



Mental Health Commission of Canada Launches National Research Project to Find Sustainable Solutions for People With Mental Health Issues Who Are Homeless

Study will investigate 'Housing First' approach

TORONTO, November 23, 2009 – The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) has implemented a ground-breaking national research project in five cities to find the best way to provide housing and services to people who are living with mental illness and homelessness. Using a 'Housing First' approach, the research project focuses on first providing people who are homeless with a place to live, and then the other assistance and services they require. The goal is to see if this approach is better than traditional 'care as usual.'

A total of 2,285 people who are homeless and living with a mental illness will participate in the study. Of these, 1,325 participants in the research project will be given a place to live and offered a range of housing, health and social support services over the course of the research initiative. These supports include help with maintaining a home, undertaking routine tasks like shopping or getting to a doctor's appointment or securing opportunities for education, volunteering and employment. The rest of the participants will receive the services that are currently available in the five test sites. Both groups will be compared to see which approach works best.

"The study will produce evidence on whether providing a place, plus services, will better support reintegration into functional, meaningful living," said Dr. Jayne Barker, Director, At Home/Chez Soi Project. "Another research question is cost. Will it cost less to house and provide services than it would if these marginalized individuals were in hospitals, prisons and shelters?" said Dr. Paula Goering, Research Lead, At Home/Chez Soi Project.

The At Home/ Chez Soi project is the largest of its kind in Canada. The research will help make Canada a world leader in providing better services to people living with homelessness and mental illness. Each test site will focus on a specific target population within the overall study group.

Toronto's project will provide specialized services for people from diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds. Moncton will examine the shortages of services for Anglophones and Francophones, and Montreal will focus on the outcomes related to social housing, as well as helping people to return to the workplace. In Winnipeg, the needs of urban Aboriginal people will be highlighted, while Vancouver's project is aimed at people with addictions and substance abuse problems.

The MHCC is working closely with many partners on this project, including provincial and municipal levels of government, researchers, many local service providers and individuals who have experienced homelessness and mental illness. "This research initiative is meant to represent a significant step forward in understanding and reducing the incidence of homelessness in Canada," said the Honourable Michael Kirby, Chair of the MHCC.

In Toronto, services will be provided in eight different languages and approximately 57 per cent of the participants will come from immigrant and ethno-racial groups. 300 participants in the Toronto research group will get housing units within a number of different locations across the city, including apartments, where they can stay for the duration of the project.

Participants in the *Housing First* model will have to pay a portion of their rent, will meet with program staff once a week, and will be encouraged to make use of the support services. 260 participants in the non-*Housing First* group will meet with an interviewer every three months.

A unique focus of the Toronto project will be the development and evaluation of a *Housing First* ethno-racial intensive case management model for people who are homeless from different ethno-racial groups. One hundred participants will be served by this innovative program, and will have access to holistic, culturally appropriate and linguistically competent services and supports.

Key partners in the Toronto demonstration project include: the Government of Canada, COTA Health, Across Boundaries, the Centre for Research on Inner City Health – St. Michael's Hospital, Toronto North Support Services, the City of Toronto, and Housing Connections.

"A recent survey found more than 5,000 people are homeless each night in the City of Toronto. Our hope is that this project will help us find best practices and long-term solutions for all people in this city with homelessness and mental health issues, as well as Canadians in similar circumstances in communities right across the country," said Faye More, Toronto Site Coordinator.

Previous related research suggests that the provision of housing and support services may be effective. For example, a joint report by Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia and the University of Calgary found each person who is homeless in B.C. costs taxpayers \$55,000 a year in health, corrections and social services. The report concluded that if housing and support were offered to these people, it would cost the system much less -- \$37,000 a year -- a savings of \$18,000, or 33 per cent per person per year. According to Corrections Canada, the cost of incarceration in a federal prison averages \$90,000 per year, per inmate.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada is a non-profit organization created to focus national attention on mental health issues and to work to improve the health and social outcomes of people living with mental illness. In February 2008, the federal government allocated \$110 million to the MHCC to find ways to help the growing number of people who are homeless and have a mental illness. Updates on the study will be posted on the MHCC website at www.mentalhealthcommission.ca.