Youth experiencing homelessness were identified as a priority target group in the development of the Wood Buffalo Community Plan on Homelessness and Affordable Housing in 2004. A youth shelter/safe house and drop in center was identified as a need during consultations with stakeholders held in 2005 with respect to determining the needs of the community's homeless populations. Further investigation was required to identify the true scope and nature of youth homelessness in the urban center of Fort McMurray.

In January, 2007 a Youth Shelter Sub-committee was struck to enumerate youth experiencing homelessness and at risk of homelessness in the Fort McMurray region and to determine appropriate shelter and support services required to effectively address their needs. The Committee composed of youth housing and support service providers, local and provincial government, the RCMP as well as advocates for youth developed a survey to assess the circumstances experienced by youth when they leave home. In particular, the survey was developed to answer questions related to the numbers and ages of Fort McMurray youth experiencing homelessness, causes of youth leaving home, where youth stay when they are homeless, their employment and school attendance status and their involvement in criminal or unsafe behaviour. Survey findings were validated with community youth stakeholders to ensure their accuracy. A review of current literature on youth homelessness and shelter and support services was included in the study to provide insight into factors that contribute to youth homelessness, the impact and cost of youth homelessness and promising approaches to alleviate youth homelessness.

The youth shelter survey findings coupled with a review of current relevant literature on youth homelessness, youth shelter and of current programs and services, provides an understanding of the diverse issues correlated to youth homelessness and of the short and long term supports required to improve youth housing circumstances. More specifically, the research addresses the following questions:

1. Does the number and nature of youth homelessness and accompanying support issues warrant the development of a youth shelter in Fort McMurray?

2. Considering the results of this literature research on youth shelter and youth homelessness what are effective interventions for responding to the needs of homeless youth?

The definition of youth homelessness used in the study is youth who have been abandoned by the guardians responsible for their care or who have left their homes without notice or guardian consent and who have no permanent place of residence. This includes youth who are absolutely without shelter and are living on the street, or taking shelter in makeshift housing structures, under bridges, in cars, tents etc. It also includes youth living temporarily with friends, couch surfing from one house to the next and therefore without reliable, permanent, appropriate housing or housing stability. Some homeless researchers include youth when defining “new homeless” suggesting that youth are one of several emerging segments of the population along with seniors, working families and immigrants experiencing trends in homelessness. (Laird 2007, Hulchanski, 2002)

On May 15th, 2007 a point-in time survey was administered to Fort McMurray youth between the ages of 12 and 17 in junior and high school classrooms and at street locations where youth are known to congregate. It was administered via volunteers to youth at four downtown street locations; the Dugout Coffeehouse and Youth Centre at Borealis Park, Flavors convenience store...
on Franklin Avenue, the Provincial Building Bus Stop on Franklin and Main and Mac's Food Store at the corner of Franklin and King Street. Surveys were collected from the offices of the local Alberta Drug and Alcohol Commission (AADAC), probation and YMCA Youth Connections on the day of the count as well. A total of 2204 surveys were completed. The survey was pre-tested with youth and reviewed by representatives from the Catholic and Public school boards as well as Homeless Initiative Steering Committee members before it was administered. Survey non responses were not included in percentages.

A review of current Canadian literature on youth homelessness and shelter and support services was undertaken in July 2007 and included material from government, academic, business and grassroots literature. The review focused on material published after 1998 and on youth aged 12 – 24 as this is the age most often cited in the research.

**YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN FORT MCMURRAY: KEY FINDINGS**

Sixty five youth aged 11-17 were living away from home without shelter, or living in unsafe or temporary housing in Fort McMurray on May 15th, 2007 the day of the count

- Males accounted for 61% of the youth homeless population.
- More than 1/3 of Fort McMurray’s homeless youth had lived in care previous in a group home, foster home, treatment or assessment center

Findings about school attendance and current employment status indicate that on the day of the count over 65% of homeless youth were attending school. One youth was attending school and working full time. Other responses include;

- Working full time (9%)
- Working part time (25%)
- Unemployed (20%)

Issues that focused on the family accounted for the bulk of causes of homelessness as identified by Fort McMurray youth. Over half of all youth identified family conflict as a cause of their homelessness and 48% identified family breakdown including family violence, physical and/or sexual assault. Parents or guardians, drug or alcohol use (44 %) and/or the youth’s personal drug or alcohol use (42%) combined was the second most commonly cited cause of youth homelessness. One youth indicated they were homeless by choice. Other causes include;

- Mental health problems (26%)
- Lack of skills, education or experience to obtain employment (22%)
- Housing discrimination (20%)
- Housing affordability (19%)

The report also found that 39 youth or 61% of homeless youth respondents experienced high risk behaviour while homeless as indicated below;

- Criminal behaviour (79%)
- Panhandling activity (56%)
- Providing “favors” for a place to stay (56%)
LITERATURE REVIEW FINDINGS

A study of the literature documents the role of shelter in stabilizing individual life and setting the foundation for participation in community economic and social development. (Laird, 2007) It highlights the complexity of circumstances (both personal and systemic) that cause youth to be without safe, affordable, adequate shelter and suggests a range of targeted services to address the multiple challenges - economic, education, social, health - that homeless youth face. (YSIN, 2007) Further the literature indicates that short and long term strategies are needed to stabilize youth lives and address barriers in securing and maintaining permanent, appropriate housing. (Community Development Halton, 2007) Finally, transitional and affordable housing supply is seen as critical to prevention of youth homelessness and for the successful transitioning of youth into housing stability and independence. (Community Development Halton, 2007; HRM and ARK Research, 2005)

The literature indicates that the most promising approaches to addressing youth homelessness include strategies that provide youth with immediate shelter with the ultimate long term goal of moving youth through a continuum of housing supports toward housing security and self sufficiency. (Community Development Halton, 2007) The literature indicates that once a homeless person’s life has been stabilized through the provision of shelter, they are in a situation where they can now address the complex issues that caused their homelessness to begin with. (Laird, 2007; Victoria Cool Aid Society, 2007)

CONCLUSION

The survey results indicate that Fort McMurray has a vulnerable youth homeless population experiencing a variety of issues that trigger or intensify their homelessness. The findings of homeless status were most prevalent among 14-17 year olds and highlight a correlation between youth homelessness and family conflict, show that youth from care are over-represented in the local youth homeless population and show that homeless youth are placing themselves in unsafe and/or undesirable and even criminal situations when they choose or are required to leave home.

Promising practices in youth shelter provision highlight a number of key elements seen as effective methods of shelter provision and models of support for homeless youth including;

- Meeting youth’s basic and immediate needs for safe, affordable shelter (ideally permanent)
- Providing youth with access to programs and services to address personal causes of homelessness and accompanying issues
- Permitting youth to stay for extended periods
- Including transitional housing and supports to assist youth moving toward housing security and self-sufficiency

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Youth Shelter Sub-Committee recommends that policies, programs and services seeking to prevent and address youth homelessness in Fort McMurray be directed toward;

- Providing immediate shelter (ideally permanent) to homeless youth with the goal of stabilizing their housing situation so that they are in a position to receive other needed supports to help them move toward housing security and self-sufficiency
• Providing a range of programs and services specifically targeted to address the individual needs/circumstance that led to their homelessness. The major causes of youth homelessness in the region revolve around the family, therefore supports should be geared toward family reconnection and getting youth back into the family or guardian home where appropriate. Supports such as family counseling, mediation and conflict resolution services are required for youth to help re-connect them to their families and stabilize the family home. Programs to address youth and/or family substance abuse problems should also accompany supports provided as together they account for the second most common cause of local youth homelessness as reported by youth.

• Providing support to youth transitioning out of group care, foster care, treatment centers or assessment centers to ensure their successful transition to housing stability and self-sufficiency

• Preventing homelessness by engaging all levels of government and youth in addressing policies and programs related to affordable housing supply, poverty, low income, education and other systemic causes of homelessness