Making Research Matter

A Progress Report on Calgary's
Research Agenda to End Homelessness

May 2011

Calgary
Homeless
Foundation

Acknowledgements

Recognition is given to the important work of academic researchers, community-based organizations and government bodies. All had a common goal of gaining a clearer understanding of the issues, experiences and solutions needed to end homelessness in our communities.

Thanks are extended to Calgary's community of people experiencing homelessness for their continued feedback, advice and expertise.

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Executive Summary

Calgary's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness (10 Year Plan) was launched in 2007 by Calgary's Committee to End Homelessness and in January of 2008, the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF) was chosen to lead its oversight and implementation. There were several key strategies in the original plan, including a strategy specific to data and research. To improve data and systems knowledge the CHF, in consultation with academic and community researchers, engaged in the first Calgary Homelessness Research Symposium to develop a three-year research agenda in 2009.

The 10 Year Plan was assessed and updated in 2010 to reflect what was learned from research and interventions during the first three years of implementation. In the updated plan, data and evidence-based knowledge are seen as critical to informing the advancement of the 10 Year Plan over the next seven years, to reform and improve mainstream systems, and to guide and measure progress.

In 2010, the CHF began further consultation with local researchers, in part through the second Homelessness Research Symposium. More than 75 local researchers, academics, service providers and government representatives were in attendance. Their input and feedback were instrumental in updating the original research agenda and in aligning future research priorities with the goals and strategies of the updated 10 Year Plan.

Since 2008, collaborative efforts have built a strong and rigorous foundation to advance the implementation of the 10 Year Plan in an evidence-based manner and to enhance our community's understanding about homelessness and the interventions necessary to end it. The dissemination of this research has built awareness, strengthened networks and deepened our efforts.

Work to date shows:

- Significant progress has been made in the priority research areas of Ecology of Homelessness and Tailoring Interventions.
- There is a rich body of research emerging locally, nationally and internationally that advances our understandings and informs our decisions.
- The priority directions that guided the original research agenda remain relevant, though specific projects have been updated.
- Current and future research should prioritize our community's most vulnerable people including, chronically homeless, Aboriginal peoples, youth, women and families experiencing or at risk of homelessness.
- Continued collaboration and knowledge dissemination is key to building on the existing momentum and continuing efforts to end homelessness.

This document presents an update to the 2008 Research Agenda to summarize progress over the past two years, to reflect what has been learned, and to highlight changing priorities.

For a copy of the original Research Agenda that includes symposium input, visit the Calgary Homelessness Research network, the Homeless Hub at: http://homelesshub.net/network/chf

Background

The vision of the 10 Year Plan is that by the January 2018 all people facing homelessness in Calgary will have access to safe, decent and affordable housing as well as the resources and supports necessary to sustain that housing.

Four key strategies underlie Calgary's updated 10 Year Plan:

1. **Prevention and Rehousing**	Develop a system of care that ensures Calgarians at risk of or experiencing homelessness have the necessary supports to achieve and maintain housing stability
2. **Housing**	Ensure adequate affordable housing, supportive housing, and treatment capacity
3. **Data & Research**	Improve our data and systems knowledge.
4. **Non-Profit Sector**	Reinforce non-profit organizations serving Calgarians experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Research is recognized as its own strategy, but it is also a critical and core component across strategies. An evidence-based understanding of the issues and best practices is necessary to effectively establish and strengthen our service and policy responses. Moving the research into action is a primary goal of Calgary's Research Agenda.

The 2008 Symposium, attended by 50 local academic and community researchers, was a catalyst event for the formation of guiding principles for the research agenda and for development of a local Homelessness Research Network. The network was created to provide an essential and effective vehicle for bringing researchers together across sectors and to unite and strengthen efforts around the implementation of the Research Agenda. In collaboration with the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN), Calgary's research network was officially launched during the Canadian Homelessness Conference in February of 2009. This network represents the first local online research network to be launched under the umbrella of the national homelessness research clearing house, The Homeless Hub is an initiative funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

Mobilizing Calgary's research community around a shared agenda in support of the 10 Year Plan is fundamental to its success. Calgary's Homelessness Research Network is a critical vehicle for enhancing our capacity to connect, coordinate and collaborate around this effort and to ensure homelessness research across Canada covers a broad range of methodologies and multidisciplinary approaches. As well, launching the research network in partnership with CHRN has been instrumental in the development of the Alberta Homelessness Research Consortium and links to other national and international researchers and networks.

Collaboration, knowledge exchange, public engagement, research rigor and capacity building were core principles emphasized by participants at the 2008 Symposium. Calgary's Research Network provides a tool to build capacity across all of these areas.

Snapshot Status Report – 2008 Research Agenda

In response to the 2008 research agenda, the CHF engaged in a number of research and knowledge mobilization projects, formed partnerships with researchers in Calgary, across Canada and internationally, put forward calls for proposals from the research community, and generated efforts to establish funding in support of research addressing the three priority research directions.

As a result of these efforts, the CHF has been able to follow through on many of the goals and strategies indentified in 2008-2009. The list below highlights progress against research priorities.

✓ = completed

🟢 = ongoing

3 Year Priority Research Directions	Critical Research Areas	Status report	
1. **Ecology of Homelessness** (or population enumeration and composition)	A. Establish a Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) to capture real-time data on numbers of homeless persons, basic demographics, services accessed, outcomes and system capacity.	✓	
	B. Assess the pathways in/out of homelessness, as well as assets which prevent/reduce homelessness.	✓	
	C. Determine methods of assessing data over time, to monitor overall trends of homelessness and associative factors contributing to it.	✓	🟢
2. **Tailoring Interventions** (or implementing best results through the evaluation loop)	A. Identify services, programs, and policy responses for different subgroups of the homeless population.	✓	🟢
	B. Determine methods of evaluating programs and policy responses.	✓	
	C. Assess the role of social supports in contributing to preventing homelessness.	✓	
	D. Explore the relationship of mainstream social service systems in pathways in/out of homelessness.	🟢	
3. **System Co-ordination & Capacity** (or system barriers and facilitators)	A. Identify issues facing agencies serving the homeless.	🟢	
	B. Assess flows through current housing stock and current levels of co-ordination among homeless serving agencies.	🟢	
	C. Identify regulatory mechanisms to develop and maintain affordable housing.	✓	
	D. Establish "promising practices" for program and systems evaluation in ending homelessness.	✓	

Advancing the Agenda – What We Have Learned

Since 2008, a number of important research projects have been completed in Calgary and across Canada. The CHF led, partnered and supported several of these. In addition, groups including The City of Calgary, the University of Calgary, Mount Royal University and community-based organizations completed research in the area of housing and homelessness. National, often pan-Canadian, projects and partnerships led to a breadth of current information about the state of homelessness in Canada. This work aligns with the identified key priorities in Calgary's Research Agenda and 10 Year Plan.

Specifically, these projects have led to:
- clarity of demographics (age, gender, cultural background, history of homelessness),
- the social and economic costs of homelessness,
- patterns of homelessness (chronic episodic and transitional),
- risks and protective factors (individual and systemic),
- best practices for interventions, and
- health and housing needs of homeless and vulnerably housed people.

Based on this work, we also identified gaps in need of further research, such as:
- priority sub-populations,
- means of reducing service barriers,
- impacts of public policy on homelessness,
- defining best and promising practices,
- improving system collaborations,
- effective homelessness prevention, and
- rigorous and coordinated evaluation efforts.

Support for a sector-wide Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) for enhanced data collection to influence decision making and interventions also was re-affirmed.

For a more comprehensive description of the research projects across Calgary, including the work of the CHF and partners in the public, non-profit and academic sectors, please visit the Calgary Homeless hub website at: http://homelesshub.net/network/chf

Calgary Homeless Foundation's Contributions

Since 2008, the CHF has been involved in collaborations across three main fronts.

Addressing research priorities

- Implementing an HMIS to streamline access to services, data and reporting.
- Gathering and analyzing data through the Rehousing Triage & Assessment Survey, with a focus on vulnerability to prioritize for intervention.
- Facilitating the development of Homelessness Risk/Asset Assessment to identify those at risk of homelessness and suitable for prevention intervention.
- Launching Case Management Standards to ensure standards of excellence in service provision.

- Collaborating with local and national experts on the development of federal tax incentives to increase affordable housing stock.

- Analyzing the health and vulnerability of rough sleepers (those sleeping outside) and homeless adults, as well as patterns of homelessness in collaboration with local academics.

- Liaising with community and academic researchers who developed and are implementing a research agenda specific to Aboriginal homelessness.

- Advancing national research through collaboration on pandemic planning and homelessness, quality of life for homeless and vulnerably housed, immigration and homelessness in Alberta, and contextualizing informal employment.

Creating opportunities for research transfer and knowledge mobilization

- Developing partnerships with the University of Calgary's School of Public Policy, Canadian Homelessness Research Network and Reach3 on national research projects on homelessness and forming international links with European, Australian, and U.S. partners.

- Developing and maintaining an online Calgary Homelessness Research Network, and contributing to the Homeless Hub.

- Holding annual policy roundtables on priority public policy issues, including increasing affordable rental stock and international income support policy.

- Making more than 10 policy submissions to the federal and provincial governments.

- Sharing information through more than 15 conference presentations and keynote addresses, and hosting two research symposiums and five other events to highlight current local, national and international research.

Promoting a common research agenda

- Participating in provincial efforts to mobilize research to end homelessness through the Alberta Homelessness Research Consortium, and in federal work on a Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Research and the Canadian Homelessness Research Network.

- Facilitating local research transfer and agenda-setting through two research symposiums and five community events focused on what has been learned through research.

- Partnering on two national research projects.

- Collaborating with the community to support sector-based research priorities.

Updating the Research Agenda to End Homelessness

A number of key recommendations for action were captured from group deliberations, including the 2010 CHF Research Symposium, information from the CHF 2010 Community Summit, analysis of local, national and international research, ongoing feedback from service providers, people in Calgary experiencing homelessness and the updated 10 Year Plan to enhance development of an updated Research Agenda.

1. Determine redundancies and gaps in programming, and facilitate collaboration within and across agencies and services.

2. Determine best practices based on evidence and evaluation, using a broader definition of research, a wide range of methodologies, and community-based approaches involving clients, service providers and the public.

3. Determine best practices related to knowledge transfer and the dissemination of information for maximum advocacy and uptake.

4. Address the need for more client-centered services, and more flexibility within these services.

5. Implement the Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) to provide a central database related to homelessness in Calgary, and to capture and retrieve data for both research and intervention purposes.

6. Enhance the Research Network in support of the Research Agenda. To strengthen and deepen the Network's capacity, next steps should focus on relevancy, increased participation, and opportunities to engage more broadly and more interactively.

7. Specifically include research on the unique pathways, needs and interventions for priority sub-populations, notably, Aboriginal people, women, families, and youth. Support for community research projects should be led by agencies and include the Community Action Committee.

8. Enhance collaboration with other local, national and international research groups and networks. For example, The University of Calgary, The City of Calgary, the Alberta Homelessness Research Consortium, the Canadian Homelessness Research Network, Reach3, the National Housing Research Committee, The National Alliance to End Homelessness, European Observatory on Homelessness and Heriot-Watt University.

9. Focus research on best practices for homelessness prevention, including discharge processes from health and correctional facilities, mapping high-risk communities, effective models for rent supplements and income support and government disability benefits.

10. Engage community in a point-in-time count of rough sleepers to inform and support their unique needs.

11. Conduct a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of Housing First programs as compared with emergency responses to homelessness.

12. Strategically and collaboratively mobilize evidence-based research findings into program, policy and system changes.

For 2010 Homelessness research symposium proceedings, visit the Calgary Homeless Hub website at: http://homelesshub.net/network/chf

Supporting Local Research

The CHF acknowledges the variety of academic and community based research happening locally. In addition, CHF acknowledges the development and implementation of community-based, collaborative research agendas in the areas of Aboriginal homelessness, women and family homelessness and youth homelessness. CHF is committed to working in partnership with these groups for the purposes of shared data, knowledge dissemination and policy and practice advancements. For examples of community-based research agendas, visit the Homeless Hub website at: http://homelesshub.net/network/chf

The Updated Research Agenda

The Priority Research Directions underlying the original Three Year Research Agenda are acknowledged as still relevant. To supplement the ongoing research efforts originally identified in the original Research Agenda, a number of key recommendations for action and next steps are captured below. The specific role that CHF plays in each of the actions will vary depending on the work of other researchers but priority will be given to collaboration, dissemination and evidence-based policy/practice advancements.

Priority Research Direction	Recommendations for Action	10 Year plan implementation Strategy
1. **Ecology of Homelessness** (or population enumeration and composition)	1.a. Continue the implementation of a Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) to capture real-time data on numbers of homeless persons, basic demographics, services accessed, outcomes and system capacity. Support the use and interpretation of data longitudinally across Calgary community of care.	Strategy 3: Data & Research Strategy 1: Prevention & Rehousing
	1.b. Assess the existing evidence regarding the circumstances that lead to patterns of youth, women, and family homelessness, particularly chronic homelessness.	Strategy 4: Non-Profit Sector
	1.c. Determine methods of assessing data about hidden homelessness over time, to monitor overall trends of and associative factors contributing to it.	Strategy 1: Prevention & Rehousing
	1.d. Develop an enhanced understanding of Aboriginal people's homelessness experience and its public policy implications.	Strategy 1: Prevention & Rehousing
	1.e. Conduct a point-in time count of rough sleepers to assess need and adequate response.	Strategy 1: Prevention & Rehousing
	1.f. Examine labour dynamics in homeless populations; analyze the sub-population that is employed or has a history of employment in informal/low income work.	Strategy 1: Prevention & Rehousing
2. **Tailoring Interventions** (or implementing best results through the evaluation loop)	2.a. Based on review of the existing evidence, identify services, programs, and policy responses for different priority sub-groups of the homeless population: chronic and episodically homeless, women, Aboriginal, families, and youth using HMIS.	Strategy 1: Prevention & Rehousing
	2.b. Implement a consistent framework for evaluation based on best practices for interventions over time leveraging HMIS.	Strategy 3: Data & Research

	2.c.	Assess the role of such social supports as income assistance or short-term rental assistance and prevention services in contributing to preclude homelessness; and determine means of evaluating these relationships, and of sustaining this evaluation, longitudinally.	Strategy 1: Prevention & Rehousing
	2.d.	Explore the relationship of mainstream social service systems, including child intervention services, corrections and mental health in pathways in/out of homelessness; and determine means of evaluating these relationships, and of sustaining this evaluation, longitudinally.	Strategy 1: Prevention & Rehousing
	2.e.	Identify means of determining best housing interventions for priority sub-populations and means of evaluating these over time.	Strategy 2: Housing
	2.f.	Assess the role of transitional housing and emergency shelters to determine best impact in ending homelessness.	Strategy 2: Housing
	2.g.	Assess the cost effectiveness of Housing First interventions.	Strategy 1: Prevention & Rehousing
3. **System Co-ordination and Capacity** (or system barriers and facilitators)	3.a.	Identify capacity issues facing agencies serving the homeless, actions needed to shift towards ending homelessness, and determine sustained means of evaluating these issues.	Strategy 1: Prevention & Rehousing
	3.b.	Assess flows through current non-market housing stock, current levels of co-ordination among homeless serving agencies, and how these processes can be evaluated longitudinally.	Strategy 4: Non-Profit Sector
	3.c.	Identify regulatory mechanisms to increase and maintain the supply of affordable housing.	Strategy 2: Housing
	3.d.	Establish "promising practices" for program and systems evaluation in ending homelessness program types and determine means of evaluating these practices, and of sustaining this evaluation over time.	Strategy 4: Non-Profit Sector
	3.e.	Enhance knowledge transfer efforts by supporting the development and implementation of sector-based research agendas and feedback loops in non-profit and public sectors.	Strategy 3: Data & Research
	3.f.	Indentify standards of care across program types in Calgary's community of care including: outreach, shelters, transitional and permanent supportive housing, affordable housing, and rapid rehousing and prevention services.	Strategy 4: Non-Profit Sector Strategy 1: Prevention & Rehousing

Immediate Priorities

Although the above strategies are prioritized for the next three years, immediate priority will be given in three key areas.

Homelessness Management information System (HMIS)

Implementation of a city-wide database specifically to reduce systems barriers, improve service interventions and evaluation, as well as understand the needs of Calgary's homeless community is a critical asset for both research and practice.

The HMIS system is the information technology backbone of the homeless-serving system. It will provide real-time data on the length of time people are homeless, their needs, causes of homelessness, interactions with the homeless-serving system and the effectiveness of interventions. By improving the quality and availability of information, the HMIS will make access to and coordination of services to those at risk of or experiencing homelessness easier and more effective.

Real-time and longitudinal data from HMIS can be interpreted and used strategically. Homeless serving agencies will be able to analyze, report and respond to this data while maintaining client privacy and confidentiality. Additionally, community-based and academic researchers can access the data for research in the future. An advisory committee of community-based agency representatives created a Reporting Committee to develop standardized processes for reporting and research using HMIS data.

Alberta Housing and Urban Affairs were and will continue to be involved in the HMIS system to ensure compliance with provincial privacy legislation, and adherence to rigorous policies and procedures regarding acceptable collection and use of client information, program information and reporting of data.

Initiate Priority Research Projects

Keeping the issue of homelessness and evidence-based solutions for addressing it at the forefront for policy makers, service providers and the public is recognized as an immediate and ongoing priority. While it is beyond the scope of this document to summarize all of the research happening on homelessness, there are commonalties emerging that help guide efforts to influence decision makers and build public awareness.

- Conduct cost analysis of program spending in relation to societal benefits and public sector savings across program types.
- Examine labour dynamics and migration in homeless populations; analysis of sub-population that is employed in informal/low income work and transient.
- Sweep of rough sleepers in Calgary and inclusion in HMIS, followed by prioritization and intervention matching.
- Conduct research on Aboriginal reserve – urban dynamics and homelessness and policy/systematic barriers to housing stability.
- Review literature on family acuity and intervention matching.
- Research outreach program standards.
- Examine the effectiveness of rent supplements in preventing homelessness.

- Review literature to understand why some youth become chronically and episodically homeless (detailed characteristics / circumstances) and practice interventions

- Conduct prevalence of homelessness study (national/international); cross-country policy regime analysis in relation to homelessness.

- Partner with Global South to learn from international development.

Strengthen Calgary's Homelessness Research Network

Strategies to enhance the development of Calgary's research network and strengthen its capacity as a vehicle for generating research, exchanging knowledge, promoting collaboration, and fostering innovation and research excellence are critical to reducing redundancies and building on best practices.

The Calgary network has more than 180 members comprised of academic investigators, public sector policy makers, leaders of community-based organizations, private sector consultants, and students. Member expertise spans diverse disciplines including anthropology, architecture, economics, engineering, environmental design, epidemiology, geography, health economics, health services, justice studies, medicine, nursing, planning, psychology, public health, public policy, social work, sociology, and urban studies. See www.homelesshub.net/network/chf.

The Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness (Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs) began work to expand Calgary's research network and research agenda model province-wide. A provincial academic community was recently established to explore this further. As well, expansion of the network to include service providers is underway to reduce barriers from research to practice.

Conclusion

The Three Year Research Agenda was developed and initiated at the first Homelessness Research Symposium. Since then, the CHF led, partnered, or supported a number of collaborations to address research priorities and create opportunities for research transfer.

Plans for the initiation of a Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) are well underway, and Calgary's Homelessness Research Network is up and running in partnership with the Canadian Homelessness Research Network.

Research efforts are critically important to the successful realization of Calgary's 10 Year Plan. Its success is directly proportional to its usefulness as a living document and the Research Agenda must continuously and collectively be revisited to evolve and adapt as new information is generated and community needs change.

A successful realization of an end to homelessness depends on our ability to broaden awareness and understanding of the issues. By enhancing strong collaborative partnerships with local, national and international researchers and by sharing and disseminating knowledge effectively, services and programs can improve, and policy makers, the media and the public can be engaged in the fight against homelessness.

The research done to date validates the community's priorities and informed interventions and influenced policy. The 10 Year Plan and the Research Agenda will continue to evolve as new knowledge is gained on homelessness and as community needs change.

The CHF would like to extend a special thank you to researchers and research partners who guide, lead, collaborate and support its research work.

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Calgary Homeless Foundation
Calgary Police Services
Canadian Homelessness Research Network
Canadian Mental Health Association
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Centre for Northern Families
City of Calgary
City of Red Deer
Community Action Committee
CUPS Downtown Outreach Addictions Partnership
Discovery House Family Violence Prevention Society
Drop-In Centre
Eva's Initiatives
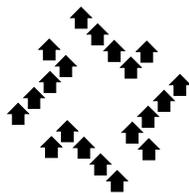Fresh Start Recovery Centre
Homeless Awareness Calgary

Homeward Trust
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Living Homeless: Our Write to Speak
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Salvation Army
Servants Anonymous
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