

Research project gets mentally ill Canadians off the streets

BY LAURA STONE, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE NOVEMBER 23, 2009



A homeless man sleeps in the Harrington Hall homeless shelter in Cranston, Rhode Island November 18, 2009

Photograph by: Brian Snyder , Reuters

Sandra Dawson woke up one morning with a bright idea.

She would quit her job as a video editor in Vancouver, take all her money out of the bank and move to Seattle. There, she would have a revelation.

It didn't happen.

Penniless, Dawson moved back after a few days to her mother's basement — another manic episode that shook her once stable life.

For 11 years, from age 26 to 37, Dawson went through bouts of homelessness, sleeping on couches, in shelters, rooming houses and single-room occupancy hotels. She has been hospitalized more than 35 times in three provinces. She has attempted suicide.

Now 42, Dawson takes medication for bipolar and obsessive-compulsive disorders, does volunteer

work and has a part-time job. But in her past, she was one of as many as 150,000 homeless Canadians estimated to suffer from mental health problems, such as schizophrenia, depression, addiction and post-traumatic stress disorder.

“Homelessness feels like you’re constantly about to die,” said Dawson, who lives in North Vancouver.

“When you don’t have a home, you’re always operating in survival-crisis mode. And you’re just thinking about your basic safety, and your basic next meal, and there’s just no time, no luxury, to work on anything else.”

A new national research project in five Canadian cities hopes to address what researchers call the “national crisis” of as many as 300,000 homeless people in Canada.

It is the first experiment of its kind in Canada to use a “housing first” approach, mirrored after a project pioneered in New York City, which advocates say has achieved a 90 per cent success rate.

The approach states that in order to offer services to homeless people with mental health problems, their most basic housing needs must first be met.

“Typically, people who are mentally ill and on the street are some of the most difficult to engage in services and get off the street,” said Jayne Barker, director of the At Home/Chez Soi project, which is run by the non-profit Mental Health Commission of Canada.

“The idea behind housing services is to provide people with a safe place to live, and then offer choice about how they want to deal with their addiction and mental health problems.”

The project, which officially began this month, will run until 2013. In 2008, the federal government allocated \$110 million to the mental health commission to conduct the five-year research, with 85 per cent of funds going toward housing and support services.

A total of 2,285 mentally ill homeless people in five cities — Vancouver, Winnipeg, Montreal, Toronto and Moncton — have volunteered for research.

To make a comparison, slightly more than half of the volunteers — 1,325 people — will be given their own housing as well as access to social services. The remainder will be only be offered the services. Researchers hope the results will show the effectiveness of stable housing, and what type of services would work best to help reduce homelessness in Canada.

Homeless people who are given housing must pay about 30 per cent of the rent, which typically comes from social assistance or disability checks, Barker said. They will also be visited by a staff member at least once a week who will encourage them to make use of health and support services.

Many homeless people living with mental illness are denied social housing because there are

stipulations to getting in, such as being in treatment or on medication, Barker said. Shelter living is less stable, she said.

For her part, Dawson said she's been able to work out many of her problems through volunteering and treatment. She'll also be working on an advisory committee for the At Home/Chez Soi project.

"But I couldn't have done any of it without somewhere to live," she said.

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