REPORT ON
HOUSING NEEDS IN
FORT McMURRAY

Prepared by:
Fort McMurray Housing Needs Count Committee

Prepared for:
Wood Buffalo Homelessness Initiatives Steering Committee

November, 2004
Fort McMurray Housing Needs Count

Committee Members

Carole Bouchard – RMWB, Family & Community Support Services
Sheila Brasnett – Human Resources Development Canada
Const. Brian Eves – Royal Canadian Mounted Police
Jan Fix – Human Resources Development Canada
Val McGriskin – RMWB, FCSS, Family Service Agency
Heather McMaster – RMWB, Family & Community Support Services
Beth Sellick – RMWB, FCSS, Community Plan on Homelessness

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Wood Buffalo Homelessness Initiatives Steering Committee would like to thank the many individuals and organizations that generously contributed time, information and resources to making Fort McMurray’s second Housing Needs Count a tremendous success.

Thanks and appreciation are extended to the Homelessness Initiatives Count Committee and Count Volunteers whose concern for the needs of the community motivated and sustained the project.

The Committee would like to specially recognize the essential and significant contributions of the respondents themselves whose willingness to disclose sensitive information made this project possible. The success of the Count is largely due to their generosity in sharing what they know of the reality of homelessness and near homelessness.
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Summary & Key Findings

Fort McMurray’s second housing needs count, conducted on November 16, 2004, found 355 persons without a permanent place of residence. The one-day survey captured the responses of individuals who were unable to obtain safe, adequate and affordable housing at the time of the count. This report describes both the absolute homeless and the sheltered homeless, those individuals who found shelter in one of the community’s emergency shelters or group homes.

This “snapshot” of the homeless population was undertaken by the Fort McMurray Housing Needs Count Committee, an ad hoc committee under the guidance of the Wood Buffalo Homelessness Initiatives Steering Committee, to provide insight into the size and scope of the homeless population in Fort McMurray, Alberta. The count was conducted at various outdoor locations throughout the downtown core where homeless are known to congregate as well as at service sites where agencies have direct contact with homeless persons.

The Count Committee applied the methodology used in last year’s Housing Needs Count conducted November 17, 2003. This will allow us to monitor changes and trends and confidently present a solid picture of homelessness in Fort McMurray.

- The count identified 187 adults, 4 youth, and 41 children (dependents) as absolutely homeless. There were 100 adults and 23 children (dependents) in shelters. This makes for a total of 355 homeless individuals. Aboriginal peoples accounted for 49% of the adult homeless population.

- Males accounted for 63% of the total homeless population (excluding dependents) with 72% of those men recorded as absolutely homeless. In contrast, 51% of homeless females were counted as being absolute homeless and 49% were sheltered homeless.

- Of those who responded to the age category question, 71% identified themselves as between the ages of 31-54 and 22% were counted as 18-30. The age categories of 0-17 and 55+ accounted for 7% of responses.

No inquiries were made into the gender or age of dependents of absolute and sheltered homeless.

Defining Homeless

The Homelessness Initiatives Steering Committee used the following definitions of homelessness:

**Absolute Homeless**: Individuals and families who have no housing alternatives (may sleep ‘on the street’ or in a stairwell that night, or alternatively they may stay with a friend or find an emergency shelter space).

**Sheltered Homeless**: Individuals and families who are living in emergency accommodations or condemned housing and do not have a permanent place to live.
Fort McMurray’s Housing Needs Report: Key Findings

- Three hundred and fifty-five (355) persons were counted in the total homeless population (includes respondents & their dependents) *
  - This is up from three hundred thirty nine (339) persons last year.

- Two hundred and thirty two (232) persons were counted as absolutely homeless (includes 41 dependents)
  - This is up from one hundred seventy three (173) persons last year.

- One hundred and twenty three (123) persons were counted as sheltered homeless (includes 23 dependents)
  - This number is down from the 166 reported as sheltered last year.
  - The total sheltered homeless number is down from last year’s number due to the fact that the Salvation Army was sheltering more than capacity in their mat program last year. Another notable factor was that the turn-away numbers were captured in the shelter numbers reported in last year’s count.
  - A total of 87 individuals were sheltered in emergency shelters. This represents a 112% shelter occupancy.

- Males accounted for 63% of the total homeless population
  - This is down slightly from the 67% reported last year

- Aboriginal people accounted for 49% of total homeless individuals
  - This is down slightly from the 51% reported last year

- 191 persons (about 75%) of absolute and sheltered homeless status fell within the age category of 31-54
  - This is up significantly from last year’s number of 50%

- One hundred and seventeen respondents or 74% of persons absolutely homeless indicated they are residents of the Municipality of Wood Buffalo. Sheltered homeless were not asked this question.

- 74% of absolutely homeless responded that they see themselves living here in six months. Sheltered homeless were not asked this question.
  - This is down from 85% reported last year

- Ninety-seven persons (61%) indicated they had a source of income.
  - This is up from last year when only 51% of those who responded to this question declared that they had a source of income.

*Unless stated otherwise figures do not include dependents. All data analysis is based on completed responses & non - responses have been omitted from percentage totals.
CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Community Plan on Homelessness & Affordable Housing

The count was organized and implemented by the Housing Needs Count Committee, an ad hoc committee under the direction of the Homelessness Initiatives Steering Committee, as part of ongoing efforts to understand the scope and nature of housing needs in Fort McMurray.

The housing needs data was generated to assist in understanding the particular demographics of the Fort McMurray population experiencing homelessness. The research will be used to update priorities in the Community Plan on Homelessness and Affordable Housing and will assist with future planning and development efforts concerned with housing needs within the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo.

PROJECT APPROACH

A point-in-time agency and location street count survey was utilized to count the homeless population of Fort McMurray. The Count was conducted from 8:00 am – 6:00 pm on Tuesday, November 16th. Environment Canada recorded temperatures on Count Day at a high of +1 and a low of -10.

The count enumerated all those who could be characterized as homeless in one day, providing a view into the size and composition of the population currently experiencing homelessness.

Location & Agency Count

The survey was administered at 6 street locations and at 12 agencies; in emergency shelters, at the hospital, the soup kitchen and other locations frequented by homeless persons. Volunteers were enlisted as surveyors at street locations and agency staff supervised enumeration activities on site. Three street locations that were staffed last year were eliminated because they did not report any contact with homeless individuals. Also, the RCMP did not survey individuals in cells this year, as it was determined that the guards should not be obtaining information from prisoners for release outside the detachment. There was also one agency that did not participate due to a personal emergency experienced by the staff member dedicated to the project.
Methodology

In 2003 the Homelessness Initiatives Steering Committee developed two separate survey questionnaires for use in conducting the location and agency counts. These exact same surveys were used again for the 2004 Housing Needs Count.

The survey opened with a question that was designed to reduce duplication in the count by inquiring if the person had been surveyed yet today. The second survey question asked if the individual had a permanent residence to return to that night. A permanent residence was understood to be one eligible for receipt of Canada Post and in a place meant for human habitation. If an individual responded yes to this question, the survey was terminated.

Four questions were asked to gather demographic information on those surveyed. The location surveys also asked participants if they planned to stay in the Municipality for six months as well as a question related to income that was not asked at agency counts.

Volunteer orientation was conducted in small group sessions or on an individual basis to review the survey questionnaire and to provide surveyors with a set of instructions for conducting the count.

No media were contacted prior to the count to avoid attracting unnecessary attention to count activities that could potentially impact on responses or response rates. However, a media release was issued upon the unveiling of the final report.

Survey questions will be re-used for the next count anticipated for Fall/Winter 2006. Having enumerated the homeless population two consecutive years has allowed for comparability of data. Conducting the housing count every second year will help in the identification of trends and changes in the characteristics of the homeless population of Fort McMurray.
COUNT RESULTS

The 2003 Fort McMurray Housing Needs Count recorded 339 homeless individuals. The 2004 housing count reported 355 homeless individuals. This represents a significant increase in one year, however, it can be expected given the increase in the population of Fort McMurray and the current state of housing in the city.

Data analysis for homeless characteristics, demographics and other statistics in this report are based solely upon completed responses.

Total Absolute & Sheltered Homeless

The total homeless population was counted at 355 persons. This figure includes respondents & their dependents. Of this figure, 232 persons (65%) were counted as absolutely homeless while 123 persons (35%) were counted as sheltered homeless. Dependents of absolute homeless numbered 41 and dependents of sheltered homeless were counted at 23.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2004 TOTAL HOMELESS *</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absolute Homeless</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheltered Homeless</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Homeless</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes – Singles, adults in families and dependents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2003 TOTAL HOMELESS *</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absolute Homeless</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheltered Homeless</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Homeless</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes – Singles, adults in families and dependents

Notes:

The total number of absolute homeless has increased significantly since the count last year, from 173 up to 232 this year.

The total number of sheltered homeless is slightly deceiving. The shelters and group homes were at or near capacity last year, they were at capacity this year, and yet the number of sheltered homeless was reported higher last year than this year. This discrepancy is due to two primary factors; the number of sheltered homeless reported in 2003 included those turned away from the shelters, and the Salvation Army was sheltering more than capacity numbers in their mat program last year.
Homeless with dependents and without

A majority of homeless individuals were single (86%). There were thirty-eight (38) families counted with a total of sixty-four (64) children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Single Homeless</th>
<th>Homeless with Dependents</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Dependents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute Homeless</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheltered Homeless</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Homeless</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Total does not include dependents
Non responses not included in percentages

Homeless By Observed Gender

Males are over-represented in the homeless population with 63% of the total homeless population recorded as male with more males reporting as absolutely homeless than sheltered. The gender of dependents was not asked and is not included in total figures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute Homeless</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheltered Homeless</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Homeless</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Total does not include dependents
Non responses not included in percentages

Homeless By Observed Race

Aboriginal peoples accounted for 49% of the total responses of homeless. Caucasians were observed at 46% and 5% of respondents were observed as other.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HOMELESS BY OBSERVED RACE*</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
<th>Aboriginal</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute Homeless</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheltered Homeless</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Homeless</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Total does not include dependents
Non responses not included in percentages
Homeless By Age Category

Seventy-one percent (71%) of homeless persons who responded fall within the age category of 31-54. Twenty-two percent (22%) of homeless persons counted fall within the age category of 18-30. Only 4 youth homeless were counted between the ages of 0-17 and those reporting to be 55+ totaled fourteen (14). The age of dependents was not recorded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HOMELESS BY AGE CATEGORY*</th>
<th>0-17 yrs</th>
<th>18-30</th>
<th>31-54</th>
<th>55+</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absolute Homeless</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheltered Homeless</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Homeless</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>268*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Total does not include dependents
Non responses not included in percentages

Absolute Homeless

One hundred and seventeen respondents or (74%) of persons absolutely homeless indicated they are residents of the Municipality of Wood Buffalo. One hundred and seventeen respondents or (74%) of persons absolutely homeless indicated they see themselves living here in six months. Sheltered homeless were not asked these questions.

Ninety-seven persons (61%) indicated they had a source of income. Sixty-two (39%) individuals responded as not having a source of income.

Of those individuals that responded positively to having a source of income, fifty-eight of them (70%) indicated they were employed while twenty-five persons (30%) indicated they were currently receiving government funds.
Emergency Shelters

Although the sheltered homeless count or agency count captured individuals who were staying in group homes, emergency beds, second stage housing facilities etc., and included persons discharged from jails and hospitals, only those persons registered in a licensed emergency shelter are captured in the table below.

The figures indicate that two of the city’s shelters were operating at or beyond capacity during the point-in-time covered by the survey. The Salvation Army Mat Program sheltered 26 homeless individuals during the time covered in the count though the program offers only 20 mats. The Salvation Army Men’s Shelter was operating at full capacity at the time of the count with a 100% occupancy rate. Unity House Shelter reported a 112% occupancy rate with 29 registered and only 25 beds (4 registrants were toddlers).

### Emergency Shelters: Registered & Turned Away

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No. Beds</th>
<th>No. Registered</th>
<th>% Occupancy</th>
<th>No. Turned Away</th>
<th>% Total Turned Away</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salvation Army Mat Program</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>130%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvation Army Shelter</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity House Shelter</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>116%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>77</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>113%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since the 2003 Housing Needs Count, 5 additional shelter beds have been created in Fort McMurray.
COUNTING HOMELESS

Many people are not permanently homeless but move in and out of a homeless state making it difficult to enumerate the number of individuals that are at any time experiencing homelessness. Due to constant changes in the number of homeless individuals and families that may move in and out of homelessness and due to the “hidden” and transient nature of the homeless population, a census of persons homeless on a given day will not necessarily translate into an accurate reflection of the homeless population of a given month or year.

The Count Committee was approached by a local agency, that provides programming for families, to take part in the Housing Needs Count. Because this agency was not involved in last year’s count the information gathered from this agency was not incorporated in the main body of this report but is being recorded here. This agency ran two structured programs and a drop in program on the day of the count and recorded the following information (using the same survey as the street count).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No permanent residence</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Observed Race</th>
<th>Dependents</th>
<th>Source of Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Of the 31 respondents declaring that they had no permanent residence 28 said that they were from the urban area and 3 were from the rural area. 26 of the respondents declared that they thought they would be living here in six months time, 4 said that they wouldn’t. These families are all currently living with family or friends.

On count day 2186 people were contacted at agencies and at outdoor locations. The majority of these contacts (95%) were made at street locations where 2078 people were asked about their housing situation. Most of the individuals contacted were not homeless but expressed concern on issues of homelessness and affordable housing. Some of their comments and those of homeless themselves are listed below.

- Rent is too high – currently living in a car/ tent by Snye
- Housing prices are too expensive – can’t buy a house
- Rent increasing – one pay cheque away from being homeless
- No place to go – guys sleeping under cars
- Family is living in a camper – can’t afford to live in town