ALBERTA MAKES STRIDES AGAINST HOMELESSNESS

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By Gillian Steward , the star.com , 14 August 2012

Between 1994 and 2006, Calgary had the fastest growing number of homeless men, women and
children in Canada. There were plenty of new condo towers but there wasn't enough housing for
many of the people who laboured to build those glass palaces.

Today it's a different story. Calgary's 10-year-plan to end homelessness is showing results and has
become a model for other Canadian cities. So much so, that Tim Richter, the CEO of the Calgary
Homeless Foundation (CHF), is moving on to head up the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, a
collaboration of several interest groups designed to mobilize communities across the country to
develop their own ten-year plans.

"This kind of plan can work in any community," says Richter, who has seen the Calgary plan house
about 4,000 people since 2008.

Michael Shapcott agrees. "There's no question that Alberta is the leader in this field, it has shown that
these kinds of plans can produce results," says Shapcott, who is director of housing and innovation
at Toronto's Wellesley Institute, one of the founding partners of the new national organization, which
is funded with a three-year grant from the Suncor Energy Foundation.

"Alberta stands out because of what it has done but also because of what is not being done
elsewhere," Shapcott said during an interview.

It would be easy to assume that Alberta could succeed at curbing homelessness because it has
more money to throw at the problem. But Richter says there's much to it than that.

The key in Calgary was the leadership provided by people in both the private and non-profit sector
as well as local government. CEOs from corporations such as Suncor, Carma Developers and
TransAlta banded together with heads of agencies such as the United Way and the Calgary Urban
Aboriginal Initiative to develop a plan that was not just pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking but one that
included operational details about how the plan would be implemented.

They then took the Calgary plan to other cities in Alberta so they could use it as a model. When each city had a plan they went to the provincial government as a united front.

Premier Ed Stelmach was so impressed that he bought in with multi-million-dollar commitments even though the recession had taken a big bite out of provincial revenue.

Richter was eventually seconded from TransAlta (which provides electricity for much of the province) to head up CHF and oversee implementation of the plan. His former boss, Steve Snyder, CEO of TransAlta, had been one of the first business leaders to get on the bandwagon.

"His office overlooked the Mustard Seed," says Richter. "He saw people lining up for food and shelter every day and he decided it just wasn't right, something had to be done."

It's usually difficult to get hard-nosed CEOs and frustrated directors of non-profits to agree on how to proceed. But in this case, says Richter, the goals of both could be met.

"Our plan appealed to people on the left who see the issue as a one of social justice. But it also appealed to the business sector because it was about a more efficient use of public money."

That's because it was clear that homeless people are much more likely to end up in ambulances, hospitals, courtrooms, jails and shelters. All of these public services are expensive and homeless people were cycling through them yet still didn't have a home to call their own.

In the end, the Calgary group was convinced that it would be less expensive to provide housing than to keep providing the public services that many homeless people constantly use.

And indeed a recent survey undertaken by CHF of 270 formerly homeless people who have been housed for over a year found that hospital ER visits were down by 50 per cent, interactions with police by 60 per cent, and days in jail by 49 per cent.

There's still a lot to be done if Calgary is to achieve all the goals of its 10-year-plan. But the number of homeless is going down for the first time in more than a decade. People with addiction and mental health problems are being housed with supports in place to sustain them. More affordable housing is available for people with low wages.

"We're hoping that we can show other cities that there is a way out . . . and that everyone benefits when people are properly housed," says Richter.

Here's hoping he's succeeds as well as he did in Calgary.

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