



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

Vancouver demonstration project will investigate possible benefits of 'Housing First' approach for individuals who are mentally ill and also abuse substances

VANCOUVER, November 23, 2009 – Vancouver is one of five cities selected by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) for implementation of its ground-breaking national research project 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 with a place to live, then offering other assistance and services they require. The goal is to learn if people with mental illness who also have substance abuse problems can benefit from this kind of approach.

Up to 500 people who are homeless with a mental illness living in Vancouver will be among the 2,285 participants in the national study. Of these, as many as 300 local participants in the research group will be given a place to live and offered a range of support services – such as help with shopping or getting to a doctor's appointment – to help them over the course of the study. The rest of the participants will receive the services currently available in the five test sites. Both groups will be compared to see which method works best.

"It is very difficult, if not impossible, to deal with mental illness and addiction when homeless. Housing provides stability. With housing, many people can reach a degree of recovery and they may eventually return to work or reunite with their families," said Catherine Hume, Vancouver Project Site Coordinator.

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

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

The MHCC is working with many partners on this project, including provincial and municipal levels of government, researchers, many local service providers, as well as 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.

Two hundred participants in Vancouver will receive apartments in a variety of neighbourhoods. In addition, 100 people will be housed in a single site location in the downtown core. All individuals will have access to support and service teams

that will provide mental health treatment services, assist with routine tasks like shopping and attending appointments, identifying volunteer and employment opportunities, addressing addiction issues and facilitating family reunification where possible. Individuals in the intervention groups will have to pay a portion of their rent and meet with program staff at least once a week. *Non-Housing First* research participants will meet with an interviewer regularly.

Key partners in the Vancouver demonstration project include: the Government of Canada, the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, RainCity Housing and Support Society, Coast Mental Health Foundation, the MPA Society, the Portland Hotel Society, Providence Health Care, the BC Ministry of Health, Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, BC Housing, the City of Vancouver, the Vancouver Foundation, the Streethome Foundation, the BC Ministry of Housing and Social Development, and the Vancouver Police Department.

“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.

In Vancouver, the city’s homeless population doubled between 2002 and 2005. From 2005 to 2008 it increased by another 20 per cent to 1,600 people. Vancouver’s *Homeless Action Plan* estimates that at least one-third of those people suffer from mental health issues and two-thirds have addictions.

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 this population, 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