian cities. Observers say the Stelmachs were obviously touched by their stories and their joy in having homes.

“I shook my head at the number of children,” says Stelmach who with Marie has set up his own community foundation to deliver support to organizations that do not receive direct funding from the province. “There is something unfair in society.”

Stelmach likes to talk about a dinner at the Edmonton Petroleum Club. One of the servers, a young man, timidly asked if he could talk to him. Stelmach stood up and moved back from his chair and put out his hand. Instead the young man gave him a hug. “I was very surprised,” recalls Stelmach. “I didn’t know this fellow.” Then the server said, “I want to thank you. You changed my life. I’m back with my family, sober, and I have a new start in life.”

“I was speechless,” says Stelmach, “but that’s what it’s all about.”

While all this work on homelessness was going on, another

Stelmach initiative had been launched that was also to have an impact on the streets. Headlines like “Alberta Gangs Everywhere, Say Cops,” screamed at the readers. Gangs with names like Crazy Dragons, Fresh off the Boat, White Boy Posse, Redd Alert and Alberta Warriors had become an issue; everyone was talking about them and the slaughter on the streets. The Safe Communities initiative was originated by discussions with former Justice Minister (now judge) Ron Stevens; Ron Glen, Stelmach’s chief of staff; and Ron Hicks, deputy minister of the executive council. Heather Forsyth, solicitor general under Klein, chaired a committee that consulted with police, justice, municipal officials, social agencies and victims of addiction and crime. They put together 31 recommendations, 29 of which were accepted by the government, becoming the Safe Communities initiative. After the 2008 election, Stelmach appointed current Premier Alison Redford to work with Solicitor General Fred Lindsay to implement the plan.

Safe Communities became important to Calgary’s 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness because, besides tackling the gang issue, it provided funds for programs like the Calgary Police Service’s Vulnerable Person Unit (VPU). In keeping with the plan, VPU works with homeless agencies, addictions and mental health services to help provide a multi-disciplinary approach to the case management of people identified as “acute service users.” VPU is frequently used as a staff training resource for agencies as well as briefing other members of the CPS on how to interact with and to deal appropriately with marginalized people.

VPU goes hand in hand with the Police And Crisis Team (PACT), a partnership between CPS and Alberta Health Services. The goal is to reduce the number of times at-risk people take up hospital beds, or re-offend, by addressing the root causes of their symptoms. When a call comes in involving a mental health situation where, for safety reasons, a worker might not venture, a PACT police officer and a mental health clinician respond. They help people who in the past have been very under-served because of perceived and real threats. The aim is to divert the clients from the courts and hospitals to appropriate community supports, including mental health or addictions treatment. If the person does not have an advocate, a team member keeps in touch with them as they work their way through the system.

In the 16 months from March 3, 2010, to June 30, 2011, PACT responded to 565 situations involving 382 individuals, 258 of whom were appropriate for the team. In the six months prior to PACT, 41 per cent of the clients had used Emergency Room or Urgent Care one or more times. Of those clients, 40 per cent did not use those services six months post-discharge from PACT. In the six months prior to PACT, 15 per cent had used Emergency Medical Services (EMS); of these 63 per cent had no EMS use six months post-discharge. Included in this group is one person who had used EMS 15 times prior to being involved with PACT. Similar decreases were seen in psychiatric admissions post-discharge from PACT.

Developing the province's homeless plan wasn't always an easy ride for Stelmach, who recalls there were those in the cabinet who thought it was "a goofy idea," but he explains it away by saying they weren't educated to the same degree. "In our political system," he adds "the premier has a fair amount of authority. Sure, there were moans and groans, but people recognized my resolve and Yvonne's resolve and today we all share in the accomplishments."

Wigston gives Stelmach credit for acting before the situation became an absolute disaster, as had happened in New York City and other places in the States. He says 11,000 people experiencing homelessness "wasn't drastic, but it was growing fast."

After the plan was created in 2009, Snyder stepped down from the secretariat and was replaced by another familiar Calgary figure, Wayne Stewart. "The prospect that we might spread compassion for those in need across our great country really excites me," he said as his appointment was announced on July 30. By that time the province had set aside \$400 million in capital to construct 2,700 housing units over three years and another \$32 million in operational funding for that fiscal year to help 1,000 people find permanent homes.

In Stewart's letter contained in the Report to the Minister, written before he quit in May 2010 to run in Calgary's mayoralty race, he observed they had exceeded the target of housing 1,000 by more than 700 people — to be exact 1,779 — many of whom were considered chronically homeless. He also recognized the fact that headway had been made because "this is a resourced plan" and that continued provincial commitment will help "build a better, stronger Alberta." Like many others, Stewart was crediting

Stelmach's dedication and willingness to release money for making the difference.

The money was delivered through community-based organizations, known as CBOs, like the CHF, Edmonton's Homeward Trust and Lethbridge's Social Housing in Action, thus ensuring each community's needs were met. This had been the way of doing business since 2000, so it made sense to continue flowing the cash through tried and true channels, with each agency submitting a service delivery plan to be eligible for funding.

In the plan's first year, the secretariat worked hard to build the capacity to deliver the housing-first model by holding workshops and financing a provincial conference as well as sending five people from smaller communities to attend the University of Calgary certificate program, Working with Homeless Populations. It also met with various bodies to provide feedback and information to the minister. Some of the concerns they heard were about the extent of youth homelessness; the fact that rents continued to be out of reach of many – the provincial average for an apartment in April 2010 was \$937; and that some of the chronically homeless were not able to move along the planned continuum towards independence. They also urged more attention to prevention, particularly with cross-ministry strategies like Safe Communities and making ID and healthcare cards easier to obtain.

It concluded, "Alberta is now working from a solid foundation. The plans, systems and structures to help end homelessness have been put in place. Governments, CBOs, and homeless-serving agencies are collaborating in new and meaningful ways. Research and province-wide data collection activities are poised to expand our knowledge about homelessness in Alberta, refine our work, and improve our prospects for success."

By the 2010-2011 report, the secretariat, now headed by Gary Bowie, a former kinesiology professor at the University of Lethbridge who helped develop Lethbridge's plan, was able to report that 3,995 people had been supplied with permanent housing; 727 had graduated from a housing-first program, becoming self-sufficient; 82 per cent of those who received housing and supports remained housed; and the number of people using emergency and transitional shelters had declined by 5.9 per cent. A new website [www.albertasupports.ca](http://www.albertasupports.ca) had been built to make it easier for those

experiencing homelessness or those on the brink to get information about government social programs. "During this next critical chapter, our efforts will shift from the establishment of housing first to the integration of complex systems at program and policy levels that will not only reduce, but prevent homelessness in Alberta," wrote Bowie.

To that end, the secretariat was able to report that a cross-ministry committee on high-risk/homeless youth had been created and that plans targeted at this group were emerging all over the province. They had also worked towards a multi-partnered plan to ensure people being discharged from provincial systems, including correctional centres, hospitals and group or foster homes, had somewhere to go other than the streets. The third area where multiple partners had come together was to remove barriers to obtaining ID.

The province was still flowing cash into alleviating the situation. It had put \$41 million into outreach and support and \$58 million into capital grants, including the \$3.7 million to help Calgary's Dream Centre purchase 67 rental units. Housing and Urban Affairs approved a budget of \$54.1 million in 2011-12 (a \$12.1-million increase over the previous year) for the Outreach Support Services Initiatives to deliver housing-first programming.

"One important point to note," says Stelmach, anticipating charges of frivolous spending, "our operating budgets were balanced. The deficit was in the capital side of the budget, building needed schools, hospitals and roads."

If anyone had doubts about the benefits of all this cash, the report was well leavened with stories of people like George. George had lived in Red Deer for 10 years. He was tossed out of his hotel room, after which he lived on the streets and in shelters. An outreach worker befriended him and found him housing close to his daughter and grandchildren. He began to receive treatment for severe foot problems and a long-standing hernia was repaired. Then he had a psychiatric assessment that changed his world, revealing that he has Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Finally, George understood why life was so difficult. With the diagnosis, George's worker helped him get Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped, so now he is housed and financially independent.

Moving forward, the secretariat had four key points: continuing

to improve the coordination between services and ministries; maintaining the momentum in part by preparing for another boom; using Alberta-based research to underpin strategies; and reviewing a Plan for Alberta at the end of the third year in 2012-2013.

Now retired, Wigston, who pulled everything together to write the plan and who was an ex-officio member of the secretariat, looks back with satisfaction. While acknowledging nothing would have happened without “the champion” Ed Stelmach, Wigston says, “It was one of the best things I ever worked on in all my 23 years of government.”

## **Aaron**

Aaron is only 34, but he’s already catching up to the proverbial cat with nine lives. According to the medical charts, he’s died and been resuscitated three times, he has a brain injury, a bad heart, an addiction, and has been on the streets of Calgary since he was a little kid.

That’s one way of looking at Aaron. There is another way, a way he prefers, and it’s the way staff at Alpha House see him. In this portrait, he’s a man who is struggling back into mainstream society after a life of extreme marginalization; a courageous man who has made huge changes, but who still has a way to go.

Now on Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), Aaron found housing through Alpha House, where he says a lot of the counsellors are friends as well as professionals. “They get to know you personally and they are very supportive and care about us.”

Under the organization’s harm reduction program, Aaron has stopped using drugs, but he still drinks, explaining, “The reason why I drink is because something happened. It’s a coping mechanism. When I need a way to cope, I pick up the bottle.”

Used to sleeping in stairwells and under bridges, Aaron said that at first living in his own place was hard because “all I knew was street life.” Then he began to adapt and to like it because it was “safe, private, where no harm could come to me and where I was happy.”

Despite Alpha House's support for both the landlord and for Aaron, the arrangement didn't work out. But he'd had a taste of home and discovered that he liked it. Without help from Alpha House he went out and found another apartment – something he had never done before.

"It's a huge move forward for Aaron," says Alpha House's housing coordinator, Allison Flegg, whose team provides all the support, encouragement and friendship to him that it can.

As for Aaron, he now has hope.

He says: "I believe if I have the opportunity to have a house with structure and with the staff as friends, I could cope with the different life – if given a chance."

## SOURCES

Interviews: Bradley Chisholm, Ken Faulkner, Yvonne Fritz, Cheryl Gardner, Brian O'Leary, Erin Partridge, Tim Richter, Steve Snyder, Ed Stelmach, Robin Wigston

Alberta Affordable Housing Task Force, *Housing First, An Investment with a Return in Prosperity*, 2007

Alberta Government, *Government Responds to Task Force Report with \$285 Million in New Funding*, news release, April 14, 2007

Alberta Government, *Province to Create a 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness*, October 29, 2007

Alberta Government, *Secretariat Appointed for Plan to End Homelessness*, January 23, 2008

Alberta Health Services, *PACT Facts*, June 30, 2011

Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness 2009 – 2010 Report to the Minister

Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness 2010 – 2011 Report to the Minister

Barlow, Eliza, *Alberta Gangs Everywhere, Say Cops*, Edmonton Sun, January 4, 2007

CBC Edmonton News, *Alberta Strikes Affordable Housing Task Force*, February 1, 2007

CBC News, *Alberta Aims to End Homelessness For \$3.3B*, March 16, 2009

CBC News, *Alberta Homeless Secretariat Gets New Chairman*, July 30, 2009

Campion-Smith, Bruce, *UN Housing Envoy Scolds Canadians; Radical Shift in Policy Needed to Tackle Crisis, Official Warns After Visit*, Toronto Star, October 23, 2007

Cryderman, Kelly, *Rental Crisis Fund hits \$43.5 million*, Calgary Herald, July 1, 2008

Cunningham, Amie, *Labour Shortages and Lack of Affordable Housing Are Two Sides of the Same Coin*, Alberta Venture, January 8, 2008

Fritz, Yvonne, background notes, September 2011

Shapcott, Michael, *Alberta Announces \$3.2B Plan to End Homelessness*, [wellesleyinstitute.com](http://wellesleyinstitute.com), March 19, 2009

Stelmach, Ed, emails February 2012

Van Rassel, Jason, *Gangs Ranked*, Calgary Herald, July 21, 2007





## A SYSTEM, NOT A PLAN

When Calgary's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness came into being there was no lack of crisis responses to homelessness. Shelters and services had sprung up responding to the multiple needs – addictions treatment, food banks, medical facilities and job training, to name but a few. The community had invested to the tune of \$320 million in a mish-mash of services operating in vacuums.

"It was like a chaotic road system," says Tim Richter, president and CEO of the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF). "Some roads led to cul de sacs, others connected with major arteries, but the cars (representing people without homes) were moving round the system without direction and more and more vehicles were entering the confusion. Inevitably traffic jams piled up, so we built a huge parking garage to warehouse them. What was required was a logical flow to move the cars, that is the people, off the tangle of roads. In other words, we needed a system of care, so there were clearly defined roads home."

The grand vision was to create a system so that wherever anyone turned up seeking help – at hospital, a domestic violence shelter, in a police cruiser, Alberta Works, a detox facility, or a youth shelter – all roads would lead to housing; there would be no wrong door. In other words, everyone would be coordinated and connected instead of working in isolation with no knowledge of what the next agency or the next system was up to. The 10 Year Plan's official goal stated: "By January 29, 2018, an individual or family will stay in an emergency shelter or sleep outside for no longer than one week before moving into a safe, decent, affordable home with the

support needed to sustain them.” It is a lofty aim that requires more than goodwill and platitudes.

In 2007, there were 140+ non-profit agencies providing more than 2,000 programs; eight provincial agencies; and an unknown number of Aboriginal entities involved in homelessness, with everyone fighting for money and resources. It was an array of caring solitudes competing for the same dollars and, in some cases, the same clients; the agencies had become mini systems with them all doing a little bit of everything.

“It is hard to describe the position we had put ourselves in,” says Richter. “We had little, or no, authority and all kinds of expectations.” While agencies like The Alex, CUPS, and Alpha House were rehousing people, CHF staff began to address the daunting task of creating a system. “For the first three or four years we asked ourselves, ‘How do we stitch this together?’ We had no idea and we talked about it a lot.”



Alina Turner, left, and Martina Jileckova on Richter's team.

Without a system in place, housing would at best be haphazard and uncoordinated, guaranteeing that people would still fall through the cracks or possibly receive second-rate service and become trapped in the homeless web. In the likes of Marina Giacomini, Martina Jileckova and Alina Turner, however, Richter had a team that gradually was able to patch a system together so that all the pieces began to cohere into something more than the parts. The first step in the right direction was the development of a homeless management information system (HMIS).

“Ultimately, we came to the realization that every single person (experiencing homelessness) has touched a system that could have prevented them from becoming homeless – the police, Child and Family Services, various agencies – and none had prevented them from losing their home. Each touch-

point is an entryway. It's not like the services didn't exist; they were just disconnected," Richter says.

From the beginning the CHF wrestled with the question of whether to redesign the agencies, or to target individuals so that it was easier for them to move through the existing structure. In the end it was a bit of both, with the aim of producing a seamless flow. One of the chief architects of all this was Alina Turner, who arrived at the CHF as director of research. "We kept pushing her into the deep end and she consistently over-delivered, so we promoted her to vice-president, strategy, and set her loose on system design. She was a mile ahead of the rest of us," says Richter. Others, like Stephen Gaetz, an associate professor at York University, have called her plain "brilliant."

It was a no-brainer for Turner to sign up with the foundation when offered a job in 2007. She had always been motivated by social justice issues and at the outset of her career she deliberately chose to work in the social service sector, seeing it as a moral imperative. She cut her teeth in various Edmonton agencies, mostly helping immigrants and people experiencing homelessness, then moved to the United Way Calgary and Area's Sustained Poverty Reduction Initiative just in time to be loaned out to help create the 10 Year Plan. She was recruited to be the CHF's "ending homelessness detective," to do the crucial reconnaissance required for the plan to succeed.

"I wanted to be part of something that made a difference," she recalls. "This was an opportunity to have more impact . . . They didn't have to sell me."

For two reasons, it was "quite a challenge." With a background in social anthropology, Turner was an observer rather than a participant in the hurly-burly. Back then, her knee-jerk reaction was that the business elites had caused the homeless problem and here she was working with the erstwhile enemy to alleviate it. However, she quickly realized that business people are creative, ambitious, well connected and they have the power to make a difference at a systemic level rather than produce more Band-aids.

At the outset, Turner "unleashed a beast." She knew that knowledge is power and with it you can shape public policy, but information was sorely lacking and she had few resources at her disposal. "Knowledge," she says, "plays an important part, even if

it's a hidden role; it influences policy at higher levels, but we didn't have the knowledge and we had to catch up and become experts."

Several questions kept bugging her: who are the people experiencing homelessness; how do we know if programs are working or not; what does the population really need; what are their patterns of usage; and what really helps them find and retain housing? In one way, the CHF couldn't go wrong because people needed help, but Turner was sure they could do better if they knew more. "With no data, there was nothing to analyze," she said. What was required was a system that tied the service providers together in real time feeding in information about their clients without invading their privacy. This was something the CHF had struggled with for many years and, in fact, there was something called the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS), but according to Turner the agencies weren't very receptive to it and it wasn't working well.

She started by "prodding and talking" to people in the US, particularly in Boston and Alabama who had already implemented a well-functioning system. In February 2010, Canavan and Associates, already experienced in the process, were hired as a facilitator. Thus the work began to implement a system tailor-made for Calgary. Turner wanted to extract five things out of HMIS:

- System-wide, standardized data on individuals experiencing homelessness, including how long they had been without a home, their demographic characteristics and their needs.
- A better understanding of their experiences by tracking the services they received.
- Better help for clients by improving co-ordination between agencies, better referrals and a reduction in administration.
- Better decision-making for things like program design and policy proposals.
- A reduction in the time people are homeless, and a more efficient and kindly approach.

The non-profits were apprehensive, Turner remembers, partly because they didn't have a good grasp of privacy rights. She pointed out that the minute they receive government money (which implicated most of them) they become part of that government and

so does their data, falling under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. “No one had that understanding,” she says. However, because it was a big issue, Turner consulted with the provincial privacy commissioner whose office gave her the official go-ahead. There followed a year of monthly meetings with a group of about 30 agencies, ranging alphabetically from the Aboriginal Friendship Centre to the YWCA of Calgary and Area, discussing issues like how to share the information, privacy protocols and general policies.

By November, Bowman Systems was selected as the HMIS provider; a month later the system administrator was being trained and in January 2011, the software was reconfigured for Canada. In February, one by one, 20 agencies initiated HMIS. “It was a huge learning curve,” says Turner. The software had to be customized for each agency and staff had to be trained. In the end, she says, everyone agreed where we needed to go. “It sounds minuscule, but how else do you end homelessness?”

As for those privacy concerns, there are regulations in place, but compromises were made, trust built and firewalls created so that not just anyone can pull out data. “It sounds onerous, but it’s not.” Unrolled to the agencies in three stages and due to be completed in 2012, HMIS was already spitting out good information before it was fully functioning. By the end of 2011, there was a feeling that homeless numbers were down, but Turner says that, thanks to HMIS, they could now say it with much more certainty, a fact that was further corroborated by the count taken in early 2012.

By May 2012, when Turner presented at a CHF community information session, HMIS was well on its way to being the standard reporting system. While it’s not mandatory, “agencies funded by the CHF will be required to submit data in HMIS-friendly format,” she told the crowd.

HMIS almost forced the issue of designing a system of care, says Richter, because it made the CHF ask such questions as what are the programs, who are they designed for, what are the criteria, what are the outcomes? As usual, a vital step was to look south to see what was working in the US. Some of the communities with dynamic plans included Washington, DC; Chicago; Columbus, OH; and the state of Utah.

Then Turner began the long, difficult and painful process of

turning the solitudes into a functioning system. “It is a bumpy road,” she says, “with a lot of pressure on agencies and a lot of short-term pain for long-term gain.”

Some naturally worried what the impacts would be on their organization, rather than the potential benefits for their clients. Turner brought the agencies together to identify their strengths and then to create a referral process through the system, or a system map. She also saw the need for measures and indicators of how different parts of the system were working. While agencies were able to agree on their alignment within the system, they had more trouble reaching consensus on benchmarks, partly because the sector had never before had professional standards of care, consistent funding, staff accreditation or good, standardized data collection.

Turner identified six pillars of a successful system:

- Defined basic building blocks of the system.
- Programs with clear, consistent and transparent eligibility and prioritization rules.
- Clear and appropriate performance measures and service quality expectations at the program and system levels.
- Common tools to assess the needs of clients to allow comparison across programs, to make appropriate referrals and to track people better.
- Engagement of stakeholders in continuous performance monitoring, priority-setting and improvements.
- The sharing of information with providers and funders via HMIS.

After several meetings, Turner combined three elements: what they had learned from HMIS, from other jurisdictions, and from Calgary agencies, and she sketched out a framework that Richter considers “really revolutionary, leap-frogging ahead of most plans – even in the US.”

The system of care is an evolving beast as it continues to adapt and respond to new research and demands. One of the goals is to bring more funders and other mainstream groups and provincial government departments, like health, corrections and child intervention, into the loop to ensure that everyone is working

### Calgary's Model

Calgary's System of Care is composed of nine key program types, shown in the chart below, which deliver distinct services. Each program type has a clear service model and target population, eligibility and prioritization criteria, as well as performance indicators.

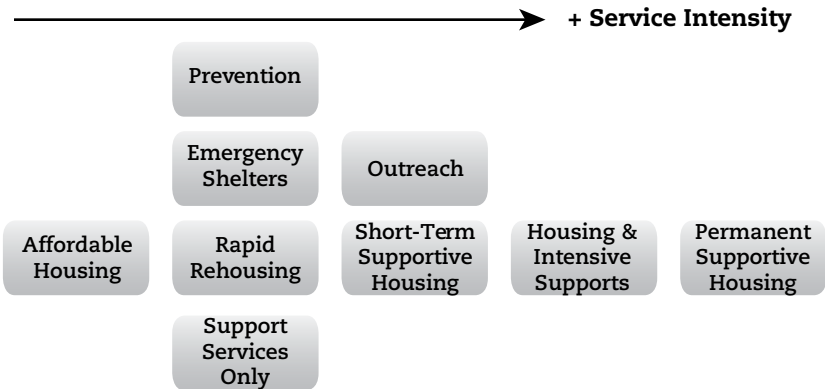
Performance measurement and monitoring is achieved using the following:

#### System Measures

- occupancy
- destinations at exit
- return to shelter/rough sleeping
- interaction with public systems

#### Program Measures

- income gains at exit
- length of stay/stability
- self-sufficiency measure
- program defined



The HMIS allows front-line staff to apply the System of Care by ensuring consistent service provider program definitions, intake and eligibility criteria, and outcome measurement. HMIS also allows programs to use consistent client assessment tools appropriate for their target population and role in the system. This helps CHF at the aggregate level to understand how clients fare as a result of service interventions over time.

together, rather than at cross purposes. Another goal is to ensure that brand-new programs for people with complex needs are actually helping them and that they are standardized across the city so that people have the same level of support no matter which agency they are with.

When Katrina Milaney, CHF manager of research and policy,

came on board in 2009, search as she might, she found precious little work had been done on developing standards. Scanning what was out there, she discovered that there had been some scrutiny of best practices, but nothing had been translated into what was actually happening on the ground.

Milaney formed a committee of experts with academics, agencies and Aboriginal people from across North America, including New York, Toronto and Los Angeles. She held focus groups with people experiencing homelessness and the recently housed, and looked at local best practices here and in the US. After 18 months of consultation she wrote a comprehensive report, *Dimensions of Promising Practice*, that was published in a peer-reviewed journal. *Dimensions of Promising Practice* set out to shed clarity on and to lay the groundwork for guidelines essential to effective case-management supports to end homelessness.

From the report, Milaney drafted standards for the agencies, which were scrutinized by front-line workers and tweaked by Marina Giacomini. Then the Canadian Accreditation Council transformed them into “a big, fat manual.”

Now clauses are built into agency contracts, acknowledging that agreed standards are a condition of funding. Part of this includes an annual review process with site visits and interviews with staff and clients. To make this happen, two quality assurance specialists were added to CHF staff.

Eventually, says Milaney, standards and a review process will be rolled out to other areas like outreach and housing. Admitting that most people find this kind of thing a big yawn, to her it is “super exciting” because research is being transformed into practice, giving the clients the best possible care and services. “It is cool,” says Milaney, pointing out that already other agencies – some in the US – are using parts of the care managers’ training segment of the manual.

While many people hired by agencies had some qualifications like a BA in psychology or social work, some had nothing at all except the availability to work; often they had no understanding of critical issues like the impact of colonization on Aboriginal people; the effects of trauma; and how to help people with FASD. It would be difficult to maintain standards called for by the CHF without trained staff. In 2009, the CHF and the University of Calgary’s



(U of C) faculty of social work, aided and abetted by Dr. Pam Thompson, who initiated Pathways at The Alex, began to talk about a certificate program for people already in the field.

It took about nine months to get it off the ground, says Lobsang Galak, the assistant director of continuing professional education for the faculty's Centre for Social Work Research and Professional Development. In those formative months, "the big guns" including Richter and the faculty's dean Gayla Rogers, plus representatives from the Community Action Committee and the Alberta Housing secretariat, met a few times then handed the work over to a steering committee including the CHF's Marina Giacomini.

The result was a course unique in North America. Officially called a Certificate in Working with Homeless Populations: Practice Fundamentals, it is designed for front-line staff who want to upgrade their skills and knowledge. It provides baseline, uniform information with an emphasis on housing first, in 2010 still something of a foreign concept to agencies modelled on the housing-ready premise. Topics include street culture, how to establish rapport, ethical issues, care management and navigation through the system, health – both mental and physical – addictions, diversity and anti-oppressive practice, legal issues and, very importantly, self-care.

Galak says that about 90 people in total went through the first three sessions, some of them from other centres like Edmonton, Lethbridge and Fort McMurray. With out-of-province interest, the course will soon be offered online and levels 2 and 3 will be developed. "All these things are a process," he cautions.

Although the CHF was learning almost daily, there were still gaps in their knowledge. At the outset, about the only relevant research to Calgary were the biennial homeless counts, blurry freeze-frames at best. Turner needed to find people who could help formulate policy and opinion, so she began to explore who was available locally. One of the first things she did was hold a symposium to gather a wide range of people to see if they were interested in doing research aimed at ending homelessness.

A comparative newcomer to the field and certainly not advanced in years, she invited people by picking out names garnered from Googling "homeless research." However, she was ambitious enough to envision Calgary becoming a leading centre

in the field. For her keynote speaker, she chose Stephen Gaetz, who besides his York University post is also the director of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network and the Homeless Hub, a clearing house for research. One of his shticks is making research relevant to policy and program development. After the symposium, Calgary formed its own hub involving other Alberta cities and it hooked up with the national one. Even more to the point, research is now hardwired into all the foundation's work.

Cash to fund the research was the next big hurdle. "I scratched my head," says Turner. In the end, she approached researchers telling them that she had, say, \$1,000 and needed answers to Question X. "What do you think?" It turned out the academics wanted their work to make a difference so they were not only eager to find the answers, but they were also able to parlay the CHF money into something more substantial with matching grants from the U of C and places like the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. This attracted names like Herb Amery, an expert in the economics of healthcare, two other economists, Ron Kneebone and Jack Mintz, as well as Leslie Tutty, a social work professor.

One of the first results was the Rehousing Triage and Assessment Survey (RTAS), an acuity scale developed with Marina Giacomini, to determine who were the most vulnerable people on the streets so that they could be given priority in the housing process. Another early piece of research published at the end of 2009 was the Homeless Assets and Risks Tool (HART) by U of C's Tutty. HART, a summary of research around risk factors and pathways in and out of housing, helps predict who is at greatest risk of becoming homeless.

At the end of August 2010, so much had been achieved that a second symposium, again featuring Gaetz, was held to help update the three-year research agenda. Presentations on some of the leading local research were made, including one on the Aboriginal situation led by Wilfreda Thurston from the U of C and Carol Mason, executive director of the Aboriginal Friendship Centre; and *Patterns of Homelessness* conducted by Dan Dutton, a graduate student in community health sciences, and Herb Emery, Svara professor in health economics. *Hidden in Plain Sight*, a collaboration among the United Way's poverty reduction coalition, the CHF, the City of Calgary and the U of C, highlighted the housing challenges facing newcomers.

While all this was happening, agencies were doing their best to fulfil a major goal of the first phase of the 10 Year Plan, which ran until the end of 2010. They were charged with creating rapid and visible change by housing the chronically homeless to relieve the pressure on the system and assure the public the plan was working.

"We shocked the system with the pace. It was pretty relentless. We pressed people to act quickly, hoping to imbue the sector with some urgency. We weren't necessarily the easiest people to deal with because we were learning on the fly too. Sometimes we gave out mixed messages and sometimes it was a lot of work," says Richter.

The non-profits worked hard at housing the most vulnerable people, even though few, if any agencies, had experience in housing first. "It was a huge burden on agencies and staff and still is," says Richter. "Because of the very, very complicated needs, it takes special people with special skillsets. The non-profits really rose to the challenge." They also had to deal with the added strain of more demanding funders hounding them for documented outcomes.

In the US, many agencies pushed back against the 10-year plans. But here the core agencies were enthusiastic, willing to take the risks and to embrace the concept. "It must be something in the water," says Richter, explaining the enthusiasm. Besides making housing first work, many agency heads were also good ambassadors doing the uphill work of selling the plan to the public, to funders and to other agencies. "If it weren't for people like that in the trenches, we wouldn't be where we are today," he adds.

A problem faced almost immediately in housing the 20 per cent of people who took up almost 60 per cent of the shelter beds, was that they required more support than could be given in apartments scattered across the city – the model for Sam Tsemberis in New York. Scattered housing has the advantage of avoiding outcries of, "Not in my backyard!" but some clients have behaviours that make them more challenging, others require life-long supported care and few, if any, can afford even "affordable housing." And, yet, if they could be housed, it would be a big gain in reducing the shelter system and ultimately costs to the public.

John Currie, the foundation's former CEO, says the CHF had always wrestled with the lack of affordable housing. In the early days they were given land or acquired it cheaply from the City of

Calgary which enabled them to host a couple of Habitat for Humanity builds, but it wasn't enough and the situation was deteriorating. With the razing of East Village and Victoria Park, the closing of the York Hotel to make way for the Calgary Bow, and other redevelopment projects, the U of C school of public policy calculated that the city lost 8,000 rental units. While many were not of the best quality, they offered an affordable haven.

Martina Jileckova, who had been with the CHF since 2002, observed all this take place while she helped former Calgary-Bow MLA Bonnie Laing build the Community Action Committee and develop the co-operative granting process for agencies. Part of the funding went towards grants for small real estate projects like the houses purchased by Oxford House for recovering addicts, and those bought by the Calgary Boys and Girls Club. She calls them "boutique projects for specialized groups."

Jileckova also remembers the CHF uniting with various partners in two much larger initiatives. The first was the Bob Ward Residence in which the foundation, the Calgary Home Builders Association and Horizon Housing Society collaborated from 2001 to 2003 to construct a 61-unit building for people with mental illness and other special needs. The same three partners broke ground in Inglewood in 2007 to construct Alice Bissett Place, which features 104 apartment units and 10 duplex-style townhouses for low-income families. It was constructed on land leased from the city at nominal cost and received significant provincial and federal funding from the Affordable Housing Partnership Initiative program.

They were big projects, requiring a lot of work in terms of city permits and fundraising, Jileckova recalls.

Trained as a planner, Jileckova is now the foundation's vice-president of housing and happily swimming with real estate "sharks" to acquire properties for the foundation, in particular to house people with complex needs. "Show us the good deals," she said to the real estate world in 2007 when property was going for a comparative song. "I've always liked real estate," she says. "I'm from Eastern Europe and always want to get a good deal and to do things the right way."

The goal was to develop 150 units of affordable housing per year over the 10 years of the plan to end homelessness. In the first four years, the foundation received funding for 590 units. Typically,

this was achieved with 70 per cent government monies and the remaining 30 per cent raised through a combination of mortgages and donations, with First Calgary Financial providing a \$5-million, interest-free, evergreen line of credit for short-term financing. The housing is scattered throughout the city and ranges from a 58-unit apartment building in Acadia to an 11-unit property in Bridgeland.

With a decrease in the 2012 provincial budget for capital spending — from \$232 million over three years, to \$121.9 million spent in 2011 and with only \$80 million spread over 2012-2013 — the CHF was forced to make adjustments. Instead of a target of 940 units, it reduced the number to 790 and began to look at new ways of raising funds, including a collaborative capital campaign and finding matching funding for support programs.

Already some changes had occurred in the CHF's thinking about the best way to house people. By the summer of 2011 it began to dawn on people that permanent supportive housing (PSH) services were required for some of the most challenged and challenging people, but there was very limited capacity in the sector to create it.

"Most agencies weren't prepared to take the financial risk of debt to create the housing. Others were concerned about the operating risk of housing chronically homeless people. And, even if you could find agencies willing to take the operating risk or the financial risk, they had little or no real estate experience. So very little housing for people with significant needs who needed deep subsidies was getting done. That's the gap we were stepping in to fill," says Richter, who also worried that the province would withdraw its funding commitment if it wasn't being drawn on.

"At the same time we were learning lessons about operating housing and we were running into challenges with a mixed, affordable housing concept (mixed income and need) because we had multiple agencies supporting multiple clients in the same building with a private-sector property manager thrown into the middle. It was neither an efficient nor an effective response," he says.

That was when the CHF started to purchase small, specialized buildings like the Madison for veterans and the Ophelia for women, the former supported by Alpha House and the latter by the YWCA of Calgary and Area.

Meanwhile, before the end of Phase 1, it became clear there

were three groups who needed more attention and, perhaps, somewhat different approaches: Aboriginals, young people, and women and children fleeing domestic violence. When the updated version of the 10 Year Plan was published in 2011, the priority list was expanded to include those experiencing chronic and episodic homelessness, Aboriginals, young people, families and women, even though progress was already occurring in some of those areas.

Katrina Milaney says, at the last census, Aboriginal people accounted for 2.5 per cent of Calgary's population and yet in the 2012 homeless count they totalled 16 per cent; for some specialized sectors like the Remand Centre, or those sleeping outside it was as high as 30 per cent. Calgary is not alone in this very lopsided representation – similar figures can be counted across the country. The different structural pathways that catapult Aboriginal people into homelessness were neither well acknowledged, nor acted upon. Some factors include colonization, residential schools, child welfare, the baby scoops, lack of access to supports and poverty. Families and entire communities and cultures have been ripped apart, and children raised in white homes lose their sense of family, culture, safety and identity.

In Calgary, the Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness (ASCHH) has its roots in the 1996 forum on homelessness. Out of the forum came the Ad Hoc Steering Committee on Homelessness and an Aboriginal subcommittee which had the mandate to develop an action plan. Over the years this subcommittee evolved into the ASCHH, now formally recognized by the CHF and Human Resources Development Canada as the group best positioned to address Aboriginal homelessness in Calgary.

According to Lowa Beebe, co-chair of the ASCHH and the housing co-ordinator of Aboriginal Friendship Centre, Aboriginals were conspicuously absent from the first 10 Year Plan, but by the update in 2011, the word "Aboriginal" was peppered throughout it; however, not in ways that were particularly thoughtful or meaningful to Aboriginal people. "Everyone was up in arms because the update was going to be printed and no one was happy with it." It was then that Beebe asked the committee, "Why are we allowing other people to speak for us when we have our own voice?"

From then on the ASCHH, supported by the CHF, has led the

way designing an Aboriginal plan with the intention of integrating it into the larger plan. The big step forward in Beebe's eyes was when the foundation said, "So, tell us what is the difference between Aboriginal homeless people and others?" She describes that moment as a big miracle when, finally, Aboriginal people felt heard. "People feel safety when they are understood and when they feel they belong, it changes their behaviour."

Because there were huge gaps in our understanding of what does and doesn't work for Aboriginal people – who it must be recognized are not themselves a homogenous culture – it became important to find out "their wants, needs and desires," says Milaney. "We can't assume there is one way of knowing." As well as the usual literature scan, 50 Aboriginal people, either experiencing homelessness or recently housed, were interviewed and 37 more participated in eight focus groups.

As a draft of the Plan to End Aboriginal Homelessness in Calgary says: "The core stakeholders in this process are the Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness, those at-risk of homelessness and Aboriginal people who have recently been housed. In order to ensure that we 'get it right,' the voice of this core population will be heard and applied to all facets of the Aboriginal plan. At times, this feedback may conflict with the voice of policy makers, service providers and the wider community, but history tells us that this voice . . . is *the* voice to be listened to."

An example of this voice, says Beebe, is the clear finding that Aboriginal people want community. Usually they do not want to be the lone person in an apartment. "If we are alone we think we are going to die. We need community to live."

The three pillars of the Aboriginal plan embrace continuing input from and consultation with those who are affected by homelessness, a clear articulation of the trauma inflicted on Aboriginal people and culture, and goals and strategies that are rooted in the Aboriginal context. "It will not be a rewrite of the 10 Year Plan," stresses Milaney.

Meanwhile, some Aboriginal people continue to be housed by agencies that, as part of the 10 Year Plan, are encouraging front-line workers to become more sensitive to the issues of colonization that are also dealt with in the U of C's diploma syllabus.

The Plan to End Youth Homelessness, released June 2011



Chaz Smith provides his perspective on the youth plan.

and the first of its kind in Canada, was totally a CHF document, although written in consultation with the sector and the young people themselves.

In its preparation, one phrase resonated for everyone around the table: “The Plan to End Youth Homelessness in Calgary is a plan that is driven by innovation, not invention. By innovation, the plan extracts value from the creative understanding of what we already know. What we know comes from the experience and feedback of young people, service providers, the wider community and quality research.”

When it was all over, Camille Farrag, the CHF director of prevention and youth homelessness at the time, said she was most proud of the youth panel “which was the first time young people had been brought into the fold of trying to end homelessness.” The young people worked with the CAC’s youth sector, which



embraces Alberta Health Services and the Calgary Police Service among other entities, to develop the plan.

Reasons why homelessness is different for young people include the facts they are still developing; they have often been forced into abandoning their education; they have little or no work experience and few life skills like cooking, budgeting and job-searching; and they experience high levels of exploitation and victimization. While Aboriginal people are over-represented in the general homeless population, it is believed the figure is almost double in the Aboriginal youth bracket, and they also tend to be younger than non-Aboriginal homeless youth. Therefore, it was imperative, says Farrag, to make Aboriginal youth a priority.

The group consulted with the ASCHH, whose comments and suggestions are listed verbatim in the youth plan. Some of the things that came to light are the many structural factors contributing to the over-representation of Aboriginal youth that should be investigated. For example, of all the children and young people in Alberta Children and Youth Services care in 2010, 64 per cent were Aboriginal, and several studies elsewhere show a strong link between Aboriginal children growing up in care and becoming homeless. With this in mind, there was some urgency to reduce this over-representation on the streets, says Farrag. One of the youth plan's major targets is that by 2018, Aboriginal young people will not be over-represented in Calgary's homeless population. "It was kind of like an affirmative action policy."

Other targets include building a co-ordinated system to prevent and end youth homelessness; developing an adequate number of housing units and supportive homes dedicated to youth at risk or experiencing homelessness; and to improve data systems and knowledge in part to better shape public policy. No one wanted to see the young people becoming entrenched forever in the morass of homelessness.

In 2008 it became clear to CUPS that 48 per cent of the referrals to Rapid Exit were from the domestic violence sector. While this was no surprise to that sector, it was a bit of a shock to the rest of the homeless community; no one else had really thought about these women and children in that light before. Realizing there was a gap in the system, the CHF approached the Women's Shelter Directors Network about funding a housing-first pilot project. By December,

it had been agreed that Discovery House, a second-stage shelter, should take it on.

When Heather Morley, co-ordinator of the agency's residential program at that time, heard about the pilot she immediately applied to be the director of programs. With a target of housing 50 families, the community program was never meant to replace the shelter, but to provide an alternative for women who, for one reason or another, like active addictions, didn't want to stay, or weren't eligible to stay at Discovery House. In two short months, Morley found space and had a team in place, including two housing locators from CUPS. In nine months, 75 families had been housed. "We could have kept going, but we didn't have the capacity," she says.

"It was a lot like cooking pasta. When you throw it against the wall, you know it's ready," says Morley. Just a month before the pilot funding ran out, the CHF renewed funding and in the subsequent two years, the team has been busy "creating the meal."

The first of its kind in Canada, the program has met with resounding success, having supported a total of 194 women and their children, 94 per cent from local domestic violence shelters. Of that number, 14 per cent were chronically homeless and 86 per cent episodically homeless. The overall housing retention has been 85 per cent. At intake, 75 per cent were identified with mental health concerns, 54 per cent with substance abuse and 47 per cent with physical health issues; 59 per cent had two or more of those problems. After three months of being housed, those figures dropped to 36 per cent, 32 per cent and 44 per cent respectively. As well over one-third of the women had entered some form of education or training program.

Contrary to what Discovery House staff expected, many of the women who lived under a severe threat of danger from their abusive partner opted for community housing. Many said, "I can't run forever. I will create a safe place in a community. I want a normal life." One of the bonuses is that all the services are home-based, so a woman doesn't have to drag herself and her four children across town on a bus to get counselling. Because of the high levels of mental health issues, Discovery House ramped up that kind of support. One worker is nicknamed "The Detox Fairy," because she is often up at 5 am to take a client in to treatment. They have also added child support workers to the team.

If a mother has to leave her children temporarily because of a parole violation, or for detox, Morley and her team work hard to keep the kids in the home, often by supporting other family members to care for them. They also help mothers through the Catch 22 that often occurs when their children are apprehended. Social services then cuts their money so that they can't sustain their housing and, without adequate housing, they are unable to get their offspring back. The children's wellbeing is paramount, says Morley. Another marker of success is that 25 per cent of the participants who had active child protection service files have had them closed and they are no longer living under the threat of their children being taken away.

"We put aside 'I can't do it' and 'It's never been done before' and made the great leap of faith," says Morley.

Community housing has been so successful that Discovery House has shelved its plans to construct another shelter. There will always be women for whom a shelter is the preferred option, but so many more can be supported in the city at large that the board has made the decision to fundraise for more community housing, with a target of 100 families. It is easy for the board to pronounce success, but more importantly, the women themselves praise community housing.

"This program really helped save my life," says one woman who is now enrolled full-time in nursing and social work studies. Another says, "It's very helpful. It's gotten me to where I'm at. We got a house. We're not moving place to place anymore."

"This is a real future opportunity for all shelters," says Carla Link, director of operations at Discovery House. "This is the way to combat the homeless issue, poverty, abuse and addictions."

There is, however, still one problem: the great number of women who don't get help. In 2011, city police logged 16,000 domestic violence calls. In only 3,700 cases were charges laid and even fewer women found a place in an emergency shelter. "The demand is huge. Think of all those couch-surfing or living in abuse because there are no options. . . . There is still so much work to be done," says Morley.

As the CHF and agencies worked to put the plan in place and results started to be tabulated, other institutions also pitched in. Since at least 1992, when Alderman Barb Scott's request for a home-

less count initiated the city's first biennial count, there had always been a strong element at City Hall working to improve the plight of those experiencing homelessness. Alderman Bob Hawkesworth, social planner Kay Wong and others spent tireless hours both before and after the formation of the CHF. Former mayor Al Duerr had granted the CHF both money and land and, as reports of housing first and 10-year plans began to emanate from the US, several city representatives travelled to places like Washington, DC, to check them out. But as the homeless counts graphically showed, the numbers here didn't diminish – no matter what we did.

Then, in the flurry of activity, or as someone called it a “collision of ideas,” before the Calgary Committee to End Homelessness (CCEH) was struck, community representatives went to see Mayor Dave Bronconnier to enlist his and the city's support for their plan using the housing-first model. Bronconnier knew from the calibre of recruits, like Steve Snyder and Tim Hearn, that the committee would have the necessary clout to make an irrefutable case to the provincial government to release funding. He realized this was the best chance we had to tackle the problem.

By the first meeting of the CCEH on January 9, 2007, Bronconnier's support was in place. After Snyder had spoken, the mayor thanked everyone for their time and expertise and pledged human and financial support from the City of Calgary. At the second meeting on February 12, John te Linde, manager social policy and planning, community and neighbourhood services, and Sharon Stroick, who had quarterbacked the city's counts and who had written various research papers, put together “an insightful” presentation on homelessness in Canada and, more particularly, what was known about Calgary.

When asked what was needed most, te Linde, foreshadowing Turner, replied, “Aside from lobbying the provincial government to get back into the game, we need to commission an information system. We need better day-to-day numbers.” He explained that HIFIS, the system in use at that time, was not working because of “flakey” software and that better information would give a better understanding of the different groups.

In fact, prompted by the rising figures, representatives from the city's Community and Neighbourhood Services had already met with Robin Wigston, Alberta's assistant deputy minister of housing

and urban affairs, to persuade the province to get on board with a 10-year plan. The response was cutting. They were told, recalls te Linde, “Your system in Calgary is so dysfunctional that every time we try to help we run into grief, so we are not interested.”

The city was at the table through 2007, and its research on affordable housing and homelessness helped the CCEH to understand the issues and to shape our 10 Year Plan. Two important events had been organized by Pat Rice of the city’s social planning department – Kari Bedell’s (of the National Alliance to End Homelessness) pivotal visit and the first community summit during the year of planning. Everyone gave unstintingly, says Bronconnier, praising the committee for its hard work and long hours with 7 am meetings. “The only complaint I heard was that we had run out of coffee.”

When the plan was announced, it mapped out roles for the three levels of government. The City of Calgary’s was the shortest:

- Negotiate a three- to five-year multilateral implementation and funding agreement between the city, the Government of Alberta, the Government of Canada and the CHF for implementation of the 10 Year Plan. The city found this was easier said than done. In 2011, it was still trying to coordinate the three levels of government.
- Approve a land-use policy designating 10 to 15 per cent of all single- and two-family lands in new subdivisions as R1-S and R2-S respectively, to accommodate secondary suites.
- Approve a development policy requiring that all new housing built on R1-S and R2-S lands provide the necessary building infrastructure to accommodate the inclusion of a secondary suite. Zoning on secondary suites has been relaxed, but the city was hamstrung in part because it does not have the legislative authority and because of a prevailing attitude of NIMBY.
- Agreement among Alberta, the city, and the CHF concerning the disposition and use of provincial funds to support the development of affordable housing. The city has continued to do this and to support the disposition of municipal lands for affordable housing projects, according to the city’s 2011 annual status report.

- Develop an inventory of municipal land appropriate for affordable housing. The city also continues to review and assess its inventory of affordable development opportunities.

The city became what perhaps can best be described as a cautious supporter of the plan. In its 2010 annual status report to the municipal intergovernmental affairs committee, it said, "While the city is supportive of the 10 Year Plan, recognizing the corporation's role as a steward of the broader public interest, it must maintain predictable, responsible and bounded participation. As a partner in the 10 Year Plan, and with more general work in affordable housing and social development, the city continues to play a central role in working to end homelessness in Calgary."

Since the plan came into effect, the city has had a policy of building, buying or facilitating 200 units a year of affordable housing, mainly administered through the Calgary Housing Company (CHC). The role of the CHC, however, is more to catch people before they descend into homelessness rather than lifting them out of it. Since the 10 Year Plan came into effect, disconcertingly, its waiting list climbed from 2,111 in 2007 to 4,148 in 2010.

"I think this is very reflective of the cost of housing, increased income disparity and a changing demographic in our city. CHC has definitely seen its 'client base' change over the past few years towards a greater immigrant population," says Alderman Brian Pincott, former CHC chair.

Other ways of adding to housing stock were the Secondary Suites Grant Pilot and Public Consultation, with funding approved for 79 suites by 2011; and the Financial Incentives Pilot Program to help private and non-profit sectors develop affordable housing by providing start-up grants. The city has also partnered with the LaCaille Group in the construction of the 11-storey Louise Station with 88 affordable units, and with the Kansas Corporation on the Lumino building in Manchester with an equal number of units, as well as providing land at a nominal-cost lease for Alice Bissett Place. On top of that it has approved funding for 1,000 units for purchase under the Attainable Home Ownership Program for those with an income of less than \$80,000 a year. While not alleviating homelessness directly, these families will be siphoned off from the fierce competition for low-rent accommodation.

After he stepped down in October 2010, Bronconnier said he wished that the city had been able to do more with incentives to developers, citing New York City where they have used a system of stackable grants to construct affordable housing. “I regret that we were not aggressive enough to build rental stock,” he said. “In some ways we were too timid, but from a Canadian perspective we led the way.”

Another strong ally was Rick Hanson, who returned to the city in 2007 to take over the reins of the Calgary Police Service (CPS). Here was a police officer who truly understood the futility of locking up people with mental health issues and addictions without tackling their underlying problems. Although a few of the people experiencing homelessness tied up a lot of resources and their visibility caused some members of the public a great deal of anxiety, they weren’t the real criminals.

“Well over 50 per cent of inmates have undiagnosed mental health problems and addictions and the bottom line is they continue with their cycle (in and out of incarceration),” Hanson says, advocating for better ways than jail to deal with these issues.

This is not Hanson’s prescription for everyone, only for those who clog up the cells – returning with alarming regularity – not because they are hardened criminals but because they need help and aren’t finding it. For hardened criminals, it’s a different story. Hanson would throw the book at them.

“No one can accuse me of being soft on crime. We should lock up the serious predators and those who commit crime for profit,” he says.

One of the first things Hanson did was launch a “take-back-the-core” initiative in downtown Calgary. In 2008, officers were dispatched to more than 24,000 publicly generated calls in this area; 43 per cent were “social disorder” complaints – panhandlers, loiterers, suspicious or intoxicated persons, disturbances or drug activity. A flexible, very visible unit of 62 officers was created to deal with gangs and drug trafficking, plus all those social disorder calls. This required building links with agencies like Alpha House and The Alex’s Pathways to Housing for people with mental health issues. Two of the results were the Vulnerable Persons Team and the Police and Crisis Team.

Deputy Chief Trevor Daroux says the work has its frustrations

because of limited options for people who need help and the difficulty of finding it. “If I can’t navigate the system,” he says, “I don’t know how anyone does. How can we ever expect someone with mental health issues or addictions to deal with it?”

These difficulties are compounded by the silos of justice, addictions, health and the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, he says. “We need them as a group to share and to go beyond to an integrated solution and a common goal.”

Daroux cites the case of a man with both a mental health condition and addictions who had also done time in jail. Thanks to the 10 Year Plan, he was housed, had undergone treatment and had secured a job. One day, he left the office to buy coffee for the staff and was picked up on an old warrant. Back in jail, the cycle of incarceration, untreated mental health conditions and drug use started all over again. It’s too bad one hand didn’t know what the other was doing, Daroux says. “We have to get to the root cause.”

While Hanson and Daroux have definite ideas, some of the rank and file had been operating under a very different philosophy, so the brass had to change the culture. As Daroux says, officers used to be judged by numbers – how many tickets did you give out; how many charges did you lay? Now, it’s a “value evaluation.” This is being achieved by education and sensitization about the root causes of homelessness, hiring the right people and talking to recruits about treating people with respect. Increasingly, the Calgary police officer is becoming one of Richter’s touch-points where people can find the door to housing.

Against the backdrop of the province’s Safe Communities initiative with developments like the Integrated Justice Services Project, the CPS has made many significant adjustments. For example, the police media unit contributed by creating a video to help officers understand the dynamics of homelessness; officers work closely with Alpha House and Bylaw Services to help move rough sleepers into housing; the HAWCS helicopter unit and the marine unit scout for camps away from prying eyes; two officers went to Servants Anonymous, an agency working with female victims of sexual exploitation, to listen to the clients’ accounts of police harassment and as a result made some important changes; and it was a beat officer who urged the CHF to do something about veterans experiencing homelessness, which resulted in the purchase



of the Madison where Alpha House supports all the former service people who have been identified so far.

From Hanson's viewpoint there are still notable gaps. Perhaps the one that exercises him the most is the dead time spent in jail. It shouldn't just be a warehouse, he says, adding that it can be a safe place to detox, find help for any mental health problems, and generally prepare for re-entry into society in order to reduce recidivism, which ultimately benefits everyone. "We must use the system to facilitate good things," he says. "Although I'm not super religious, we will be judged on how we treat the least among us."

As 2010 rolled through the months towards January 2011, the day of reckoning for the first phase of the 10 Year Plan, staff began to wonder if they would meet their ambitious targets. It is easy to lay out plans on glossy paper in nice pamphlets three years prior to D-Day. It's another thing to reach those targets and to prove they were solid achievements, not smoke and mirrors.

### **John and Mary**

John and Mary exude gratitude to their new country.

Political refugees, the couple and their nine-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, arrived here with only a couple of hundred dollars to their names. They had spent their life savings on the fares to escape Zimbabwe.

John's face bears the scars of torture, his younger brother was murdered, and Mary was sexually molested by government thugs, all because they were suspected of supporting the Zimbabwean opposition party. It was time for them to leave.

Mary departed first on October 23, 2011. On the way here she met a Calgary couple who invited her to stay with them for a few days until she figured out what to do. The situation grew very tense when John and Elizabeth arrived about three weeks later.

In order to impose on their hosts as little as possible, the new arrivals left the house early and walked the wintery streets when not working on their refugee claim at Citizenship and Immigration Canada. They tip-toed in late every night. "It was very difficult," says John, 30.

“We over-stayed our welcome. It was very, very tough.”

After their refugee application was accepted, they were referred to Alberta Works to claim financial support, but they quickly realized the money wasn't enough for a damage deposit and rent. From there, though, they were sent to CUPS.

With very low expectations, John and Mary were bowled over when within a couple of days they were accepted into Rapid Exit, which provides accommodation and support for families experiencing homelessness. Not only that, they were immediately found an apartment near a school, given basic furnishings, referrals to the food bank and all sorts of supports that will continue for a year.

“We couldn't believe it,” says Mary, 31.

Elizabeth is doing well at school, catching up on her education and making friends, and John is eager for his work permit to come through so that he can find a job. He managed a casino in Zimbabwe and is happy their new home is within walking distance of the Grey Eagle Casino, where he hopes to find work. He would also like to find a volunteer position as a way of thanking the city that has given them such a warm welcome.

As for Mary, she too worked in a casino and looks forward to the day when she can do something similar here, but in the meanwhile, she's expecting a baby and she's grateful for all the pre- and post-natal support offered by CUPS, on top of everything else.

“We didn't expect to get so much help,” says John, who admits he was very scared about what would befall the family. “It was tough, but we had a roof and at the end of the day we didn't have to sleep at a train station.”

When they first thought of leaving Zimbabwe, they checked out both the US and Canada. Now they are certain they made the right choice and the expected baby has become a symbol of their safe, new life.

“When we came here we were running away from home,” says Mary. “Then we realized we had been blessed.”

John adds, “It's our big, big hope.”

SOURCES

Interviews: Iowa Beebe, Dave Bronconnier, Trevor Daroux, Camille Farrag, Lobsang Galak, Rick Hanson, Marina Giacomini, Carla Link, Katrina Milaney, Heather Morley, Brian Pincott, Tim Richter, John te Linde, Alina Turner

Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness, *Plan to End Aboriginal Homelessness in Calgary*, (draft), April 2012

Calgary Homeless Foundation, *10 Year Plan Update: Learnings and Progress*, PowerPoint, October 2010

Calgary Homeless Foundation, *Calgary's Homeless Information Management System*, Calgary Homeless Foundation CHF Housing Plan Recommendation – March 2012

Calgary Homeless Foundation, *Plan to End Youth Homelessness in Calgary*, June 2011

City of Calgary, *Affordable Housing Update 2010*

City of Calgary Community Services Report to Intergovernmental Affairs Committee, *Annual Status Report on the Contribution of the City of Calgary to the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness in Calgary*, City of Calgary, 2010 and 2011.

*Plan to End Youth Homelessness in Calgary*, Calgary Homeless Foundation, June 2011

Chantal Hansen, Alina Turner, *Calgary's Homeless Information Management System*, Calgary Homeless Foundation PowerPoint

Nolais, Jeremy, *Calgary Police Ramp Up Efforts to Aid "Rough-Sleeping" Homeless*, Metro, May 27, 2012

Scott, Nancy, *Calgary Police Beat Unit Taking Back the Core*, Blue Line magazine, August-September 2009





## COMING HOME

In May of 2010 as Canada was emerging from a severe economic recession, the Salvation Army released a report, *Poverty Shouldn't Be a Life Sentence*. It was a time when unemployment was high, one in 10 Canadians lived in poverty, and housing for many was a precarious proposition. The report surveyed a representative sample of Canadians to understand what their perceptions of homelessness and poverty were, as opposed to the cruel realities. The results indicated that, although the two interlocked problems were continuing to grow, public perceptions were a trifle sketchy. Against this backdrop, what was happening in Calgary? Would the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF) make a dent in the city figures by January 2011, the official end of Phase 1 of the 10 Year Plan, during which “rapid, visible and meaningful change” was supposed to occur?

Across the country, the Salvation Army discovered that one in nine Canadians, or almost three million people, said they had experienced homelessness, or had come close to it. In Alberta it was 14 per cent of the population, as opposed to the national average of 12 per cent. While 35 per cent of the survey respondents believed that homeless rates had remained static, in fact the Alliance to End Homelessness In Ottawa was reporting that, in the capital, shelter use was up by nine per cent and stays were 12 per cent longer. The same was true of other cities. How did this translate in Calgary, which formerly had the fastest growth rate in the country?

As the CHF worked on the 10 Year Plan update report, Tim Richter, president and CEO, was haunted by the baby girl whose picture was to be on the cover. Her mother was homeless during

her pregnancy, but supported by Inn from the Cold she found housing before the little girl's birth. "I kept thinking about her and imagining her as my own daughter who is around the same age," he says.



**President and CEO Tim Richter kept things moving in the initial phase.**

Richter continued to think of all the families he had met in shelters. He wondered how they maintained a routine – so essential for children – what happened if a child became ill and couldn't stay indoors, or even something as simple as telling a bedtime story in peace and quiet. One of the aims of the original plan had been to eliminate family homelessness in two years. By January 2011, 453 families had been housed, but others were still entering the system. However, there was hope in the overall picture.

In April 2009, after provincial funding had fully kicked in, and the 10 Year Plan had begun to bite, Alberta Housing and Urban Affairs (HUA) figures show that Calgary shelter numbers had begun to fall,

although there were some pretty big hiccups on the way down.

Talking to CBC News on January 28, 2011, commenting on the end of Phase 1, Richter was able to say that on top of 2,300 people being housed, the rate of homelessness "has at least plateaued and we're beginning to see reductions in emergency shelters. We saw a spike in 2009 just as the recession began to take hold, but we've been seeing reductions in shelter use since about 2009. So (it's) a really positive sign."

People like Philip Mangano, the former head of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, had praised the plan when it was unveiled. "We are especially impressed with the Calgary plan's attention to and adoption of innovative initiatives that are field-tested and evidence-based. Some home-grown, some stolen

from other places in what I call ‘the art of legitimate larceny’,” he wrote in a letter to the CHF. He continued: “Your 10 Year Plan will move Calgary beyond managing the crisis to ending the disgrace; beyond funding the status quo to investing in innovation; beyond servicing homeless people to solving their homelessness.”

Closer to home, Roger Gibbins, the former CEO of the Canada West Foundation, commented, “I came away from the report believing that we might indeed move beyond managing homelessness to ending homelessness. The 10 Year Plan combines a long-term vision with a practical business plan and, perhaps more importantly, demonstrates that an aggressive approach to solving homelessness makes financial sense. As a consequence, the report will not only provide a clear sense of direction, but also a model for urban centres across the country.”

Others in the field, however, were sceptical. They argued that business people knew nothing about homelessness and that the housing-first approach would not work for those who had lived in shelters or slept rough for years; that they had to be made “housing ready.” Fortunately, the view prevailed that a home would give people a better opportunity and the safety to deal with their underlying issues like mental health, violence and addictions. By 2011, results being documented by programs like Pathways, Rapid Exit and HomeBase were proving that housing first worked better for most people.

Lisa Garrisen, director of The Alex’s HomeBase program for Calgary’s most vulnerable people, says that for a long time certain shelter clients were considered “unhouseable,” or unable to stay housed, but since housing first had come into effect she had observed something very different. “I’ve seen those folks be housed and, with the right support and the right encouragement, retain housing for over a year now,” she said at the end of Phase 1. Although dealing with a comparatively small number of the total, Garrisen was confident that housing first was the way of the future: “I think if we could do that for everybody experiencing homelessness, I think we could end it for once and for all.”

In fact, most of the housing programs were reporting a retention rate of over 85 per cent, some as high as 90 per cent. At the same time, there were significant reductions in police responses and hospitalizations for their clients. Most North American studies

indicate that it costs \$100,000 a year, or more, to support those with the highest needs in the shelter system. The CHF was discovering that some people could be rehoused for as little as \$4,000 a year in rent supplements. Providing housing and support for those with complex needs bumped the figure up to \$36,000 and, for those requiring programs with 24/7 care, similar to a nursing home, it could rise to \$56,000 per annum. This was still considerably less than a shelter.

What cannot be measured adequately is what a home means to someone who has lived without one. Their words speak loudly to our hearts, if not to the statisticians. Many of the women talked about the importance of being safe for the first time in their adult lives. Don Bixby, who was without a home for 27 years, 17 of which he slept in a downtown alley, said after being housed, "I feel fantastic and I want other people to feel the same way."

In an anonymous evaluation, one of Garrison's clients wrote: "Sometimes in life we think no one listens or cares. Then one day the sun starts to shine; even on the darkest day, opportunity presents itself. When it does and how it does just blows my mind. It's like a whole new me was just born. I'm so grateful for HomeBase, and everyone who entered my world and took the time to show me that I am not just a number; that there is always someone to help; we just have to learn to trust, but first be honest."

Figures and stories were sufficiently persuasive for housing-first programs to be up and running in seven of the nine Calgary Action Committee sectors by the end of 2010. As well, housing programs were operating in six of the eight HUA-funded shelters. Alberta could boast that it was the only province with a 10-year plan and with \$188 million to spend on affordable housing and \$42 million for related programs. Others looked at us with envy.

Even though 189 shelter beds at the Salvation Army's Booth Centre would be retired by the end of the 2011, there was at least one cautionary note. The City of Calgary's 2011 *Fast Facts #4: Affordable Housing and Homelessness in Calgary* pointed out that in 2010, in order to rent a one-bedroom apartment in Calgary without overspending on shelter, a person would need to earn a minimum wage of \$17.21 an hour. The then current provincial minimum wage was \$9.40 an hour – a big gap. The doomsayers predicted that the next boom would bring another bumper crop of homeless people



who had migrated here for jobs, but who couldn't make enough to pay rent.

"I think we have seen a difference at street level," says Kathy Christiansen, executive director of Alpha House Society. But she adds, "Many of our longer-term shelter users have been housed, but we have found that a new group has come in to fill their spaces. Our shelter occupancy continues to be well utilized. Other shelters have seen a reduction, but I'm wondering if some of our more marginalized men and women are still in need. This seems to be the case and we are working on building a response for those who are more vulnerable."



Alpha House  
Society's  
Kathy Christiansen.

By January 2011, the homeless management information system (HMIS) was poised to start in 20 agencies, with another 25 added later in the year. Almost immediately the CHF had more accurate information about how clients used various components of the system; information that might help Alpha House figure out ways of assisting that group of vulnerable clients. HMIS also helped enhance the agency collaboration that was beginning to gel across the city.

"When we started connecting with other services providers like the Inn from the Cold and Brenda's Place, the whole system started to strengthen with the networking and the sharing. We were working together in a different way," says the YWCA's director of social development, Cynthia Wild.

"When the last RFP (request for funding proposal) came out we were calling each other for references. It has a different feel to it. There's smarter collaboration and we don't have to guess where the gaps are."

It is a moot point which city developed a 10-year plan first, but after Calgary's was launched, 11 other Canadian cities followed suit. Calgary also racked up a number of Canadian firsts in the initial three years of the plan's operation:

- Introducing and beginning to implement HMIS.
- Hosting Project Homeless Connect with 8,000 people served by the end of 2010.

- Drafting the first youth plan and applying housing first to young people and to those experiencing domestic violence.
- Implementing case management standards for agencies.
- Assembling a regional research network.
- Adapting a tool already up and running in the US to assess mortality, giving us the ability to prioritize the most vulnerable (RTAS).

“The first three years of the plan were a total blur of activity. Despite having been around since 1998, that time was in many respects like a start-up business – very entrepreneurial, fast-paced, doing everything on the fly and getting a lot done,” says Richter. “But we were also making a scale of transformation much like a mom and pop corner store becoming a Walmart. We were building governance, strategic and operational sophistication of an organization with a huge job, responsibility for a lot of public money and a growing affordable housing portfolio.”

Some of the initial assumptions – like the effectiveness and the financial pay-backs of housing first, the focus on people experiencing chronic homelessness, the value of good data and research, the importance of listening and the need to shift gears from isolated efforts to a coherent system – were all being proved correct. Some issues, like the unique needs of Aboriginals, women and youth, were being dealt with. Families and those experiencing chronic and episodic homelessness were also beginning to receive attention, as was what intervention works best for which client. As the first three years drew to a close, the system of care began to rise to the fore.

“We had been very good at building and implementing housing-first programs, but we struggled with how to pull it all together,” says Richter.

Alina Turner, vice-president strategy for the CHF, was the person credited with having the vision. The system she envisaged has four pillars: The first is system planning, performance monitoring and co-ordination; the second is common intake, triage and standardized assessments; the third sets out standards of care for things like outreach, case management and housing; and the fourth is housing outcome driven “by system and program metrics.”

A system, of course, depends on good information, which was

where HMIS would prove to be important — painting pictures of hitherto blacked-out areas. Without it, there was no way to know how many unique individuals use the shelter system and how many are using a range of agencies repeatedly; where they come from and why; and what is the return rate to shelters — all important factors to find a new, better and more humanitarian way of doing things.

Richter says that, ultimately, creating a system of care may be one of the CHF's greatest accomplishments. Stephen Gaetz, the director of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network and the Homeless Hub and an associate professor at York University, agrees.

"Calgary is a leader in Canada at responding at a system level. . . . what they have done is different in a sector that doesn't have a strong planning culture," he says. The legitimate emergency response to the needs on the streets can be overwhelming, making it difficult for agencies to deal with more than the day-to-day needs confronting them. In the face of the tidal wave, it's hard to think of anything more than grabbing the nearest boat, when perhaps there are ways of helping more people or even of setting up an early-warning system and avoiding disaster altogether.

Having picked their way through other 10-year plans in the US, some of which are mere window-dressing or are heavily reliant on shelters, the CHF deliberately modelled itself on the better ones, which has resulted, says Gaetz, in a system, not a collection of independent agencies. Although a way hasn't yet been found to integrate mainstream services like corrections, healthcare and child protection, at least they are on the radar, he says.

"Trying to eat the elephant at one bite can be daunting," warns Susan McGee, executive director of Homeward Bound, Edmonton's CHF counterpart. We know the key entry points to homelessness and they need to be a part of the system. If you start with them, you can grow from there, but sometimes it's tempting to extend too far too fast, she says.

Michael Shapcott, the director of housing and innovation at Toronto's Wellesley Institute, suggests the strength of the Calgary plan was that "the focus was on the solution, not the feel-bad thing."

Gaetz praises the agencies for their ability to adopt promising practices and being willing to think about and to embrace solutions

that are known to work. “We all hate the present, but we hate change even more and I’m sure there was lots of blow-back. . . . Managing a shift like that is impressive.”

On the ground, some of the agencies that took more of a wait-and-see attitude, and even those that jumped in at the deep end, are happy that the CHF has evolved into a more nuanced organization and that it has focussed on some often-neglected groups — like young people, single women and women with children — all of whom are comparatively invisible because of their resourcefulness in couch-surfing and other ways of finding shelter, much of it neither safe nor conducive to moving on.

Christiansen says she sees the CHF becoming more flexible and providing more options for agencies to offer clients. “They have been very supportive of our harm-reduction housing projects. We are very pleased that they see the value of a range of housing and supports.”

The YWCA, too, says that while it has undergone a huge cultural shift, the CHF has also reached out to meet their clients’ needs.

The YWCA first became involved with the 10 Year Plan in mid-2009 when they received federal government funding dispersed by the CHF. This occurred when the organization was rethinking its programs for women and the two things together brought about a shift in language, a strong focus on housing, and counsellors became case managers supporting the women on their journey.

“Staff judging a woman’s readiness made me cringe — it was one person’s assessment. Now the women define when they are ready (for housing). It’s our job to help them facilitate their own solutions,” says Wild. “We use a very different lens,” adds Valerie Tkacik, now manager of the YWCA’s Mary Dover House.

As the YWCA moved to a modified housing-first model the staff realized that, with women’s different needs and history — which include high levels of loss, grief and depression, violence, sexual abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder and stigma — there was a case for transitional housing to give the women time to process, to think and to apply for things like Alberta Works.

Housing experts in the US and Canada say there are several reasons why Calgary has chalked up successes with its 10 Year Plan, including having the business community onside, a supportive provincial government, the ability to adopt and adapt programs

already working well elsewhere, the emphasis on research and standards to make a convincing case for its policies and programs, and the sheer audacity of CHF staff and board “willing to shake up the status quo.”

The business community, often referred to as the “unusual suspects,” has consistently championed the plan and the foundation to the provincial government and other movers and shakers. The “suspects” include Richter, who came from the very different world of the military via a lobbying position at TransAlta. His appointment as the CEO of the foundation to deliver the plan presented opportunities and risks both for him and the community, says Susan McGee, because he didn’t have “the street creds,” although he has very different strengths not usually found in the service-delivery end.

Richter’s ability to see what needed to happen and his drive to make it happen were key, says Gaetz, as well as his effective communication skills clearly conveying a can-do message. “The public engagement piece is important because it moves the politicians. He has given leadership to his staff, the sector and the community. . . . He’s bold, flexible, listens and asks questions. Sometimes you have to bend. If you are all directive you run into trouble. It’s how you get people to buy into change and get excited about it.”

“Having a high-profile, very passionate chair (Steve Snyder) elevated the plan and kept it in the community,” says McGee, and the fact that many of the individuals connected to the plan were outside government and the shelter system allowed them to focus on best practices. In fact, Shapcott believes the committed business people probably did more behind the scenes than we will ever know, through dinner and golf-course conversations, creating a huge ripple effect. This kind of backing and education generates a lot of political will and resources, says Nan Roman, president and CEO of the National Alliance to End Homelessness in the US.

Although many have been suspicious of the corporate advocate, Shapcott points out business people not only have hearts, souls and consciences, but also a real grasp of the economics of homelessness, recognizing that it’s bad for things like tourism and that if people move to an area to work, but can’t find housing, that impacts their job performance, a phenomenon all too prevalent in

Calgary. "Calgary blazed the trail to have an equal business partnership," he says.

Whether it was the business community that finally changed the provincial government's mindset, or whether former premier Ed Stelmach would have released funds into housing and programs unprompted, is a moot point. The fact is that Alberta's performance has been stellar at the provincial level. McGee says Stelmach was strategic in the way he approached the cause and sequenced his actions with lots of consultation. "He seeded it in the communities so it did not come out of left field."

Others further afield also laud the role of the province, led by Stelmach, saying that he defied national trends. "The Alberta government has been ratcheting up investment in homelessness with very positive results. It's not magic, it's not oil fumes, it's because the CHF created compelling plans," says Michael Shapcott. "It's remarkable the per capita spending in Alberta, quite remarkable. Under Stelmach and (present premier Alison) Redford it has turned around," he says. Gaetz is just as complimentary: "The provincial government, oh my God, what a model. How awesome that Stelmach lined up (with the plan)."

Another reason why experts believe the provincial government was supportive is that the CHF, under Richter, scrutinized plans already working in the US and then adapted the best of the crop. "They weren't re-inventing the wheel. They saw what could be done and what was practical, which is not necessarily a common practice," says Roman. "It takes quite a talent figuring out what is workable in a different country."

Roman also praises Richter for keeping things moving in the early stages, explaining that many communities heave a sigh of relief after they have drawn up a plan and expect it to implement itself. "It's the implementation, not the plan, that moves it forward." This drive, coupled with flexibility so the momentum doesn't crumble at the first hurdle, accounts for many of the CHF's victories, she says.

"In the world of homelessness, anti-intellectualism is a constant battle," says Gaetz, but the CHF has instigated a data management system (HMIS), sought answers to specific questions about risk assessment and also asked questions that were outside the box." Alina (Turner) went out and talked to researchers. She values quality."

Data is crucial, says Roman, because it helps homeless advocates make a case to government that an investment in housing pays off in the end. “As the struggle for resources gets harder, we need sharper arguments and we need more data and information. We can’t just wring our hands. We need to show cost effectiveness and efficacy and that investments are good because they save money for the government. Investing earlier in upfront prevention will save money. There’s a group of us now, including Tim (Richter), for which these things are not rocket science.”

And, if we think that as Canadians we are immune from federal cuts to social housing, Shapcott says, think again. “There has been a giant sucking sound out of Ottawa in the last two decades which threatens to overwhelm the Calgary Homeless Foundation successes.”

Although the province’s financial role has “been quite remarkable,” it won’t be enough to balance what the federal government is taking off the table, Shapcott says. By 2014, the entire national homeless program will have vanished. It’s as if the dyke is springing numerous leaks and we are busy plugging the holes, but if current federal policy continues, then the dam will burst.

“It’s time to have an adult conversation with the government in Canada to stabilize funding. That is a challenging conversation because you bump up against ideologues, which makes it very difficult,” he says. However, good data about cost effectiveness will help, as does the fact that Richter has not aligned himself politically with either the left or the right.

Both Gaetz and Shapcott tell people interested in new ways of eradicating homelessness to look at Calgary because that’s where the innovation is. “They have taken the 10-year plan model and given it real rigour to make it a powerful lever to get good results,” says Shapcott. “They are ahead of the pack.” Comparing Calgary’s plan to others, he says some aren’t even worth the paper they are written on, but this one “is practical, efficient and problem-solving.”

In times to come, Shapcott says that social financing, as modelled in the UK and the US, will be increasingly important. In Canada, the federal government is belatedly and tentatively getting into it, but the Alberta Treasury Branch has already given the CHF money to develop it. “It’s not magic, it’s not the chinook wind; it’s because the CHF proved itself capable of taking on innovation.”

Provincially, McGee says that the resourcing in Calgary brought all the other Seven Cities up a notch, opening the gate for provincial government investment and setting precedents for obtaining funding. One of the good things in Alberta, she says, is that two very different cities – Edmonton and Calgary – can develop plans that suit their communities, adopting what works for them. “Things happen when they need to happen for the community.”

Ten-year plans are a journey that require flexibility, she concludes. “We can never say we have it all figured.”

In the first half of 2012, Richter announced his departure from the CHF to take over the new Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness. The CAEH’s first publication, *A Plan Not A Dream*, listed the “10 essentials” of a community plan: planning; data, research and best practices; coordinated system of care; income; emergency prevention; systems prevention; housing-focussed outreach; rapid rehousing; housing support services; and permanent housing. It was no coincidence they were all essentials of the Calgary plan.

At the ground level, the first three years were sometimes a little bumpy for the agencies. In its 2011 annual report, The Alex’s HomeBase program cited the difficulty of securing affordable housing. “In order to ensure it meets basic standards, typically it will cost \$700-750 a month. In order for our clients to graduate they must be able to afford rent on their own. Until we can ensure a guaranteed monthly income for each person, they will need to remain a client of HomeBase.” For the most part the program’s clients receive a total of \$687 a month from Alberta Works. It’s not hard to see the problem.

Clients with complex mental health issues and addictions also create “a perfect storm,” therefore HomeBase was looking at finding new ways of supporting them and their landlords. On top of that it was frustrating for both clients and workers to navigate the larger systems.

“Exclusionary criteria can mean that clients are often shuttled back and forth from program to program and never actually receive the services they need. . . . Navigating through the complex system to determine their diagnosis and then accessing appropriate support can take years,” said the 2011 report.

Despite this, HomeBase clients showed reductions in their use of legal services, health services and alcohol and drug use, plus



improved self-sufficiency in such areas as money management. Typical client narratives are like that of 51-year-old “V.I.,” quoted in the report. “He spent over 20 years of his life in prison. Adjusting to life out of an institution was not easy and he found himself homeless for 2½ years. V.I. also struggles with addictions, which were usually a factor in his inability to maintain housing as most of any income he would earn was always spent on drugs. V.I. has maintained sobriety for one year and has been offered a full-time job.”

Looking back, Richter says, “In the first three years we drove really hard, sacrificing a certain amount of process for results. We put a premium on getting better data, creativity and initiative. And, I think, we got smart and worked hard to make the objective the unifying focus. If we created absolute clarity on the objective, as we became more focussed on our mission to achieve that objective, we could more easily strip away the stuff that impedes progress – ego, pride, organizational self-interest.

“By putting clarity on the objective, and giving achievement of that objective a deadline, we also created a sense of urgency (reinforced by the countdown clock in our office!) so that we never lost sight of the emergency that homelessness is for the people living through it.”

At his last CHF annual general meeting in June, after a rise in shelter use had been widely reported in the media, Richter addressed the issue head on. Between January and March 2012, Alberta gained 14,000 interprovincial migrants compared to a mere 150 in 2010, he noted. We also know that the stock of rental units in Calgary is less than half of what it is in Edmonton. “We live in a boomtown economy that’s great for the vast majority of people. But today, there are at least 20,000 households in Calgary that don’t have affordable rental housing options. At least 14,000 of those households are at imminent risk of homelessness.”

Did that mean we had failed and we should all go home and forget the plan? Emphatically no, said Richter. Now is the very time to have the conversation about creating affordable rental housing, not 2018, when the plan’s clock ticks to a standstill.

“We have to face the brutal facts of our current reality and keep our unbending faith that we can and will end homelessness – because we can and we will. The un-natural disaster of homelessness will

end. I will leave you with one last thought and that is: Don't give up!

"In 1941 when World War II was at its darkest, Churchill said, 'Never give in – never, never, never, never, in nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in except to convictions of honour and good sense. Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy.' In our case, the enemy is homelessness, which appears overwhelming, but we've proven it's not. We will end homelessness one person at a time. . . . Homelessness will be defeated by focus, tenacity, innovation, adaptation, but above all by courage, hope and relentless determination."

For the people who had been housed, it was a life-changing experience.

"Thank you for the support, care and time put into my life," says a HomeBase client. "I have a new outlook, even as I say (this) I have a long way to go. It has put new thoughts into my head and I know that I can be everything I stopped trying to be."

Despite the fact this HomeBase client and 2,229 others (with over 1,700 more by mid-2012) had been housed, was Calgary's 10 Year Plan working?

About a year after he stepped down as Calgary's mayor, Dave Bronconnier, musing about the plan, said that it's easy to build buildings – once you have city permits – but much harder to build people, and that all too often some people used stereotypes of people experiencing homelessness as an excuse *not* to do the right thing. "Public safety, access to health care, education and the provisions of basic services, which include housing, are a hallmark of any civilized society."

To discover whether we had taken steps towards becoming more "civilized," Richter had to wait until the next city-wide count in January 2012, when workers and volunteers scoured the streets and shelters. It was a tense wait.

## Randy Steff

The paradox of Randy Steff's life is that, while crack was the key that opened the door to Never Land — where he quickly burned up all his savings — it was also what saved him from committing suicide.

“Crack,” says Steff, “was my drug of choice, physical and mental.”

He preferred it even to the Percocet and OxyContin that he had been prescribed for his failing knees, but it took him away from everything he held dear, like his beautifully furnished downtown condo and his music. However, crack also lifted the depression besetting him, partly because he couldn't fulfil his duties as a letter carrier, partly because of the pain and partly because he had become addicted to the painkillers.

And the more crack Steff used, the more he desired.

Not used to the ways of the street, it took him a long time to discover that there was help. Finally Steff phoned Fresh Start Recovery, an addictions treatment centre, but he needed five clean days before he could be accepted into the program. “I took so many runs at those five days,” he says. At first he did it by himself until a Fresh Start counsellor suggested he go to a 12-step program. “I didn't think it was possible to get away, it was such an obsession.” Then a bottle of vinegar came to his rescue.

Some people came over to share crack with Steff and, while he was in the shower, they cleaned him out of everything right down to his ketchup and mustard. All that remained was a bottle of vinegar.

He hadn't eaten in five days and his cheque wasn't due for another two more days, so he grasped the bottle and took a swig.

“It was so bitter in my mouth it stopped the obsession in my head for 10 seconds,” he recalls. The lightbulb went off — perhaps there was a way to break the craving.

Every 20 minutes for 36 hours he swallowed a mouthful and, when his cheque arrived, he purchased another 3½ gallons and kept up his regimen for seven more days. Triumphant,

he celebrated with crack. There followed a period of on-again, off-again drug use and visits to the David Lander Centre in Claresholm for mental health and addictions. All the while, he kept in touch with Fresh Start, hoping a vacancy would occur when he hadn't used for the requisite five days. "We don't know when," the counsellor would say, scaring Steff into abstinence.

After 50 days, he was told he would have a place in six days. He used for one last time and then had to withdraw in his condo that was now in foreclosure and bare of everything except an air mattress. There was nothing to divert him – no Internet, no telephone, no movies. Nothing. He had either used up his resources, or given them away.

Five days later he was at Fresh Start.

It took Steff 3½ years to work his way through the program. Looking back, he says it's the most profound thing he has ever been through, that it's been a spiritual journey and, while it's not been easy with each phase bringing its own anxieties, he has loved the process of self-discovery.

Now he says he has the capability to make choices "without being bullied by drugs."

A few years ago, when someone like Steff completed the program, they would be coughed out into the world and it would be touch-and-go if they could find housing, in all likelihood testing their recovery beyond its capacity. However, Steff is lucky enough to be one of the first residents in an apartment block purchased by the Calgary Homeless Foundation and leased out to Fresh Start graduates at affordable rents.

After he had spent an exhausting day moving in, he flopped down on his mattress thinking, "This is great." Then he noticed the distinct odour of perspiration. Suddenly, he realized he was now the proud possessor of a bathtub. "It was the best bath I've had in a year. I ran more and more hot water. I take two baths a day," he enthuses.

Steff has a new sense of validation. His apartment affirms his journey up from the bottom to his current place in the world – building manager for the entire block. "Where we are there is no sense of shame," he says.

## Virginia Lepine

In the 20 years she was couch-surfing, Virginia Lepine used to fantasize about waking up in the morning, making a cup of coffee in her own kitchen and relishing it in luxurious solitude.

“It was awful in the sense, if I was cooking I had to wait until everyone was finished, if I wanted a bath I had to wait until there was no one in the bathroom and I had to be very quiet when I came home at night,” she recalls. On top of that was the uncertainty of never knowing when her friends would want their room again. The pressures were different from being on the street, but they were ever present.

Lepine, 61, was on minimum wage all her working life. It was never enough to pay full rent, eat properly and to buy a bus pass. She eked out the budget by boarding off and on with friends. No stranger to poverty, she moved to Calgary when dealers and pimps started to approach her seven-year-old daughter at their subsidized housing complex in Toronto.

First she managed a small apartment and then she got a job at a bingo hall. After the children left home in their mid-teens, she shared an apartment with her son’s girlfriend. Then



Queen of the roost: “It’s awesome,” says Virginia Lepine of her Murdoch Manor apartment.

she rotated in and out of two friends' homes and that of an elderly woman in Forest Lawn. "Basically, wherever I could as long as I could."

Now she is excited to be queen of the roost in what she calls her penthouse apartment at Murdoch Manor.

"It's awesome," she says. "If I'm up at 2:30 am, I can put the television on and make a cup of tea. Or, I can get up at 6, or 10, and start my day. It's nice to have that space and not feel in the way of other people's lives."

Not only did Lepine feel like an intruder, at times she also felt unsafe. With no hearing in one ear and very little in the other, she felt very vulnerable because she was unaware of when the teenagers held parties or left the front door unlocked. Once it was so bad, the police came. She was disconcerted to find out what had happened the next morning.

For a while she was so desolate, she started to gamble, but it was a short-lived addiction. She went to a few AA meetings, where she realized she was trying to fill a void in her life, but the VLTs only left her emptier. Ever practical, Lepine resolved to fill her life with friendships. Now she finds real joy in going for coffee, or texting her grand-daughter, Rachel, rather than plugging a machine.

The issue of not having her own place came to a head about three years ago.

Lepine's hearing was deteriorating, leaving her disoriented and unable to work in the bingo halls. She had shoulder problems, making it impossible to continue her part-time job at a farmer's market. Then the landlady wanted her bedroom back because her son was returning to the nest.

Not sure what to do, Lepine desperately began making phone calls. She heard about Murdoch Manor, but thought that at 57 she might be a tad young. However, supported by Sunrise Community Link, she filled out the application and applied for Alberta Works. The apartment was easy; Alberta Works not so. "They really downsize you," says Lepine.

She now receives just enough to live on (because the manor's rents are subsidized by a provincial funding program) and \$132 a month from the Canada Pension Plan – so little

because every working year they returned a chunk of change saying she had overpaid. It turns out CPP was wrong; therefore she's now being docked for not paying enough.

As a result, Lepine, who is an excellent economizer, tells her friends to save, save, save.

Although she misses work, she has a busy social life going out with friends, attending the events put on by Murdoch Manor and, best of all, spending time with her daughter, who has moved back to Calgary, and with her “lifeline,” Rachel.

Rachel, 10, lives out of town, but every night she texts Lepine. In the school holidays, Rachel comes to stay and they take full advantage of all that downtown has to offer, from swimming to movies.

As Lepine sits in her small apartment decorated with many photos of Rachel, she looks around and says, “This is important to me because it’s nice that my family doesn’t have to worry about me. My daughter knows that I have an apartment and food in the fridge.”

## SOURCES

Interviews: Dave Bronconnier, Kathy Christiansen, Stephen Gaetz, Lisa Garrison, Susan McGee, Andrea Ranson, Tim Richter, Nan Roman, Michael Shapcott, Valerie Tkacik, Cynthia Wild

CBC News, *Advocates Believe Calgary’s 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness is on Track for Success*, January 28, 2011

Calgary Foundation, *Vital Signs, 2011 Indicator Sources*, Calgary

Calgary Homeless Foundation, *Calgary’s 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness, 2008-2018*, January 2011 Update

Calgary Homeless Foundation, *Don’t Ignore Me*, Report to the Community 2011

Calgary Homeless Foundation, *10 Year Plan Update: Learnings and Progress*, PowerPoint, October 7, 2010

Calgary Homeless Foundation, *Facts on Homelessness in Calgary*, January 2011

Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, *A Plan, Not a Dream, How to End Homelessness in 10 Years*, 2012

Salvation Army, *Poverty Shouldn't be a Life Sentence, A Report on the Perceptions of Homelessness and Poverty in Canada*, May 2010

The Alex, *HomeBase Year End Report July 2010 – March 2011*, April 1, 2011

Gibbins, Roger, letter to Steve Snyder, January 24, 2008

Mangano, Philip, letter to the Calgary Homeless Foundation, January 29, 2008

Richter, Tim, speaking notes for Calgary Homeless Foundation annual general meeting, June 2012





## THE COUNT DOWN

An army of Michelin people stuffed into their stoutest parkas was milling around, picking up clipboards, surveys, cigarettes, Tim Hortons gift cards, blankets, mittens, hand- and foot-warmers in the University of Calgary (U of C) Downtown Campus. They were raring to go, but at the same time concerned about the cold.

The frigid temperatures outside were daunting; how would they be affected and how could people survive outside at -34C?

It was January 18, 2012, and the 166 volunteers were about to take part in the Calgary Homeless Foundation's (CHF) first "point-in-time" homeless count since the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness in Calgary began at the end of January in 2008.

The city had held a count that year, but this was the first since the plan had started to bite and it would be a benchmark, giving the CHF a chance to ask the all-important question: Is the plan working?

"For what it's worth, there are a lot of things about my job that keep me awake at night, but I was especially anxious about the count. I worried about the weather, the volunteers, the methodology and the result," says Tim Richter, president and CEO of the foundation.

"Our community had been working so hard, so much money had been invested, so much blood, sweat and tears put into ending homelessness by so many people – so much hope was invested in the plan that I was scared to death all the evidence and information we had been analyzing was wrong."

For Richter, waiting for the results was nerve-racking; for some of the other people, it was the cold, or what they would encounter on the streets, that had them worried.

Although the crowd was leavened with police officers,

paramedics and social workers, for some it would be the first time they encountered a person experiencing homelessness up close and personal, so there was a brief orientation session including frost-bite training.



**166 volunteers braved -34C for the CHF's "point-in-time" homeless count in 2012.**

"We've got jobs to do; we want to count people, but we also want to begin the housing process. Most importantly, we have to make sure people are safe. This weather is dangerous for our homeless friends and for you. If they want to get into a shelter, let's offer them that," Richter instructed.

The next person up was Angie Bailey from City of Calgary Bylaw Services, who warned about dirty needles and other safety concerns and pointed out that people view their encampments as homes and that the volunteers should treat them as they would their own living rooms.

Finally, Scott Calling Last spoke. An outreach worker with Elbow River Healing Lodge, he had participated in six previous counts, all organized by the city.

Wearing long-johns, jeans and sweat-pants, he urged the crowd to be professional and not to do things like hand out their phone numbers. As he was speaking, he worried that all the listeners perspiring away in their layers of clothing would be uncomfortable outside if the sweat turned to ice. But he pressed on.

"You are about to meet some neat and interesting people," said Calling Last, a trusted and beloved figure on Calgary streets. He pointed out that he lives downtown "with all the noise, traffic, parties and cockroaches. People think I'm crazy, but I love it." In the same way, he said, people living rough have their own lifestyle and we shouldn't rush to judgment.

"Street people out there live with lots of stigma and judgment. We have our own beliefs. We'll find people tonight living their own

belief system. So let's not be judgmental of what that belief system is. Let's accept them for who they are."

At 10 pm the volunteers plunged into the night in groups of twos and threes, each with at least one seasoned professional, to search 46 zones – alleys, bushes, under bridges and parks – where a person might hide. They had strict instructions to call in every 30 minutes. Vans were at the ready in case they found people who wanted to be taken to a shelter or who needed medical treatment.

The evening had been organized carefully and strategically by the CHF's Katrina Milaney, manager of research and policy, with funding from Burnet, Duckworth and Palmer LLP law firm.

The first thing Milaney did was go through the city's counts, held every two years from 1992 to 2008, with Sharon Stroick who had organized the more recent ones. "I took a look at what would give us a more accurate number," Milaney says.

Like the city's counts, she divided the 2012 count into two: the facilities and the rough sleepers.

Some of the agencies canvassed in 2008 were permanent supportive housing facilities, so they were struck off the list and the number of people in them was subtracted from that year's total, reducing it from 4,060 to 3,601. Milaney also added several facilities for 2012 bringing the number up to 85 from 61. Although more accurate, she had set the bar even higher.

Milaney made up a PDF that was sent to all the emergency shelters and to transitional housing facilities to be filled in that night, indicating such things as total numbers, gender, age, cultural background, number of families and so on.

The street count itself was much more labour intensive, especially as the weather forecasts began to predict colder and colder temperatures.

To start, Milaney and her team spoke to groups like the police, bylaw staff, outreach workers and rough sleepers themselves who



**CHF's Katrina Milaney meticulously organized the count and researched previous initiatives.**

could point her to where people camp. A couple of nights ahead of time, the HAWCS helicopter was up scanning Fish Creek and Edworthy Parks with an infra-red light to detect human habitation. In cold weather the police do this routinely and if they spot someone, they place a “check on the welfare call” and an officer goes out to ensure they are all right.



**Scott Calling Last, a trusted figure on the streets of Calgary, participated in six previous counts and was out in January 2012 for the CHF count.**

The actual night, Milaney had enlisted security at Southern Alberta Institute of Technology and the U of C to scour their campuses, the Calgary Parking Authority to go through all the parking structures, CP Rail to search along the tracks and Calgary Stampede Security to check the grounds. Even hospitals and emergency care centres were checked for people who might not have a home.

“The volunteers were fantastic. I was blown away by them,” says Milaney, who had recruited by sending out a ton of emails to agencies, professors and other likely founts of help. “I only had two complainers out of the lot. Many were disappointed they didn’t find any homeless people. It changed

people’s perspectives, especially the ones who met some people.”

Although there is no such thing as a perfect count, and they don’t capture anyone who is couch-surfing or living with a dangerous partner because they can’t afford to leave, Milaney scrutinized how other cities conducted their counts and came to the conclusion the most accurate ones are in mid-winter, mid-month, mid-week and when it’s cold outside. Previously, city counts were conducted in late spring or summer.

This count was to set a winter baseline and a second was held in August to establish a summer benchmark with a slightly different set of questions to capture those people who are here temporarily. "Moving forward we will alternate," says Milaney.

Back on the street, Calling Last, with his team of three women in the helping professions, was sent to East Village, the same territory he had covered previously when there were "many, many" people outside. They were loaded with blankets, hand warmers, socks and other goodies to distribute, and instructions to call for more – if required.

Dutifully, they phoned in after the first half hour. No response. A few minutes later a text pinged through. "Hey, make sure you check in." Calling Last rolled his eyes.

After three or four sweeps through the area, they had only encountered four people, two of whom might actually reside in the nearby condos. A third agrees to do the survey and is grateful for a Timmy's card or two. It's a very different scene from previous years.

At 11 pm, they decide to go to Scarboro because they know it's not in the campaign plan. They drive up and down the alleys previously a haunt for the homeless. No one.

At about 11:30 pm, having been told it would be okay to return to the U of C offices if there's no action, they go back in from the cold. At 11:40 when someone says, "Okay, go back out again," they look at each other and stay put.

All told, the count found 64 people outside, 12 of whom did the survey. "On a night like that it was troubling if people are outside at -31C," said Milaney. "They are probably the most vulnerable. The people outside tend to be sicker. They definitely need to be approached and triaged (into housing)."

The good news was that despite the increased number of facilities, the total number of people had gone down. The day the results came out the CHF announced an 11.4-per-cent drop with 3,190 people compared to 3,601 in 2008. Provincial data also showed that emergency shelter bed use had declined since 2009. In fact, in 2011, the Calgary Salvation Army had been able to close down 189 beds.

This had all been achieved despite the fact Calgary once had the fastest-growing homeless population in the country. For years

it rose about 20 per cent every two-year count, sometimes as high as 30 per cent per annum.

Richter was ecstatic.

"Just stopping a 20-year-old 20-per-cent growth rate is a huge accomplishment. We had not only stopped the growth rate dead in its tracks, but also for the first time in 20 years of counting, the number of homeless people had gone down.

"These results show the 10 Year Plan is working. The hard work of the front-line agencies, as well as government and donor supports has turned the tide in Calgary," said Richter. "I think the biggest factor is the Government of Alberta's investment in affordable housing and the support services that you need to really support some people once they get into their homes.

"No matter how you look at it, something remarkable has happened here."

According to CHF figures, the investment pays for itself. A sample of 270 people who were housed under the plan showed that in 12 months, 92 per cent were still housed. Their emergency room visits and days in jail decreased by about 50 per cent and interactions with the police by about 60 per cent.

However, there are some things that can't be controlled, warned Richter, most notably the economy.

"To some extent we are fighting an uphill battle in a growing economy. We have people moving to Calgary for work and there is a lack of affordable housing," he said. Aboriginal and immigrant families are also moving to Calgary and, at the same time, we are still losing rental units – down from 36,174 in 2009 to 34,814 in 2012.

Although we have a way to go in ending the problem, for those who have been housed, it means everything.

Take Jen Sputek, a widowed mother of twin 12-year-old boys, whose life was up in the air after coming out of prison. She knew that if she couldn't find a place after her four short weeks in a half-way house, she wouldn't get her children back from social services. She also knew that without a home she "would be doing what I do best," selling crack.

Just before Sputek was released, her worker from Aspen Family Services visited her in prison with application forms for Horizon Housing. When Sputek was out, she asked everyone she could think of to write supporting letters. For her part, she phoned Horizon

twice a day, every day for two weeks, knowing that even if your name is on the waiting list, you aren't necessarily next in line – it all depends on whose need is greatest.

"I was so relieved to get housing because it was somewhere for my kids to come home to. If it was just me I would sleep in a fucking tent," she says. The unit is situated centrally beside a playground and close to schools and other services.

"If I had to pay \$1,700 rent as well as bills, a car and a phone, I would turn my phone back on (to deal again) in a heartbeat. Not because I want to," she says.

It wasn't just housing, it was also support. Sputek considers herself fortunate to have been plugged into a "lifeline," namely Inside Out, a group for women coming out of incarceration in which she plays a leading role. Without it, she says, she wouldn't be accountable to anyone.

Although Sputek was elated to be reunited with the boys, she does wonder why they were apprehended in the first place when there was a loving, extended family willing and able to care for them. She also worries about other women coming out of incarceration, especially single women with no children who, she says, aren't on anyone's housing priority lists. "Nobody gives a shit about them."

If you don't have anywhere to go, no services and no resources, you don't want to go back downtown because for most women it's their "hot zone," she says. In particular the women coming away from a federal sentence have had time to make plans, but "these go out of the window" if they can't find affordable, safe housing.

"If people knew how much they want to be housed, they would do something about it," says Sputek.

But with 4,000 people housed between January 2008 and March 2012, people are moving off the streets and into homes. As Art Smith, founder of the Calgary Homeless Foundation, would have said to all concerned, "Well done, my friends."

## Michael Pailer

Michael Pailer was the kind of guy you could easily pass on the street and not see. He slept under the bushes in out-of-the-way places, lined up early mornings at temporary work agencies, and knocked back cans of beer outside shelters and in parks.

Previously, however, you might have noticed him at a grocery store where he once ran the dairy department and was the produce manager. He was a model employee from the point of view of the boss, working up to 68 hours a week. Then Pailer lost his job and everything that went with it, from his home to his confidence and his family.

A whole lot of other issues besides employment began to overwhelm him to the point he couldn't address anything. "I just wanted to get away from everybody and wanted to be left alone," he recalls. "I didn't know where to start."

The five or six years when Pailer slept rough and ate at shelters, he racked up a number of charges for minor crimes like public intoxication. He also had four hospital admissions in 10 months, mainly because people, including his family and the police, were worried he would harm himself or others.

The hospital stays were beneficial, says Pailer, 34, even though he wasn't very happy to be there. "I didn't appreciate being held against my will, although it was probably good."

Pailer broke off relations with his brother and sisters and hid away in the nooks and crannies of downtown, increasingly convinced that he didn't really belong anywhere. The only person he phoned occasionally was his daughter, now aged 12.

Then those public intoxication tickets began to catch up with him. He was put into a Calgary Diversion Services program for people with mental illness. The program referred him to The Alex's Pathways, but he vanished. The next time he showed up in court, about two years ago, Pathways was waiting for him.

"I was overwhelmed and confused because I wanted to disappear and to be left alone," Pailer remembers. However, he realized he didn't have a better plan.

From court, Pathways took him to buy groceries and then to the apartment that has been his home ever since. "For the first



little while, I had a personal conflict. I wanted to leave, but I didn't have anywhere else to go," he says.

Gradually he learned he could talk to the Pathways team about the issues weighing him. He started to work through the frustrations that came out of nowhere, resulting in crying jags lasting two to three hours.

"The biggest help is the one-on-one support," says Pailer, who has curtailed his drinking, is in the clear with the courts and is sorting his "stuff" out. Possibly the anti-depressants helped, as well as group meetings and activities at The Alex, which Pailer is gingerly starting to attend as his trust returns.

"If people are given the opportunity to get stuff sorted out, it's a lot better," comments Pailer. "If it weren't for Pathways I would still be down there (in the shelter system) and working for temp agencies."

Pailer has set the bar high, aiming to return to work in a warehouse or a retail environment in six months to a year.

In preparation, he volunteers a couple of times a week at The Alex food bank, organizing the shelves, processing donations, keeping an eye on expiry dates, helping pick up the food and delivering hampers to other clients, not to mention all the heavy lifting. Staff say he's a godsend.

Pailer regularly phones his daughter, who lives out of town, is in regular contact with his siblings and, with the help of Pathways, he's starting to unravel the bureaucratic red tape entangling another family issue. Two years ago he didn't have a future. Now he does and it's looking rosy.

## SOURCES

Interviews: Scott Calling Last, Katrina Milaney, Tim Richter, Jen Sputeck, Darcy Verhun

CBC News, *Homelessness Declining in Calgary, Count Reveals*, February 6, 2012

Calgary Homeless Foundation, *More Than 3,500 Received Housing and Support in the First Four Years of Calgary's 10 Year Plan*, February, 6, 2012

Molloy, Melissa, *Over One Hundred Volunteers Gather to Search for Calgary Homeless*, Calgary Journal, January 22, 2012





## PROFILE: THE MUSTARD SEED

**A**s the chief operating officer, Jeff Dyer is often called upon to explain the changes happening at Calgary's Mustard Seed. In the two years he's been there, he has noticed that people tend to get glassy-eyed when he quotes statistics and talks strategically. But if he tells stories, they get it.

And Dyer loves stories – both telling them and hearing them from guests, staff and volunteers, especially those stories about how people have been housed and are thriving in their new accommodations. In fact stories are one way that The Mustard Seed has promoted change to all the many people connected with it as it has moved from being a well-intended shelter, trying to keep up with a human disaster, to embracing housing first.

It wasn't a sudden turn-around, but it has been a dramatic one.

Formerly, guests worked their way up from the mats on the ground floor, to Step Up on the second floor, to rooms on the third and fourth floors, and then out into the world. But around 2006 staff had a tip-off that something was wrong; very wrong. They noticed guests weren't leaving, not because they weren't ready, but because there was nowhere they could afford.

It was around then The Mustard Seed began to look into purchasing property on 10th Avenue S.W. to construct a tower of affordable housing for their "housing-ready" clients as they were called then.

The plan was greeted with one of the loudest roars of BANANA (build absolutely nothing anywhere near anything) the city has ever heard, but The Mustard Seed worked with the provincial government, city officials including the police chief, the business revitalization zone (BRZ), the Beltline community and the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF). Gradually the dream is coming true and the tower will open in the summer of 2013 with 224 units of various descriptions.

Simultaneously, the CHF was looking at the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness in Calgary based on the housing-first concept. The Seed didn't jump in until the plan came out in January 2008, says Dyer, not so much from a lack of desire, but more from a lack of understanding. "No one at The Seed wanted people to remain homeless, we dreamed of something better, but we couldn't articulate it."

According to executive director Myron Krause, it took some soul-searching and questioning before they climbed on board. What is housing first, they asked, how does it help our clients? But as early as December 2007, representatives from The Mustard Seed went to Portland, OR, to look at affordable housing in a city that had already embraced housing first. The idea was beginning to sink in.

"The 10 Year Plan put gas on the flame," says Dyer. "Strategically, we had to rethink our role in the long-term perspective because, for most of what we were doing, we were stuck in conditions of emergency response.

"The staff who had been here a long time would have loved to dream a home into being, but they were dealing with a line-up of desperate people dying in the cold. There was no way they could imagine beyond that," he says.

"It was an answer to a question we didn't know how to ask, with the tower as the anchor point of the rethink."

The Mustard Seed's leadership, including the board, saw the 10 Year Plan as a powerful tool to further their vision of bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to Earth. To work towards this, they changed their way of operating to what Dyer calls a more people-centred focus. "Instead of service providers, we are people responding in solidarity."

This included moving to a trauma-informed lens to understand



**The Mustard Seed's Key Wall: A key for every person who has been housed in their own home.**

the difficulties, including addictions, that their clients face and the realization that a large shelter doesn't constitute trauma-informed care.

Almost at once, they set up a case-worker team of young, entrepreneurial, visionary staff to start moving people into housing and to support them in their new homes. For some of the older staff who had worked for years at the Centre Street shelter, the change was a loss that had to be worked through, says Krause. But when it was pointed out that what they were doing wasn't working, most said, "You're right," and got on with the new job.

Other parts of the organization were already thinking along housing-first lines, with most people embracing it, says Krause. And they have no difficulty recruiting new, idealistic staff like Josh, a 20-something engineer. When asked if he was willing to take a substantial pay cut, he replied, "I can't not."

The very nature of the work attracts people who want to make a difference, says Dyer. "With the tools of the CHF and the 10 Year Plan, they actually *make* that difference."

Critical in moving forward was the growing excitement as staff

witnessed the positive changes in people's lives. "Success breeds success," says Krause.

"We started telling stories in emails and people began to catch the vision." The stories were both about housing and employment triumphs. Stories are also told visually with photographs of clients on display in all the organization's buildings, bringing the good news – that there is hope of a home; there is hope of a place in the wider community.

In three years The Mustard Seed has housed 250 people with an 89-per-cent retention rate. Support is key, says Dyer, and some people might need it for the rest of their lives because of the complexity and number of challenges they face.

"A home is the beginning of the end, or the end of the beginning as Winston Churchill used to say, and we have to be really mindful of that," he comments.

The goal of the support is to help people integrate into their new communities. If, for example, someone wants to take an art program instead of one at The Mustard Seed's art room, they will be assisted to find one in their new neighbourhood.

"The process is highly relational where we get to know people in a deeper way. We can't be superficial," says Krause.

The lifeblood of the organization is its army of volunteers who were a little harder to educate, says Dyer, not because they were unwilling but because there is less time to work with them. He hopes that, in the future, people who have driven an hour each way to roll up their sleeves will stay home and help support people on their street just as they would any other neighbour.

In the end, staff paid to do a job will always hold the balance of power in a relationship, but a volunteer can build a more equal, natural friendship, Dyer says, foreseeing a day when no one will be moved into housing without a nearby volunteer to befriend them.

He recalls visiting a man one month after he had been housed. In that time he had not received one piece of mail.

"If there was no mail, not even a bill, he doesn't exist." This is exactly the situation that Mustard Seed staff want to prevent through different kinds of supports and a different kind of community building.

"We all have to make a commitment to get out of the backyard into the frontyard and educate upstream," he says. For most clients,

though, it's a very different picture. "For the vast majority, we see optimism and hope. They can't believe it's real. It's inspiring."

However, a quarter of the staff are still doing shelter work, all at the Foothills Industrial Park facility which can sleep up to 370 people a night, usually hovering at the 300 mark. As guests check in they have to walk past The Key Wall, with a key for every single person who has moved into a home; it's a powerful symbol of the current philosophy behind the shelter's operation.

Dyer would prefer that the Foothills premises were seen as a re-housing centre. He says the moment a person comes to the door, staff are trying to figure out how to support them in sustainable housing. They also want to achieve it as soon as possible so that they don't become institutionalized.

If The Mustard Seed's current big vision works, he says, there will be several smaller transitional shelters dotted around the city rather than one large one. The Seed is definitely not afraid of the innovations required to meet the clients' needs. As Dyer says, "We are committed to a transformational mode, adapting as the nature of the work changes."

Dyer also thinks that we need "all manner of creative housing options" to suit different people's needs and desires. The Mustard Seed already has two apartment blocks of permanent housing in the Beltline, supporting people with mid- to high-level problems as well as people permanently housed on the third and fourth floors of the building on the east side of Centre Street.

When the tower opens, it will become an integral part of the surrounding community. The ground floor will be devoted to commercial businesses, but not just any old enterprise. The Mustard Seed has been working with the Victoria Park BRZ to identify what the community wants and needs, such as an artisan bakery and a bicycle shop. The second floor will hold an employment centre and other services, and floors three to 12 will be devoted to mixed housing for singles, some deeply subsidized, some not so. Some floors will be very communal, others less so. "It's a place for everyone," says Dyer.

Besides working with the local community, The Mustard Seed has seen more collaboration among the city's agencies since the 10 Year Plan began gradually melding into a system rather than a group of ill-fitting parts.

"We partner with everybody; it got people round the table working together," says Dyer. "If we try to do it alone, we know it doesn't work and it's not in the best interest of what we believe. The divisions before were crazy."

One of the benefits, he says, is that agencies hold each other accountable and challenge each other to do better. "It's everything to do with the client; it's client-centred."

The Mustard Seed also gives "huge kudos" to the CHF for the audacity of its vision. Dyer says it is idealistic and at the same time rational, a rare combination. Not only that, the fact the CHF can adapt as the plan unrolls is also commended. For example, the CHF has just extended its one-year housing support funding to The Mustard Seed for another year, because agencies are discovering that clients need that contact longer than initially thought.

"It's a key partner, we couldn't be our best self without the CHF," says Dyer.

While he finds it remarkable and uplifting to be with people who are happily housed for the first time in years; people who have gone from calling a shelter home to inviting workers into their own home, Dyer does have a few cautions.

"People need consistent, ongoing support. If it is pulled away, everything will plummet dramatically. It's not the end of the clock. If there's no more money, the situation will become even worse because we won't have the opportunity to launch another plan.

"We need to educate the public and the government because all Albertans are very generous, but they are also self-made and therefore have a lot of expectations that people can get themselves out of homelessness. But it's not as easy as that; it's unbelievably complicated."

## SOURCES

Interviews: Jeff Dyer, Myron Krause

CBC News, *Housing Tower Could Ghettoize Poor, Alderman*, July 13, 2007

Calgary Mustard Seed Building Time Line

Kim Guttormson, *New Mustard Seed Tower Has Community Backing*, *Calgary Herald*, September 7, 2008



---

## Calgary Homeless Foundation

### Board of Directors, 1998

Arthur Smith – President and Chief Executive Officer  
Senior Consultant to the management SNC-Lavalin

John Currie – Vice-President  
President, Currie Consulting Ltd.

Sam Aylesworth, Executive director Calgary Foundation

Milton Bogoch, Executive director Alberta Residential Rental  
Association and Calgary Apartment Association

G.W. (Scotty) Cameron, President and chief executive officer  
Scotcam Enterprises Inc.

Paul Dawson, Chief commissioner, City of Calgary

Stephanie Felesky, Former chair, United Way of Calgary

Bob Hawkesworth, Alderman, City of Calgary

J.G. (Jerry) Joynt, President of Joynt Communications

Sam Kolias, President and chief executive officer, Boardwalk  
Properties Inc. and Boardwalk Realty Ltd.

Bonnie Laing, Member of the Alberta Legislature

Derek Lester, Real Estate Consultant Toole Peet Real Estate

Lorraine Melchior, Executive director Calgary Urban Project  
Society

Major Reg Newbury, Executive director addictions and  
rehabilitation services Salvation Army, Calgary

Roderick Peden, Solicitor

Colin Penman, Co-ordinator, Action by Churches Together with  
Social Service

Darcy Verhun, Partner, Ernst & Young, Calgary

Kay Wong, Social planner, Community and Social Development  
Department, City of Calgary

## Members of the Advisory Council

John Brownlee – Chair

Judge, Provincial Court of Alberta

Dermot Baldwin, Executive director Calgary Drop-In Centre, now  
Calgary Drop-In and Rehab Centre

Karen Blasé, Executive director, Calgary Women's Emergency  
Shelter

Sharon Carry, Chief executive officer, Bow Valley College

Randy Diddams, Executive Director, Exit Community Outreach,

Michael Going, Director Calgary Downtown Association

Deputy Chief Rick Hanson, Bureau of community policing,  
Calgary Police Service

Ralph Hubele, Leader specialized housing, community health  
resources, Calgary Regional Health Authority

Myron Kanik, President, Canadian Energy Pipeline Association

Donna Michaels, Chief Superintendent, Calgary Board of  
Education

Pat Nixon, Executive director, Mustard Seed Street Ministry,

Dick Oaks, Director, Calgary Real Estate Board, charitable  
foundation

Ruth Ramsden-Wood, President, Calgary United Way

John Robson, Executive director, Inn From the Cold

David Watson, President, Equity Real Estate Consulting Ltd.

## Fundraisers

Stephanie Felesky – Co-chair

Former chair, United Way Calgary

G.W. (Scotty) Cameron – Co-chair

President Scotcam Enterprises

Blake Ashforth, Retired senior VP and general manager Royal  
Bank of Canada

Garry Henderson, Solicitor

---

Gordon J. Hoffman, Partner Hoffman Dorchik Law Firm  
Bill Kilbourn, Chairman, Kelman Technologies Inc.  
Krish Krishnamoorthy, Executive vice-president office of the  
president SNC-Lavalin Group Inc.  
John Lau, Chief executive officer Husky Oil  
Debra Mauro, Vice-president Albi Homes  
John Simpson, President CANA Construction  
Hank Swartout, President Precision Drilling Corporation  
Bob Welty, President Escondido Resources (International) Ltd.



## Board of Directors, 2012

Cameron Bailey, Director, McKinsey & Company Canada

Sharon Carry, President & CEO, Bow Valley College

Stephen Clark, VP, Commercial-West, Canadian & Eastern US  
Pipelines, TransCanada Corp.

George Coppus, Principal, Dynawise Inc.

Trevor Daroux, Superintendent, Field Operations,  
Calgary Police Service

Barry Davidson, Executive Director,  
Community Life Improvement Council

Druh Farrell, Alderman Ward 7, City of Calgary

Stephanie Felesky, Community Volunteer

Dave Gregory, Brand Insights Group

Bishop Fred Henry, Roman Catholic Diocese of Calgary

Craig Hill, Partner, Burnet Duckworth & Palmer LLP

Tom Jackson, President & CEO, Dreamcatcher Housing Ltd.

Sam Kolas, Chairman & CEO, Boardwalk REIT

Dr. Lucy Miller, President & CEO, United Way of Calgary & Area

Bernadette Majdell (Secretary), Director, Affordable Housing,  
Agecare Communities

Anne Maxwell, Director, Imagine Energy Inc.

David McIlveen, Director, Community Development,  
Boardwalk REIT

Alan Norris, President & CEO, Brookfield Residential Properties

Brian O'Leary QC (Vice Chair), Partner,  
Burnet Duckworth & Palmer LLP (retired)

---

Ruth Ramsden-Wood, Former President & CEO,  
United Way of Calgary & Area  
Amal Remu, Manager Western Region,  
Public Health Agency of Canada  
Steve Snyder (Chair), Director, Intact Financial Corporation  
Les E. Stelmach, Vice President, Bissett Investment Management  
Darcy Verhun (Treasurer), Managing Partner,  
Conroy Ross Partners Ltd.  
Len Webber, MLA, Calgary Foothills  
Robin Wortman, President, Barber Lucia Productions Ltd.



---

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have worked hard and given generously of their time to make this book possible. It is impossible to name everyone, but some do stand out: Tim Richter for commissioning it in the first place and John Currie and Darcy Verhun who read and re-read several sections; Bob Hawkesworth who entrusted me with his MA thesis; Lisa Garrisen, Marina Giacomini, Katrina Milaney, Brian O'Leary and Wayne Stewart who answered repeated questions; Sharyn Brown, Trish Muntain and Gayle Rees who took care of many little chores; and numerous busy people in the social services field who stretched their daytimers even further to accommodate me. All the main agencies, except one, were more than willing to share stories of housing first and their experiences with the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness in Calgary; I appreciate your time. A big thank-you goes to Fern Brooks and Andrea Ranson for saving me from myself and to Quentin Collier for enhancing the raw materials.

Gathering memories can be a hazardous process in that no two people have exactly the same recollections, so I have tried to double-check everything. In some cases, two people have told me one thing and a third, another. When this has occurred, I have given preference to the weight of numbers. I apologize in advance if the narrative is not quite as some readers recall. Any outright mistakes are mine. This is, at best, a fusion of memories and documents and perforce omits many, many people who have laboured in the trenches over the years.

Above all, I would like to thank those people who invited me into their homes so that I could see first hand what a home means to a person who hasn't had a safe place for months, even years.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Sam C. Scott". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. A long, thin horizontal line extends from the end of the signature towards the right margin of the page.

