

CONTINUUM OF SUPPORTS FRAMEWORK AND APPROACH

In a March 29th 2001 presentation to Regional Council, the Commissioner of Housing and Property outlined the notion of the Continuum of Supports approach that framed the First Annual Report Card on Housing and Homelessness Initiatives. Peel's Continuum framework and approach was designed to ensure that all people experiencing homelessness have their needs met while their strengths are enhanced.

The Continuum of Supports, as outlined in Appendix 1, is a matrix. Its first function is to identify and assess a family or an individual's present state of homelessness within three Continuum categories: isolated, in transition or at risk. Before further explanation of the Continuum of Supports, there may be some value in explaining the nature of the three Continuum categories.

In the first category, people most isolated tend to exhibit socially isolated characteristics of those with high need and very low capacity. They tend to associate honest attempts of assistance with negatives based on previous failed attempts. These individuals tend to have behavioural characteristics that can result in their being banned from shelters. When banned, these people must be skilled at remaining invisible. They achieve this by "camping" in isolated areas or "sleep rough" in parks, under bridges and other hidden areas. They have minimal or no income and face barriers accessing basic needs. Years of labour intensive support is often required to increase capacity to the level that allows these individuals to live independently with minimal support services. Outreach services require patient long-term contact before trust is established.

Those in transition are truly at a crossroads. By building capacity at this point, efforts can be directed toward the first steps needed for the individual to accept responsibility and consequences. Those in transition at this stage can include those fleeing abusing relationships (women alone and with children and youth); people seeking shelter usage; those in supported accommodations such as rooming and boarding houses in social housing or community agency supported accommodations; or those living independently with minimal support services.

Failure to address their root causes of homelessness and failure to stabilize, enable, or mobilize at this stage can mean decline into an isolated state. Those in the transition category require "village" or supportive housing in order to have the time and space appropriate to effect change through treatment, guidance, advocacy, care and community development. This population can function in group environments and support can be short or long-term in nature. The focus of initiatives such as housing for families in transition and the youth village, as well as those housed in the Family Life Resource Centre, our shelters and the Rosetown, falls within this category. Income for food and shelter is an urgent need but it is recognized that simply accessing housing for this population is not sufficient to increase capacity, since the root causes of what had led or could lead to their homeless scenario have not been addressed.

And finally, in the third category, those at-risk tend to have the highest level of capacity and lowest level of needs. These citizens include individuals or households living in a stable housing situation, in control of their lives; however, circumstances (such as job loss, family breakdown, illness or inability to afford a rent increase) create a condition of vulnerability to homelessness. Unfortunately, this population is on the rise in Peel. This is the group increasingly faced with inadequate income to afford shelter and facing increased financial instability, creating stresses sometimes resulting in domestic violence, family breakdown and long-term health consequences, especially for children. Crisis intervention and prevention responses are clearly required, as are subsidized housing options.

The focus of the Continuum is to address root causes through building capacity, through applying the principles of stabilizing, enabling and mobilizing. This cannot be accomplished if the Continuum is program centred or policy dictated. There is a critical need for on-going assessment (self-assessment) and assessing the effectiveness of support services and programs. To effectively address needs, all approaches must work in an integrated and coordinated way.

We know some of those root causes of instability in Peel include community and family breakdown; the lack of affordable housing options; and inadequate income. Addressing root causes through SAM principles will assist staff and community partners with identifying needs. Addressing root causes through a capacity building focus will also ensure that expenditures are achieving real change.

A number of the root causes of homelessness are known to include government policies or can be addressed by government policy, such as landlord/tenant legislation; lack of a national housing strategy; lack of a comprehensive support strategy; and the need for senior levels of government to reform existing programs and work with municipalities in homelessness prevention initiatives. Each program and expenditure of public funding toward homeless initiatives must be assessed in light of capacity building principles. Failure to do so will result in continued short-term approaches. The focus of adopting the SAM approach is to reduce need and dependency. The SAM approach ties into the notion of a Continuum of Supports through the development of strategies for the delivery and coordination of homelessness related services and housing that is based on the diversity of those who are homeless or at-risk and meeting their individual needs.