



Best Practices *for* **Working with Homeless** **Immigrants and Refugees**

A Community-Based Action-Research Project

PHASE I: RESEARCH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Funded by the
**Supporting Communities
Partnership Initiative**
(SCPI)

MARCH 2003





Executive Summary

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Immigrants and refugees in Toronto, particularly refugee claimants, are at-risk for homelessness. As a result, increasing numbers of immigrants and refugees are requiring shelter, drop-in and other housing services. The needs of immigrants and refugees who have become homeless may be different than those who are Canadian-born. Newcomers may be adjusting to a new language and culture and may also face unique challenges with respect to employment, health and legal issues. However, most shelters and drop-ins are not mandated to meet the needs of immigrants and refugees who have become homeless. Most shelter and drop-in staff lack the time, skills or resources to effectively house and settle newcomers. Moreover, there have been few systemic attempts to develop shelter and drop-in services that are accessible, appropriate, and responsive to the needs of this population.

Best Practices for Working with Homeless Immigrants and Refugees is a community-based action-research project sponsored by Access Alliance Multicultural Community Health Centre and funded by the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI) with the following objectives:

- *Document* the experiences of adult immigrants and refugees who have used single men's and women's shelters and drop-ins (i.e. "visibly" homeless) in downtown Toronto.
- *Develop* best practices among shelter and drop-in staff for working with immigrants and refugees.
- *Facilitate* the linking of shelters/drop-ins with health, settlement, legal and community-based social services.

The specific goals of Phase I, the *research phase*, were to:

- *Interview* adult immigrants and refugees who have used single men's and women's shelters and drop-ins in downtown Toronto.
- *Interview* shelter and drop-in staff to identify the service needs of homeless immigrants and refugees.
- *Conduct focus groups* with staff from settlement agencies, community legal clinics and community health centres to identify ways to strengthen links with shelters and drop-ins.
- *Develop an analysis* of the rules and practices that inhibit access to services for homeless immigrants and refugees.
- *Develop recommendations* for increasing access and improving services.
- *Develop and disseminate* the research report "Best Practices for Working with Homeless Immigrants and Refugees."

This project and the work of Access Alliance Multicultural Community Health Centre is grounded in the Ottawa Charter on Health Promotion which states that the prerequisites for achieving health are peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable economic system, social justice and equity. Access Alliance believes in the fundamental right of people living in Canada to have access to adequate and affordable housing, as it is an essential component of their overall health and wellbeing.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed a community-based, qualitative methodology that included:

Steering Committee

- Homeless immigrants and refugees, shelter and drop-in staff, and staff from other community-based agencies who provided input on all aspects of the research methodology

Semi-Structured Interviews

- 30 adult homeless immigrants & refugees who have used single shelters and/or drop-ins
- 27 shelter and drop-in staff (front-line and managerial)

Focus Groups

- 19 representatives from settlement, community legal and community health sectors

Community Reference Groups

- 14 individuals (including community agency staff and immigrant and refugee shelter users) who provided feedback on the recommendations

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The research phase of the *Best Practices for Working with Homeless Immigrants and Refugees* project has generated 11 findings and 21 recommendations for addressing housing, homelessness and access to services for immigrants and refugees, and the needs of the service providers who work with them. The findings and recommendations are organized into eight themes: *socio-economic status, housing and homelessness, shelter and drop-in services, language, discrimination, coordination of services, training, and future research and funding.*

I was raised to be educated, to go to university, then finish from university and have a good job. But all those dreams are not there. I end up at the bottom staying with the homeless people, chronic alcoholics and people that are criminals.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

FINDING #1: Immigrants and refugees are at-risk for homelessness due to poverty, cuts to social programs, unrecognized employment and education credentials, delays in work permits, and mental illness.

Recommendation #1: With support from appropriate levels of government, community agencies should continue to address poverty, cuts to social programs, lack of recognition for foreign trained professionals and workers, delays in work permits, and mental health issues among homeless immigrants and refugees in Toronto and across Canada.

When I got pregnant I had nowhere to go. So I had to go into shelters. Then last year I had my own place, but then after the rent was expensive and I couldn't [pay my rent] I ended up back in the shelter.

HOUSING

FINDING #2: The current housing market in Toronto is inadequate for meeting the needs of immigrants and refugees.

Recommendation #2: Federal, provincial and municipal governments should work together to immediately implement a National Housing Strategy in Canada.

Recommendation #3: The federal and provincial governments should provide funds to the municipal government to develop affordable housing that is accessible to immigrants and refugees.

Recommendation #4: Not-for-profit housing providers should make a commitment to ensuring that immigrants and refugees have equitable access to all forms of not-for-profit housing.

We experienced trying to find a house...it is very difficult to find a house here in Toronto. The rents are very high and there are certain premises where the landlords are a little difficult.

Recommendation #5: Community-based agencies should continue to pressure the appropriate levels of government to amend the Tenant Protection Act (TPA) and reinstate rent control.

SHELTER AND DROP-IN SERVICES

FINDING #3: Despite the number and variety of shelters and drop-ins in Toronto, the needs of homeless immigrants and refugees are not consistently being met.

Recommendation #6: The federal, provincial and municipal governments should jointly increase funds to create new shelters and drop-ins, and to support existing shelters and drop-ins, to specifically meet the needs of immigrants and refugees in Toronto.

The role of shelters has changed, or the clientele has truly changed in the last four years. The number of newcomers going to shelters is just growing in leaps and bounds. From youth shelters to adult shelters, a population that was less than one percent is now at least 50 percent and higher. The workers are definitely not equipped to deal with them.

Recommendation #7: In coordination with shelters, Shelter, Housing and Support Division (SHS) should evaluate whether these shelters are meeting the specific needs of immigrants and refugees, particularly women.

FINDING #4: Many shelters and drop-ins are not accessible for immigrants and refugees due to uncomfortable environments and lack of culturally appropriate services.

Recommendation #8: Shelters and drop-ins should work together with Shelter, Housing and Support Division (SHS) and the Ontario Association of Hostels (OAH) to develop definitions of “culturally appropriate services” and to develop and share culturally appropriate service delivery models.

Recommendation #9: The provincial government should fund the Shelter, Housing and Support Division (SHS) and its constituent shelters to develop standards on the delivery of culturally appropriate services, and to ensure that these standards are rigorous and measurable.

What is the most challenging is still the language barrier. Not always can you ask for service so you have to wait until you can get some one, so that's tough

LANGUAGE

FINDING #5: Many shelters and drop-ins are not linguistically accessible to immigrants and refugees.

Recommendation #10: Shelters and drop-ins should work with Shelter, Housing and Support Division (SHS) to develop pilot programs to address the issue of language access in shelters.

Recommendation #11: The Shelter, Housing and Support Division (SHS) should build on existing guiding principles within Shelter Standards on linguistically appropriate services by developing standards on language.

Recommendation #12: The City of Toronto should ensure that all city-funded agencies and services (including shelters and drop-ins) have consistent access to funding for interpreter services to better meet the language needs of immigrants and refugees, and other clients, with limited or no English language skills.

Well I find it is very difficult. Because being on Welfare, or being homeless basically, you have no references, and most landlords don't like that. I tried to get a place one time and the landlord needed first and last, that's number one, I don't have that, and secondly, it's my colour, some landlord don't like that. I went to this lady and she said she has a problem with Black people. I say what, if you have problems with Black people, that's Black people. Black people are not all the same. But we have those kind of stereotype and the other problem is even once the landlord knows you are on Welfare, they have a problem accepting you.

DISCRIMINATION

FINDING #6: Immigrants and refugees may face barriers to accessing housing and services for the homeless due to discriminatory practices among some landlords and shelter and drop-in staff.

Recommendation #13: Community legal clinics and other community-based agencies should continue to raise awareness about discrimination in housing and other barriers to housing through education and advocacy with the public and various levels of government.

Recommendation #14: The Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative and other appropriate funding bodies should support research to study the rate and nature of evictions among immigrants and refugees in Toronto.

The staff, the ones who work in the shelters, they must be screened so that they don't end up being racist and discriminate other people. They should be screened.

Recommendation #15: Shelters and drop-ins should develop in-house anti-racism/anti-oppression policies that are delivered appropriately and monitored on an ongoing basis.

Recommendation #16: Shelter, Housing and Support Division (SHS) should evaluate the delivery of anti-racism/anti-oppression services to ensure that shelters and drop-ins meet existing standards.

COORDINATION OF SERVICES

FINDING #7: There is a lack of effective coordination of services among shelters and drop-ins and between these services and settlement organizations, community legal clinics and community health centres.

Recommendation #17: Settlement agencies and shelters and drop-ins should work with appropriate levels of government and other key stakeholders to develop systems and structures to improve coordination of services between sectors.

Much of the time there isn't enough communication between, for example, the shelter system and the settlement agencies nor among the settlement agencies themselves.

Well I think at all levels, whether it be staff, organization or sectoral, I think that there needs to be more education around why people come to Canada, and then what's available for people when they do come here and all depending on if they come sponsored or not sponsored, when sponsorship breaks down, that sort of thing.

TRAINING

FINDING #8: Shelter and drop-in staff require improved and up-to-date information on current immigration and refugee policy and how to complete refugee claimant forms.

Recommendation #18: Shelters and drop-ins and other community-based agencies should collaborate to increase the capacity of their respective organizations to plan and deliver training on diversity, immigration and refugee policy, and completing refugee claimant forms.

FINDING #9: Some shelter and drop-in staff require more knowledge on the culture, religion and history of immigrant and refugee groups.

Recommendation #19: Together with Shelter, Housing and Support Division (SHS), agencies that deliver training to shelters and drop-ins should evaluate whether their training on specific issues affecting immigrants and refugees (such as immigrant and refugee policy, cultural competence, anti-oppression/anti-racism, and completing refugee claimant forms) is reaching the agencies and individuals that need it most.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND FUNDING

FINDING #10: There is insufficient knowledge and information about the scale of visible and hidden homelessness among immigrants and refugees in Toronto among policy makers, academics, shelter/drop-in staff and other service providers. This knowledge gap hinders the development of broad policy and program initiatives that address homelessness among immigrants and refugees in a systemic manner.

Recommendation #20: The Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative and other appropriate funding bodies should support research to quantify the full extent of hidden and visible homelessness among immigrants and refugees in Toronto.

FINDING #11: Many of the findings and recommendations of the *Best Practices for Working with Homeless Immigrants and Refugees* project require actions that cannot be adequately addressed within the limited time and budgetary scope of the current SCPI fund. This project has identified key issues and challenges that require sustained effort and funding.

Recommendation #21: The federal, provincial and municipal governments, through programs such as the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative should make a commitment to the development of best practices for working with marginalized populations, such as immigrants and refugees, in future funding initiatives.

MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS OF RESEARCH

The contributions of the research for the *Best Practices for Working with Homeless Immigrants and Refugees* project lie in two key areas:

1. Provides scientific (evidence-based) verification of a number of key problems and solutions for which previous knowledge was either scattered and partial, or simply impressionistic and anecdotal.

This research brings together the experiences, stories and recommendations of adult immigrants and refugees who have used shelters and drop-ins (i.e. “visibly” homeless) in downtown Toronto, shelter and drop-in staff, and service providers in the settlement, community health and community legal sectors. Although this research focussed on a specific sub-set of the homeless population researchers, policy makers, and service providers are urged to consider how the findings, recommendations and actions are relevant to other homeless populations and other geographical contexts. The results of this study will hopefully shed light on problems, issues and potential solutions for other communities locally, provincially and nationally.

2. By linking findings with recommendations and subsequent proposals for action, provides a vital shift from identifying problems to generating solutions.

Homelessness has reached crisis proportions in Canada. To address this crisis, research on homelessness and housing should seek to bring about understanding as well as change. In this study, a community-based research approach was employed to directly inform the development and implementation of action strategies to address homelessness among immigrants and refugees in Toronto. As such, this study defends and promotes the application of community-based action-research on homelessness and housing to ensure that research questions, methodology and analysis are responsive to – and grounded in the realities of – participating communities.

FUTURE ACTIONS

A key purpose of the *Best Practices for Working with Homeless Immigrants and Refugees* project is to bridge the gap between research and action on the issue of homelessness. Using a community-based approach, the second phase of the project has involved the prioritization of recommendations by the Steering Committee. Steering Committee participants, including homeless immigrants and refugees and staff from community-based organizations, called for action in four key areas:

- linguistic accessibility of shelters and drop-ins
- delivery of culturally appropriate services in shelters and drop-ins
- coordination of services between settlement sector and shelters and drop-ins
- coordination of training on issues affecting homeless immigrants and refugees

To address these issues, Access Alliance Multicultural Community Health Centre will host a series of “roundtables” to develop pilot project ideas and build partnerships. The specific goals of the roundtables are:

- To bring together key agencies and individuals with an interest in the particular theme area.
- To build on key issues identified through the research and develop opportunities for action.
- To brainstorm pilot project ideas.
- To facilitate the building of partnerships to conduct projects.

To ensure that the roundtables reflect the broad range of expertise and interests of stakeholders the participants will include representatives from community-based organizations and various levels of government. It is hoped that the roundtables will generate systemic and sustainable solutions for the problem of homelessness among immigrants and refugees in Toronto and other Canadian urban centres. A roundtable report will be distributed to participants, key stakeholders, and interested individuals and agencies.



**BEST PRACTICES FOR WORKING
WITH HOMELESS IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES**

PROJECT PARTNERS:

**Fred Victor Centre
Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants
Sistering
St. Christopher House**

STEERING COMMITTEE

**Across Boundaries: Ethnoracial Mental Health Centre
Canadian Red Cross
Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation
Fife House
Flemingdon Community Legal Services
HIV/AIDS Legal Clinic of Ontario
Ontario AIDS Network
Red Door Shelter
Regent Park Community Health Centre
Ryerson University
Seaton House
Shout Clinic
Sojourn House
St. Christopher House
St. Stephen's Community House
York Community Services**

ACCESS ALLIANCE

MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTRE (AAMCHC)

is a community health centre serving immigrants and refugees across the City of Toronto.

340 College Street, Suite 500, Toronto, ON M5T 3A9

Telephone: 416 324 8677 Fax: 416 324 9074

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was sponsored by Access Alliance Multicultural Community Health Centre, supported by a partnership with Fred Victor Centre, Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, Sistering, St. Christopher House, and guided by a Steering Committee. The research was conducted by Sam Dunn (Project Coordinator) and Shahnaz Perveen (Research Assistant) and supervised by Sonja Nerad (Planning and Community Programs Manager) at Access Alliance. The project team thanks the Project Partners and Steering Committee members for their commitment and support. Most importantly, we are grateful to the many immigrants and refugees who shared their experiences and stories with the project team. The research could not have been carried out without their participation. We also thank the service providers who participated in the individual interviews, focus groups and community reference groups.

Funding for this project is provided by the Government of Canada's Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative. Funds provided by the Government of Canada are matched by contributions from partners including the Province of Ontario, the City of Toronto and by private and voluntary organizations.

This report does not necessarily reflect the views of the funders of this project.

Access Alliance and the project partners would like to thank the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative for its funding support.