



**WELLESLEY INSTITUTE**  
advancing urban health

Enabling Grant Research Report

# Building Healthier Urban Communities: National Research Conference on Homelessness

## Introduction

Over 700 people gathered at York University from May 17th to 20th, 2005 to participate in the Canadian Conference on Homelessness. Delegates were able to choose from over 250 oral presentations and workshops, and 100 poster presentations. In addition, 8 documentaries on homelessness in Canada were screened. Conference delegates and presenters came from all regions in Canada, and included academic and community researchers, policy makers, people who have experienced homelessness, government officials, service providers, and advocates. The diversity of content was far reaching, demonstrating the breadth of knowledge and expertise across the country, an important resource to ending homelessness.

The three major goals of the conference were:

1. To make existing research on homelessness more accessible and reduce the geographical, sectoral, and socio-economic divisions that impede knowledge exchange;
2. To provide opportunities for collaboration among the diversity of groups involved in homelessness across Canada through knowledge exchange; and
3. To make research matter by exploring ways that research can influence policies and programs to alleviate homelessness

This was the first conference of its kind in Canadian history. There was no association or infrastructure to drive the development of the conference. A process to create a conference that was inclusive and pan-Canadian had to be developed. Funding and support had to be marshaled to move the process forward. With no track record, a marketing strategy had to be developed that would identify and reach out to a diverse group. Logistical issues, from how to select papers, to developing a conference agenda, had to be resolved. Much was learned from this first conference.

This was not the type of conference where we could rely exclusively on revenue generated by conference fees, or by support from an existing association. As such, it became important to develop key partnerships that would enable us to plan and develop the conference, without knowing for certain that we would be able to generate enough revenues from conference fees to cover our costs.

Wellesley Central Health Corporation played a key role in supporting this conference. WCHC stepped up to the plate early, providing \$15,000 in funding to help in the early development of the conference and, not insignificantly, for the development of our inclusion strategy.

One of the main objectives of the conference was to unite and integrate the diverse set of researchers, practitioners and relevant individuals and groups involved in issues of homelessness, both nationally and at the local level. Careful consideration and planning was given in order to facilitate the participation of diverse individuals and groups across Canada.

As such, we encouraged inclusive strategies of organizing, knowing that people in different regions would use their local expertise, resources and networks to encourage and support participation. We relied on the members of the National Advisory Body to engage with local stakeholders willing to consult locally with academics, service providers, researchers, government officials and people who are (or were) homeless. This was a key mechanism for promoting the conference, getting feedback on the conference program, identifying potential presenters, and helping to secure local financial support to assist people to attend the conference. It was the belief of the Conference Coordinating Committee that individuals in each region were best placed to determine how to coordinate this process, feed back information to the national Organizing committee and support local participation.

However, there was still the need to address one of our key goals: including people who are homeless in the development of this important conference.

## Inclusion Strategy

The organizers of the Canadian Conference on Homelessness were committed to designing an inclusive program in recognition of the diversity of the Canadian population. Not all groups or categories of persons have equal access to power and engagement. To be inclusive, differences that prevent participation need to be taken into account. Our inclusion strategy was directed towards a meaningful engagement with people who are homeless or have experience of homelessness.

We recognized that the category of homelessness - which focuses on lack of housing as a means of defining a group – can obliterate other important differences. It is also true that the face of homelessness differs across the regions of the country. The groups of people we defined as homeless are of course diverse, and our approach to recruitment attempted to deal with this diversity.

Ensuring that people who are homeless could participate in the conference was a key objective. As such, using funds from Wellesley Central Health Corporation, we engaged in local consultations as part of the participatory process, to determine meaningful ways in which people with experience of homelessness want to participate in the conference planning and implementation (see attached report: Appendix A). These consultations led to recommendations used to develop a framework for inclusion, which was reported back locally and nationally.

The Inclusion Framework of the Canadian Conference on Homelessness engaged people who are homeless through the following strategies:

**A. Consulting with a wide range of stakeholders, particularly persons who are marginalized, during conference planning**

We conducted a consultation with people who are homeless in Toronto.

**B. Diversity on conference committees**

We ensured that our Conference Organizing Committee not only reflected a broad degree of ethno-racial diversity, but also included people who had experienced homelessness.

**C. Creating opportunities for employment / training for people who are homeless**

Through Hospitality York, we hired 10 homeless people to assist in the day to day organization of the conference. Such people were recruited through Toronto agencies serving homeless persons. They acted as tour guides at York, and also assisted hospitality York staff in setting up the event and in trouble shooting.

**D. Hospitality Centre**

In order to ensure that people who are homeless had a place to eat, rest and connect with agency staff, we set up a “hospitality room” in one of the main buildings at York. This building was staffed by workers from several agencies in Toronto, and had food and water available, as well as some private places to rest. This facility was underutilized. This may be because it wasn’t required by people attending the conference, or people who were homeless (and other conference registrants) were not aware of the hospitality centre.

**E. Sensitivity Training**

Conference organizers were concerned about whether staff at the University would be prepared for the presence of a large number of homeless persons. To address this concern, meetings were held with senior managers from several University departments,

including Hospitality and Security. Managers supported the conference, and developed protocols for their staff to ensure that people who are homeless were treated with respect.

In addition, managers asked that “sensitivity training” be offered to a broad range of staff. A session with presentations by service providers and people who had been homeless was held in April 2005 for staff at York. Over 50 people attended.

As far as we are aware, this level of preparation paid off as homeless people were welcomed on the York campus, and there were no reports of confrontations between people who are homeless and York personnel.

**F. Provide respectful and meaningful opportunities for people who are homeless to share their stories and experiences.**

Our goal in this conference was to have people who are homeless participate in conference presentations. We identified that we were interested not only in “research papers”, but also in stories and other media, as a way of bringing this important experience to bear on the conference. It was important to provide a variety of ways to ensure the voice of homeless persons was heard. We worked with our national partners to alert homeless people about this opportunity, and several homeless people did make presentations. A weakness in our strategy was that we were unable to ensure that people who are homeless (particularly from outside of Toronto) had adequate funding to support their participation, without which attending the conference became impossible.

**G. Cover the costs of registration / transportation for people who are homeless.**

As part of our strategy, we arranged for buses to bring people who are homeless in Toronto to and from the conference. We also waived conference fees for people who are homeless, and did not require people who were homeless to pre-register. Unfortunately, we did not have any budget to provide transportation and accommodations for people from outside of Toronto.

During the conference, homeless people came from out of town and arrived without any place to stay. Hospitality York staff worked quickly to provide accommodation and money to purchase meals. Notwithstanding this response, people indicated to conference organizers their disappointment in the fact that we hadn’t been able to fund travel and accommodation for homeless people (including three meals a day) after the conference.

We recommend that if a conference such as this is held again, special allowance be made to ensure funding for the attendance of homeless people from out of town, and that ad hoc arrangements be made for those who arrive at the conference unannounced and without adequate resources.

## Success of Conference

To conclude, it is worth noting that people in general expressed a high level of satisfaction with this conference. The conference was a huge success in almost every way. Because this was the first conference of its kind in Canada, we were unable to predict the scale of the response. Where we originally anticipated submissions of 60-100 papers, we received 350. We hoped for attendance of 400 people, but had to cut off registration at 750, three weeks before the conference because of overwhelming demand. The conference met most people's expectations, and through our evaluation, we received overwhelmingly positive feedback. Below is a selection of quotes from our evaluation:

*"You did a wonderful job pulling together diverse groups, stakeholders and integrating research with the realities of the daily struggles experienced by the homeless and service providers."*

*"This was a fabulous conference over all. My comments re: improvements are really about minor operational things. However, accessibility for the disabled does need to be considered for future conferences."*

*"Excellent conference - York University has been a wonderful host. I would definitely come next year if possible - p.s. I enjoyed the media views offered - please do this again."*

*"For the first National Conference on Homeless I think the results are excellent. Well done planning committee! For future conferences I think the planning committee will need to take a harder line and say no to some groups who want to present - this will allow for more time for meaningful dialogue. But for a first. Well done!"*

*"You have done a tremendous job, putting together a conference as such. Trust you will take all the negatives and complaints with a grain of salt."*

*“This is one of the best conferences I have been to in years. It has given researchers, practitioners, policy makers and front line staff the opportunity to integrate the work and issues. Joining researchers and service providers is so important. Thank you to the organizing group.”*

*“I was disappointed to see notes community "scholars" criticizing the conference. This was a feat well accomplished. After 25 years on frontline work, to be a part of this conference was probably one of the most significant accomplishments in my life next to being a Christian. Thanks again.”*

## Conclusions and Recommendations

“The role of researchers is not only to develop knowledge they must become far more proficient at moving the knowledge from research to action, and, in the process, at linking up with a broad range of researchers and stakeholder-partners across the country.” - From Granting Council to Knowledge Council: Renewing the Social Sciences and Humanities in Canada. Volume 1

In bringing together over seven hundred people across Canada, this event represents a first step in moving forward an agenda of having research more directly inform decision making in the areas of public policy, The conference provided a national, interdisciplinary forum for sharing and collaboration between researchers, policy and program developers, people with experience of homelessness, and service providers, in order to explore the links between research and action, and to move towards effective long-term solutions in homelessness issues.

Over the past 15 years, homelessness in Canada has increased considerably. Cutbacks to the social safety net have made many more people vulnerable to homelessness. It has also made the challenge of getting off the streets that much harder for those who are already homeless. In the absence of a comprehensive, well-funded strategy to end homelessness that focuses both on prevention and pathways off the streets, service providers and different levels of government have struggled to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population of homeless and under housed people. Temporary shelters, drop-ins, nutrition programs, services for those with addictions or mental health challenges have developed all across the country. Policies and service models have been rapidly developing without access to information including research, best practices, and examples from elsewhere in the country. This ad hoc approach has

produced some clear successes across the country, but it is difficult to getting access to, and to share information. This has impeded the development of a systematic response to homelessness at the local, municipal, provincial and national levels.

The positive response to the conference (including the large numbers of papers submitted, high attendance at the conference and the views of delegates) all suggest a demand by service providers, researchers and government for more effective ways of bringing research to bear on their work.

The key purposes of the conference were to enhance knowledge exchange, to support the development of networks, and to make research more relevant to program and policy development. Although there was an emphasis on research, the objective was to figure out how research can support solutions to homelessness. Research can and should be seen as an important tool to address homelessness, and should have an impact on both policy and practice.

In evaluating this conference, then, the event itself is less important than how it fits into a longer term agenda. The conference should be seen as the first large scale attempt to mobilize knowledge to confront homelessness. Future efforts can build on this first experience, and as such, we are proposing recommendations. The recommendations are limited to a consideration of how to enhance the impact of research in the future.

## Recommendations

### Conference on Homelessness

1. That a homelessness conference be held every two years, with the goals of
  - a) increasing knowledge about effective ways to end and prevent homelessness,
  - b) networking amongst researchers, policy makers, people who are homeless and service providers,
  - c) identifying gaps in service provision and
  - d) developing a comprehensive strategy to address homelessness
2. That the Conference be held in different locations across Canada.



3. That Conference organizers bring together people from different sectors (research, government, service providers, people who are homeless).
4. That the Conference organizers develop an inclusion strategy that ensures that people who are (or have been) homeless are able to travel to, attend and fully participate in the planning and proceedings of the conference.
5. That the issues of aboriginal peoples be brought to bear on the planning and content of the conference.
6. That there be fewer sessions (papers presented) in future conferences.
7. That more opportunities to network are structured into the conference.
8. That funding from all levels of Government and from research granting agencies provide support for the conference to ensure accessibility for low income Canadians and small non-government organizations.

## Knowledge Exchange

1. That a National Association or Alliance be developed to facilitate the exchange of knowledge in the area of homelessness. Such an association would be responsible for organizing future conferences, enabling networking across the country and for strengthening links across sectors and disciplines.
2. That new tools and resources be developed by this association which will enhance knowledge exchange and make it easier for all stakeholders including researchers, service providers, government, advocates, students and people who are homeless to get access to current and past research.
3. That the Government of Canada fund such an association and its activities, and that regional governments provide support for local initiatives.
4. That such an association be national and cross-sectoral.
5. That the association's terms of reference contain policies to include the voices and experience of people who are or have been homeless and persons of aboriginal origin.