REPORT ON
HOUSING NEEDS IN
FORT McMURRAY

Prepared by:
Community Based Organization for the
Community Plan on Homelessness
Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo

Prepared for:
Wood Buffalo Homelessness Initiatives
Steering Committee

November, 2003
Fort McMurray Housing Needs Count

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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 first ever Housing Needs Count a great 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.
SUMMARY

Fort McMurray’s point-in-time housing needs count, conducted on November 17, 2003, found 339 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 “snapshot” of the homeless population was undertaken by 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 homelessness is known to congregate as well as at service sites where agencies have direct contact with homeless persons.

The count identified 145 persons as absolutely homeless and 134 sheltered homeless persons, excluding dependents, for a total of 279 homeless individuals. Aboriginal peoples accounted for 51% of this total.

Males accounted for 67% of the total homeless population (excluding dependents) with more males recorded as absolutely homeless than sheltered homeless. In contrast, more females were counted as sheltered homeless at 17% than as absolute homeless at 16%.

Over half (54%) of those who responded to the age category question, identified themselves as between the ages of 31-54 and approximately one third (35%) were counted as 18-30. The age categories of 0-17 and 55+ accounted for 12% of responses with responses equally split between these two age brackets. No inquiries were made into the gender or age of dependents of absolute and sheltered homeless.

The count project is one of many initiatives carried out under the Community Plan on Homelessness to identify and address gaps in existing housing resources and supports. Research generated from the count will provide for a more accurate reflection of the number of people that are homeless and will be applied to future efforts that target gaps in the housing continuum.
Fort McMurray’s Housing Needs Report: Key Findings

- Three hundred thirty nine persons were counted in the total homeless population (includes respondents & their dependents) *

- One hundred seventy three persons were counted as absolutely homeless (includes 28 dependents)

- One hundred sixty six persons were counted as sheltered homeless (includes 32 dependents)

- Males accounted for 67% of the total homeless population

- Aboriginal people accounted for 51% of total homeless individuals

- More than 50% or 140 persons of absolute and sheltered homeless status fell within the age category of 31-54

- Thirty five percent or 91 homeless persons responded that they fall within the age category of 18-30

- One hundred and twenty respondents or 86% of persons absolutely homeless indicated they are residents of the Municipality of Wood Buffalo. Sheltered homeless were not asked this question.

- Over 85% of absolutely homeless responded that they see themselves living here in six months. Sheltered homeless were not asked this question.

- Sixty-nine persons (51%) indicated they had a source of income.

- Twenty-two persons (31%) indicated they were employed. Twenty-three persons (33%) indicated they were receiving government funds.

*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 under the direction of the Homelessness Initiatives Steering Committee as part of ongoing efforts to understand the scope and nature of housing need in Fort McMurray.

The housing needs data was generated to assist in understanding the particular demographics of the 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.
INTRODUCTION

Defining Homeless

The Homelessness Initiatives Steering Committee accepts the following definition 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.

Near Homeless: Individuals and families who are paying too high a proportion of their income (ie. over 30%) for housing. This group also includes those living in inadequate accommodations (eg. Units in poor condition, severely overcrowded units, and/or inadequate shelter from the elements.)

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.
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 – 6:00pm on Monday November 17th. Environment Canada recorded temperatures on Count Day at a high of -2 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 16 street locations and at 12 agencies; in emergency shelters, at the hospital, jail and other locations frequented by homeless persons. Volunteers were enlisted as surveyors at street locations and agency staff supervised enumeration activities on site.

Methodology

Two, separate survey questionnaires were developed by the Homelessness Initiatives Steering Committee for use in conducting the location and agency counts. Many of the questions were modeled after those of the Edmonton Count but were modified to reflect the unique characteristics of the Region of Wood Buffalo. In surveying housing needs in Ft McMurray the questionnaires focused on key areas: residents reporting no permanent address to return to, observed gender and age and those reporting dependents.

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.
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.

A volunteer orientation session was organized to review the survey questionnaire and to provide surveyors with a set of instructions for conducting the count. The orientation included a safety presentation by Const. Proulx from the RCMP as well as a presentation from Cindy Sweet of HRDC in relation to her experiences with the 2002 Edmonton count of homeless persons. Survey volunteers from the location counts were asked to complete volunteer feedback evaluation forms and comments collected from these participants will be considered for the next count.

No media were contacted prior to the count but a media release was issued the day after the count. This was part of a strategy to avoid attracting unnecessary attention to count activities that could potentially impact responses or response rates. However, a media release was issued at the end of the day of the count.

Survey questions will be re-used for the next count anticipated for Fall/Winter 2004. Enumerating the homeless population each year, will allow for comparability of data and will help in the identification of trends and changes in the characteristics of the homeless population of Fort McMurray.
COUNT RESULTS

A homeless population estimate given by homeless serving agencies in 2000 and recorded in the Community Plan on Homelessness, conservatively estimated the homeless population at 200 persons. Although the count represents a point-in time- estimate of the homeless population the significant difference in population size between the two figures is cause for concern and should be explored more fully.

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 339 persons. This figure includes respondents & their dependents. Of this figure, 173 persons (51%) were counted as absolutely homeless while 166 persons (49%) were counted as sheltered homeless. Dependents of absolute homeless numbered 28 and dependents of sheltered homeless were counted at 32.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOTAL HOMELESS *</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<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
**Single Homeless & Homeless Who Have Dependents**

Single homeless are over represented in the count at 83%. Single homeless are more likely to be sheltered than absolute homeless persons and homeless with dependents are more likely to be absolute homeless, accounting for 10% of the total homeless population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Single Homeless</th>
<th>Homeless with Dependents</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>106</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheltered Homeless</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Homeless</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Total does not include dependents
22Non responses not included in percentages

**Homeless By Observed Gender**

Males are over-represented in the homeless population with 67% of the total homeless population recorded as male with more males reporting as absolutely homeless than sheltered. Females were more likely to be sheltered homeless (17%) than absolutely homeless (16%). 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>98</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheltered Homeless</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Homeless</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Total does not include dependents
14Non responses not included in percentages
Homeless By Observed Race

Aboriginal peoples accounted for over 51% of the total responses of homeless, excluding dependents. Caucasians were observed at 41% and 8% 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>53</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheltered Homeless</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Homeless</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Homeless By Age Category

Dependents age was not recorded.
Fifty-four percent of homeless persons who responded fall within the age category of 31-54. Thirty-five percent or 91 homeless persons fall within the age category of 18-30. Those counted between the ages of 0-17 were divided evenly into absolute and sheltered homeless at 3% each and those reporting to be 55+ were also evenly divided among absolute and sheltered homeless at 3% each.

<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></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute Homeless</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheltered Homeless</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Homeless</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages do not total to 100% due to rounding Total does not include dependents
8 Non responses not included in percentages
**Absolute Homeless**

One hundred and twenty respondents or (86%) of persons absolutely homeless indicated they are residents of the Municipality of Wood Buffalo. Five persons did not respond to this question. Sheltered homeless were not asked this question.

One hundred and eleven respondents or (87%) of persons absolutely homeless indicated they see themselves living here in six months. Seventeen persons did not respond. Sheltered homeless were not asked this question. The second part of this question had such a high item non-response that it was omitted from the results.

Sixty-nine persons (51%) indicated they had a source of income. Ten persons did not respond to this question.

Twenty-two persons (31%) indicated they were employed while twenty-three persons (33%) indicated they were currently receiving government funds. Twenty-four persons did not respond to this question.
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 were 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 35 homeless individuals during the time covered in the count. Though the program offers only 20 beds 35 individuals accessed services or facilities at the Mat Program on that day. An additional 8 individuals were turned away from the shelter. 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 57% occupancy rate with 9 of their 21 beds recorded as vacant at the time of the count.

Emergency Shelters: Registered & Turned Away

<p>| Emergency Shelters: Registered &amp; Turned Away |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. Beds</th>
<th>No. Registered</th>
<th>% Occupancy</th>
<th>% Total Registered</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>35</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvation Army Shelter</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity House Shelter</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions summarized from the survey results speak to the immediate need to provide safe, accessible and affordable housing and preventative and supportive services for those at risk of homelessness.

The reality of the Count is that far too many individuals and families in this City are without adequate, safe and affordable shelter. Count results indicate that homelessness knows no one face but is spread across gender, race and age categories and that those affected by homelessness include the employed as well as those dependent on government funds as a source of income.

Homelessness is a community issue that impacts the overall health and well being of the community and is best addressed at the local level where community resources and linkages may be tapped and mobilized to prevent those in a near homeless state from becoming homeless.

The Homelessness Initiatives Steering Committee, however, stress that no one level of government can alone effectively address the challenges of homelessness and emphasize the importance of all three levels of government working alongside helping agencies and residents of the community to find solutions to address and prevent homelessness.
COMMENTS

On count day 2358 people were contacted at agencies and at outdoor locations. The majority of these contacts (92%) were made at street locations where 2177 people were asked about their housing situation and where 145 homeless persons were counted. 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.

- Cost of living is very high
- We need a bigger range of housing
- Rent is too high – currently living in a car
- Can’t afford food
- Housing prices are too expensive
- Had to get a second job to pay the rent
- Need a bigger range of housing