

## Temporary Supportive Housing for Aboriginal People and Their Families

### INTRODUCTION

This study examined temporary supportive accommodations related to accessing medical care, education and other vital services for Aboriginal people in four north western Ontario centres: Fort Frances, Kenora, Sioux Lookout and Thunder Bay. The research also examined related needs, preferences and the challenges of providing temporary housing for Aboriginal people.

A primary objective of the research was determining the types of temporary accommodations Aboriginal people use and their experiences in using such housing. The research sought to answer the questions of why they need temporary housing, what challenges they face, whether they feel their needs are met and what they believe could be improved.

### METHODOLOGY

There were three parts to the research project:

1. A literature review to help understand the temporary housing situation for Aboriginal people.
2. A survey of Aboriginal people who have used temporary housing in Fort Frances, Kenora, Sioux Lookout and Thunder Bay. Researchers interviewed 57 women and 59 men for a total of 116 clients.

Researchers interviewed eight women and 12 men in Fort Frances; 14 women and 14 men in Kenora; nine women and 10 men in Sioux Lookout and 26 women and 23 men in Thunder Bay.

3. Twelve case studies of organizations and agencies that provide temporary housing in order to identify best practices and challenges, including one in Fort Frances three in Kenora, three in Sioux Lookout and five in Thunder Bay.

The survey used both closed and open-ended questions. Questions were short, specific and straightforward to make them easy to understand and easier to translate into Cree, Ojibway, or Oji-Cree if necessary. Some questions were quantitative and allowed for some basic statistical analysis.

The researchers first tested the survey questions with 10 people at a youth shelter, an emergency shelter and a hostel in Thunder Bay. The test ensured that the questions were clear and easy to translate, and the responses easy to tabulate. The final survey questions incorporated changes recommended at this stage.

The 12 case studies allowed more thorough analysis; interviews were held between October 18 and November 15, 2004.

This methodology had some limitations:

- A snowball sampling approach<sup>1</sup> does not provide a random sample.
- Key informants identified case study sites, and this did not provide a random sample.

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<sup>1</sup> Snowball sampling identifies a few initial respondents and uses their social networks to identify more respondents. Snowball sampling can provide access to difficult-to-reach populations, but it tends to produce samples that are not truly random and are not a cross-section of the population.

## FINDINGS

### Literature review

The review found that there are many reasons for Aboriginal people to use temporary supportive housing in communities such as Fort Frances, Kenora, Sioux Lookout and Thunder Bay.

People leave their communities for larger centres to obtain medical care, attend high school, or obtain post-secondary education or employment. In some cases, community housing is so overcrowded that people relocate to obtain adequate housing. The sustained link of strong cultural ties to home communities means that some people move back and forth between their communities and urban centres, creating a regular need for temporary accommodations.

Negative experiences, such as foster care mismanagement, violence and substance abuse also force some Aboriginal people to seek supportive services and temporary housing. The review found that Aboriginal people who grew up in the foster care system are more likely to need temporary shelter. The review also found that Aboriginal people tend not to use a temporary shelter that does not have special services for Aboriginal people.

Extreme poverty due to unemployment and cuts to social assistance is another reason people—particularly those already in urban centres—use temporary housing. Poverty and social assistance cuts affect single-parent families, large families and single women the most.

### Client survey

The client survey found that most respondents used temporary supportive accommodations from one to five times in the previous year. More than half the respondents said they were staying in temporary accommodations at the time of the survey.

Many said they were using a motel, hostel or shelter as an intermediary step while they were receiving medical care, escaping violence, waiting to return to their community or waiting for low-rental housing.

For men, a medical appointment was the most common reason for staying in temporary housing.

For women, escaping their partner was the most common reason, followed by medical appointments.

For respondents 34 years and younger, attending school was the most common reason for using temporary supportive accommodations. The researchers found that there are no high school residences. Students stay in private households, while many of them arrive alone and have little or no support system. Those who are unsuccessful in completing their high school education often become at risk for homelessness.

Hotels are the preferred temporary accommodation, followed by staying with friends or family, hostels and shelters. People said they preferred hotels because they were private and clean. Hotels, however, are the most expensive option and not available to many.

Generally, an agency rather than the client pays accommodation fees. Health Canada, for example, generally pays for hostels associated with hospitals, while the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services funds many shelters.

Hostel and shelter clients tended to learn about temporary housing services by word of mouth or referral. Most respondents stated that they use English, although 82 per cent said English was their second language. This suggests comprehension and comfort in English may vary—a consideration in publishing information and in outreach activities. This also suggests that conventional advertising in mainstream media may not be as effective as outreach workers, fluent in one of the three regional Aboriginal languages—Cree, Ojibway and Oji-Cree.

Eighty-five per cent of the respondents said that employees of temporary accommodations were helpful and did a good job, but they would like greater availability of shelters, access to more counselling and cultural activities, and greater client access to telephones in shelters and hostels.

Many clients also said it is difficult to travel within centres that have little or no public transit.

**Table 1** Centres where researchers interviewed staff for case studies

| Town          | Facility   | Type                  |
|---------------|--|-----------------------|
| Fort Frances  | Fort Frances Friendship Centre                                 | Friendship centre     |
| Kenora        | Kenora Fellowship Centre-Temporary Shelter                     | General shelter       |
|               | Morning Star Centre  | Detox centre          |
|               | Saakaate House Women's Shelter                                 | Women's shelter       |
| Sioux Lookout | First Step Women's Shelter                                     | Women's shelter       |
|               | Wii-chi-way Gamik (Out of the Cold) Supportive Housing Shelter | General shelter       |
|               | Sioux Lookout First Nation Health Authority Client Services    | Hospital hostel       |
| Thunder Bay   | Beendigen Inc.   | Women's shelter       |
|               | Faye Peterson Transition Home                                  | Women's shelter       |
|               | John Howard House  | Men's transition home |
|               | Shelter House  | General shelter       |
|               | Wequedong Lodge  | Medical transition    |

## CASE STUDIES

The table shows the centres at which researchers interviewed staff for the case studies.

The researchers found several common factors in the case studies. All stressed the need for more temporary supportive shelter for everybody, but particularly for Aboriginal people. Agencies noted that Aboriginal people form a large proportion of clients who use temporary supportive housing and the growing Aboriginal population directly affects the ability of many organizations to meet their needs.

Agencies reported that Aboriginal clients often will not use a non-Aboriginal service, particularly those without Aboriginal staff. They prefer to use Aboriginal agencies, or agencies with Aboriginal staff, because they feel less embarrassed and more comfortable with staff who understand the culture and social norms, speak the language and are aware of the challenges in adjusting to urban life from a rural, remote Northern lifestyle. Finding and hiring qualified Aboriginal staff is, however, a challenge facing all temporary housing agencies.

Perhaps the most notable common factor is the attempt by all of the organizations to provide more than shelter. They also provide formal and informal support programs and services to help their clients overcome challenges such as

opening a bank account, getting status cards and social insurance numbers, finding adequate housing, getting educational funding and finding employment. Some shelters provide meals and operate food banks so tenants can direct more of their income towards rent and stay out of temporary shelters.

Temporary housing personnel find that people who come directly from isolated and remote communities are often not proactive about verbalizing their needs and many are unaware of the programs and services that are available. Those without a strong family and social support network in an urban centre are isolated and can have great difficulty adjusting to impersonal private and public services. This suggests that temporary housing is only one piece in a larger picture of providing appropriate supportive services to Aboriginal people.

Agencies were having financial difficulties and could not provide all the services they felt clients needed. While many receive some funding from the provincial or federal government, the amount did not cover all of the costs. As a result, the agencies cut programs, services and staff. All of the agencies raise funds publicly, which takes considerable time and draws attention away from client needs and program delivery.

Government financial support for individuals, through such programs as Ontario Works,<sup>2</sup> was considered insufficient, causing many individuals and families to turn to temporary shelters for increasing lengths of time because they cannot meet their living costs.

## CHALLENGES

### Challenges for shelters and hostels included:

- Many of the temporary housing shelters are experiencing financial difficulties as they attempt to meet the needs of an increasing number of clients and their needs for shelter, food, clothing, employment training and counselling.
- The need for temporary shelter appeared to be extremely high, especially in the winter. As well, the shelters are seeing more people in financial difficulty as a result of gambling, an increase in young clients ages 19-29 and an increase in clients who are drug dependent or mentally unstable. The policy of many of the shelters is to take in all clients in need in order to ensure their safety. The range of clients makes it difficult for shelter staff to provide for all of their clients' various needs while keeping the shelter a safe place for all clients, including children.
- There is a lack of suitable accommodations for families.
- Many temporary housing shelters do not have accommodations or services that target the elderly, mostly as a result of limited funding.

### Challenges for clients included:

- The case studies show that the top priorities are access to food and a bed. Child care is important mainly for working mothers. Most of the women using temporary accommodation do not have employment and do not require child care.
- Single mothers seem to have the most difficulties obtaining and maintaining secure housing, followed by young, single, mothers-to-be and then single men.

- Services are limited in many remote First Nation communities. Medical specialists fly in to the communities once a month or less frequently to offer medical or dental services. For more immediate care, people go to urban centres. For long-term care, such as dialysis, clients often have to relocate.
- Schools are limited in some remote First Nation communities and many students have to leave their community to obtain a high-school education. Some choose not to leave.
- The lack of marketable education often makes it difficult for Aboriginal people to find employment that pays enough to secure stable housing.
- Many of the clients from remote communities do not have urban life skills or speak English as a second language, which hinders their ability to find and use services.
- Spouses, youth and children who are experiencing family violence in remote communities often remain because of a lack of access to shelters in their own community, a lack of information concerning shelters outside their community and a lack of finances to fly to an urban centre.
- People often find out about these shelters and hostels through word of mouth, indicating they are not tapped into an organized system or strategy when they move to an urban centre. This indicates that outreach can play an important role in providing information and assistance. Outreach workers who speak one of the three regional Aboriginal languages would also be an asset.
- The increasing use of food banks may be a sign that people can no longer afford to pay market rent and there may be an increase in the number of people needing temporary or subsidized shelter.

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<sup>2</sup> Ontario Works, a program of the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, provides financial and employment assistance to people in temporary financial need. People receiving assistance through Ontario Works participate in a wide range of employment assistance activities, which help them prepare for, find and keep a job.

## CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the case studies, agency workers noted that there is a need for more temporary housing to meet the needs of a growing clientele. They raised several factors that had contributed to their agency's success and that could be useful for other agencies interested in establishing temporary accommodations for Aboriginal people. They are:

- Talk to existing operators and practitioners to learn from their experiences. For example, the changing demographic of the Aboriginal population within a given region ought to be considered. In some regions, the pregnancy rate among teenagers is high and as the youth population grows, there may be a growing need for temporary housing for families or women with children, and associated services, such as day care.
- Develop networking strategies that enable community social agencies and non-profit groups to get involved in the provision of formal and informal support programs and services to help clients.
- Hire qualified, trained Aboriginal staff at temporary accommodations in areas that serve a large Aboriginal population. Agencies with Aboriginal staff that can incorporate Aboriginal cultural and social values in agency programming increase the comfort level of many clients and improve communication with them, which allows the agency to better respond to client needs.
- Consider special care needs, such as wheelchair accessibility or grab bars for the elderly when planning a centre.
- The location should allow for convenient access to services and public transportation.

## Research Highlight

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Temporary Supportive Housing for Aboriginal People and Their Families

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