



A HOME in the Hills:

A Beginning Look at the Issue of Homelessness and Precarious Housing in Caledon

Dr. C. van Daalen-Smith, RN, PhD

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OVERVIEW OF THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

Community Consultation Background

Homelessness in Caledon, for some, is a foreign concept, for the assumption is that Caledon is affluent and that these sorts of social “problems” don’t exist here. But the wisdom of the central hub of community services in Caledon tells us otherwise, and together with a group of concerned residents, the *Caledon Homelessness Partnering Strategy* (CHPS) initiative was borne. One of the subcommittees was struck with the task of consulting with the community in order to provide a starting picture or “snap shot” of the issue of Caledon-specific homelessness and precarious housing and this report will present the findings of an eight-month exploration into just that.

Who was consulted

The four-member committee set out to meet with as many individuals across Caledon as possible. From individual interviews with persons with the lived experience of homelessness, to both formal and informal discussions with support workers, focus groups with concerned members of various faith-based communities, and listening to individuals attending community awareness-building forums on the issue, this committee made use of any opportunity granted to us. Homelessness is best understood through the eyes of those living it and from the observations of those whose profession calls upon them to support our community’s most vulnerable. Faith leaders, police, outreach workers, youth, guidance counselors, chaplains, mental health professionals, volunteer drivers, town employees, crisis teams, service clubs, landscapers, and everyday people who live and work in Caledon were consulted. Individuals with past or current lived experiences of homelessness (PWLE) shared their stories, and while few in number, their stories sit now in the collective consciousness of the CHPS committee as a whole. However, and as typical of any report, the committee acknowledges their desire to continue with these consultations and especially tap further into the wisdom of individuals with the experience of being homeless in Caledon either currently or in their past. See Table 1.0

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OPP • Youth • High School Chaplain • Guidance Counsellor • Optimist Club • CCS Crisis Program • Siblings of currently homeless youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Works • Library Staff • Motel Managers • Faith Leaders • Kinsmen Club • Previously homeless • Salvation Army • Street Outreach Workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Town of Caledon Outdoor Staff • LCBO • Tim Horton's • Residents • Family Transition Place • Meals on Wheels • Street Nurses
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Table 1.0 Individuals and Groups Consulted

Questions asked

The committee met with a wide array of individuals and tailored the questions asked accordingly. However, in general the following questions were asked of all those we consulted with.

- Do you have any experience with homelessness? Can you speak about that?
- How do you understand homelessness ?
- What do you understand contributes to homelessness? How?
- What are the struggles facing homeless persons in Caledon
- What suggestions do you have that we might bring back to our working group for consideration?

FINDINGS

A Beginning Brushstroke

Interestingly, while the research team sought out to discover the face of homelessness in Caledon, our efforts often included raising awareness of the issue. For many residents we met with, most often informally or during the community forums held by the CHPS community engagement team, there was little awareness of the issue or its presence in Caledon. As the team explained our view of homelessness and its inclusion of precarious housing, i.e. of real or imminent danger of housing loss, discussion then emerged regarding observations of individuals or families they were aware of. The team ensured that those we consulted did *not* disclose names or identities of anyone and were also sure to give referral information about Caledon Community Services to those individuals sharing stories or situations that were current.

For others, their experience with homelessness included being aware of people in Caledon, but being unsure what to do. These discussions might have been about knowing about a young man living in someone's shed, of individuals in fields, or of retired farmers seemingly living without hydro or human companionship. But in the interest of protecting confidentiality and dignity, our report will refrain from describing specific circumstances, opting rather to attempt to capture many of the narratives under sub-headings found below. But first, we will provide a brushstroke of the information we gathered:

- Individuals often wander onto church properties across Caledon, mainly men young to middle aged said to be “passing through”
- Seniors living with no heat – using their ovens set to 400 degrees and having cat food for dinner
- Churches occasionally receive frantic messages on their answering machines, sometimes followed by a visit, and other times without any further contact
- Salvation Army shelters’ statistics from 2008-2010 housed two women and 15 men from Caledon.

- Concerns about Ferndale Park on Boston Mills Road where four houses share a wall. Said to be many individuals “couch surfing” there, and all appear to be precariously housed and living below the poverty line.
- We were often told that homelessness was “invisible” – and that there was a need to know/learn the signs in order to reach out.
- Knowledge of neighbours facing eviction due to unemployment, health concerns or other issues
- Some offers of help to individuals living in a bush or a barn are often declined, possibly due to shame. People wanting to help were interested in learning how to do this more sensitively and successfully.
- Town of Caledon staff report seeing mostly men in their 20s and 30s living under bridges, on the trails, in ravines, in parks etc and whom are commonly seen emerging in the morning with a back pack and returning at end of day.
- Public works reports same and stated they have a “do not disturb” policy in place unless the individual is a risk to self or others. They identified a desire to respect the person’s privacy and dignity. Police are not typically alerted. Public works interested to know how they can help
- Faith leaders knew of people either homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless. They consistently articulated a deep desire to help and explained that church families want to take care of their own *and* reach out to the broader community but they don’t know how. They are asking for a list of agencies and to be partnered more consistently with CCS
- Service clubs had a cursory knowledge of this issue but again re-iterated that they are ready and able to help individual families and to volunteer for a broader initiative if necessary.
- Individuals living on Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Pension are chronically at risk of eviction and/or homelessness. These sources of income are wholly inadequate particularly related to the dearth of affordable housing in Caledon
- Local motels house newcomers to the area, persons fleeing domestic violence,

individuals working in the area but cannot afford rent or cannot find affordable housing

- Workers at the local LCBOs told us that while they haven't seen individuals they'd presume to be homeless around their facility, they did reflect upon an observation that "bad times lead to more sales of booze"
- Still others reflected upon the trouble even affording or "keeping" housing in Caledon, stating "you know there's a problem when a shack in Belfountain costs \$1200 a month!"
- Many of those we consulted reflected on what they called 'being rural' or a 'rural way of life', wanting it to be respected, embraced and protected in any future programming planned. Observations related to this way of life included noting individuals often seek to respect another's privacy rather than approaching folks, and that independence, resilience and a desire to take care of issues themselves was present
- There is generational pride in Caledon
- People told us that many individuals want their animals to be able to come/go with them when housing changes
- People who are homeless stay in warehouses, barns, sheds, camp at Albion Hills and other open areas, makeshift shelters in the woods.
- Many people couch surf – particularly youth and the families that take them in have next to no supports
- The OPP confirmed Caledon as a place where not only are there people living in cars, ravines, and abandoned dwellings, but also as a place where folks "pass through". The OPP discussed a lack of local services/supports to address the housing needs of homeless youth or women fleeing domestic strife. Those interviewed further reflected on the vulnerabilities of individuals living with mental health concerns, disability, and social isolation. Despite the above observations, the OPP stated they don't see many "squatters", but see people trying hard to be independent and often ask for nothing but their own privacy. The OPP tells us they would only intervene if the individual

was a risk to themselves or others, and that this is rare

- Libraries sometimes see folks come when they open and leave when it closes... wearing the same clothes for days. Also see some parents drop kids off in the morning and pick them up in the late afternoon.
- During the many faith-based community consultations, we were told of their desire to help – “I want to know more about what our church can do to contribute to those in need in our community. We are ready. We have the people, we have the space, and we have the desire”.
- Service clubs are very interested to help, reach out, support individuals, families and the community as a whole

Faces

The committee learned of many situations both past and present during our eight-month community consultation. In this section of the report, we will shine a light on the faces of homelessness and precarious housing in Caledon. So, who are the homeless and precariously housed in Caledon?

- It's Individuals living in other residents' Barns
- It's Children whose parents are facing eviction after long-term unemployment being fed and clothed by a neighbour
- It's young to middle-aged men “passing through”
- It's Couch-surfing teens post irreconcilable differences
- It's the moms or dads with little means and many children
- It's the young men seen leaving for work from a ravine setting
- It's the many many individuals who are unemployed or underemployed
- Its Women in dangerous domestic partnerships with no place to go

- It's the person living in their car
- It's the senior heating his house with the oven set to 400 degrees
- It's the executive home at the end of the cul-de-sac whose bread winner lost his job yet the bank doesn't care
- It's seniors left to fend for themselves, who "don't want to bother anybody"
- It's the farmers who have lost *so* much in the last several years
- It's children whose both parents passed away, too old for CAS, too young to work
- It's the woman in the motel with her dog who can't find housing who will take them both
- It's the senior who has alcohol and nothing else
- It's the older gentleman living ten years in a ravine on a farm
- It's the widower struggling to survive on a pittance of a pension
- It's folks with mental health struggles, already feeling different and alone
- It's the children of ailing parents/living with dementia with no in home supports
- It's the financially over-extended ... treading water ... treading water
- It's the forgotten
- It's the ashamed
- It's seniors left to fend for themselves, who "don't want to bother anybody"

Contributing Factors

When asked, while many of the community informants were not sure of the exact causes of homelessness in Caledon due to their inexperience with individuals living on the edge

of homelessness, others were able to articulate what contributes to this important social issue. Most assuredly, it was the crisis/outreach workers who knew best of the barriers to sustainable housing for Caledon residents. Others when describing situations they were aware of were able to give our committee a snap-shot view of still other causes and contributing factors. Some of these include:

- Unaffordable housing
- Family transition/crisis/conflict/breakdown/re-constitution
- Losses of many kinds (job, spouse, child, health, spirit)
- Huge mortgages being provided by banks
- Precarious employment
- The necessity of a car to be employed in Caledon due to inadequate public transit
- Parental addiction struggles/anger/domestic violence
- Abuse
- Irreconcilable differences often result in youth being blamed and kicked out
- Women fleeing violence
- Marital break up
- Job loss
- Lack of education opportunities/skill development leads to dead end jobs... low job skills can create difficulty keeping jobs
- Workplace injury
- Living on a fixed income, eg. OW, ODSP – rarely have enough food
- Waiting too long to get help

- Loneliness ~ Addiction ~ Isolation~ Shame
- Mental Illness/Disability/Childhood Trauma ~~ stress
- Employment is inadequate to pay for rent
- Rents are too high
- Welfare inadequate, and rent top-ups are un-sustainable
- Cannot get a mortgage when on any type of pension or assistance
- Exorbitant alimony pay-outs or alimony not paid
- Cost of Living in Caledon. To have housing requires two (2) incomes
- Medical conditions
- Discrimination
- Shame regarding one's situation ~ leading to further isolation, desperation and poverty

What Exacerbates Homelessness/Precairous Housing?

“People often become homeless before they become houseless.”

Participant

- No-one wants anyone to know of their situation ~ leading to further isolation, desperation and poverty
- Lack of public transportation

- Inadequate housing support (to find or to keep housing)
- Lack of a well-known co-ordinated hub to go to /refer to/consult with
- Shame
- Individuals not knowing their neighbours
- No second-stage housing in Caledon
- Policies (like ODSP, or rental policies) that say “no pets”. Individuals love their pets and will *not* leave them in order for themselves to be housed. That is a deal-breaker.

Strengths in Caledon

“Let us be known as communities who care for all those who present to us – no matter how, no matter why, no matter when or for how long.”

Participant

Caledon has a rich history of caring for its residents – of coming together in times of need, and many of its unique features factored in as strengths when considering the issue of homelessness and how to best address it. These are but a few of the strengths that Caledon residents discussed when consulted:

- Hamlets: A strong affiliation with hamlets and villages and a desire to help within that specific area first, but not only. Often there are gathering places or within each hamlet that were identified as places to provide outreach and support.
- Farmers: The backbone of Caledon most assuredly. With great resilience, many connections and time plus experience both factor in heavily when considering the strength that farmers and farm families bring

- Faith-based presence *everywhere*.
- The palpable frustration of residents ready to help but who state “we can’t find people to help. Who are they? How can we help? Can you help us help others?”
- The presence of homelessness has not yet reached insurmountable levels, so can be addressed strategically and preventatively now
- The Region of Peel has street outreach and has provided support for the CHPS initiative and is offering to amplify their programming in Caledon and provide consultative services.
- There are people in Caledon taking in youth who are couch-surfing
- The churches/faith-community wants to create a network
- There exists a strong foundation of supports via CCS
- No NIMBY found during 8 months of consultations
- Out of all those consulted be it in individual, focus group or community forum formats, a mere two individuals verbalized negative viewpoints about precariously housed or homeless persons,
- The sentiment of “they are ours, even when they’re only passing through”

Challenges and Growth Opportunities for Caledon

The community consultations also gleaned helpful information to strengthen Caledon even more. These had to do with the overall way in which vulnerable people can best be reached. These growth opportunities will be listed here, and at the close of the report, the suggestions made by those consulted will provide potential ways to address these.

- CCS on far east side of Caledon –

- Lack of public transportation
- Hamlet/Village Identity -residents prefer to be supported and supportive in their own village.
- Communication gaps across the area regarding existing needs and services
- Sustainable mechanisms to cross-communicate between residents, community groups, churches and clubs and service providers.

THEMES

“It behooves us to count any homeless person as a resident of Caledon whether they are passing through and here for one day or if they are here for a lifetime.”

Participant

To many, housing is merely a symptom of larger social issues and barriers that create the vulnerabilities that place individuals and families at risk in the first place. And this opening exploration into homelessness and precarious housing shows us just that. In the following section, some of the emerging themes gleaned from a second and third glance at the interview and focus group notes are included for consideration.

Hamlets Matter

Possibly the most common finding was the deep affiliation residents have to their given hamlet, and a desire to start where they live, i.e. in their village. And this affinity for, pride of and identity with one’s own village had nothing to do with a disinterest in reaching out to other areas in Caledon, but was rooted solely in an understanding of the area and a wish to start local and join other hamlets in a bid to reach out to all. Residents and other individuals consulted wanted services in their area, and provided many

suggestions regarding how their church, village council or other mechanism could assist in this happening. The rural psyche is tied to a wish to preserve and celebrate history – and one key historical memory shared by many of those consulted had to do with a long legacy of “caring for our own”.

Animals Matter

This theme emerged several times, including in discussion regarding farmers, seniors and single individuals who were looking for affordable housing but faced barriers due to their friendship with/concern for their animal(s). We also heard stories about individuals buying dog food for families who had no food to give their furry family member. The animal shelter staff told us that they are often approached by individuals for animal food, and that they often have donated food that is ready for distribution to those in need. As these discussions emerged, a strong desire to have animals factored into the plans to address homelessness and precarious housing was verbalized.

Seniors/Farmers Matter

There was significant conversation about the well-being/quality of life of retired farmers, many of whom are seniors or widowers, particularly regarding many precarious housing situations. An interesting strategy was proposed, rooted in a realization of the long-legacy of *farmers-helping-farmers*, and it is to be found at the close of this report.

Employed but Homelessness

Many stories emerged regarding individuals who were working but were unable to secure or maintain housing. From living in cars, warehouses, ravines or motels, this sub-group of homeless persons are present in Caledon

Youth need places to be, become and matter

Much concern was verbalized about youth having nothing to do in Caledon, and that many things offered to youth were expensive or inaccessible due to geography and a lack of public transit. Churches verbalized a desire to offer more for youth to do, and wondered about working in partnership with agencies such as CCS or Parks and

Recreation in order to do this in a youth-friendly manner. Much concern was raised about the presence of youth couch-surfing, and the lack of an organized system of support for the families who take youth in. Further, that youth matter and need to be able to find their way and develop their talents often came up in conversations.

Passing Through /No Option but to Leave

We came to understand that some individuals known primarily to churches and to outdoor workers seemed to be “*passing through*” Caledon rather than originating “from” Caledon (although most people see that as irrelevant), others when facing eviction or looking for alternate housing had no option but to leave due to a lack of affordable, transitional, or emergency housing in our town.

Invisible Or is it?

At first, many individuals believed homelessness and precarious housing in Caledon was virtually invisible. Through dialogue, especially at community engagement forums, discussion often evolved into a realization that it was really about missing the signs. This emerged as a suggestion to address in the section that closes this report.

It's About Being At-Risk

What emerged was a realization and embracement of the importance to focus on vulnerability. The question often focused to Who is at risk and how? And how can we as a community prevent homelessness first, but also reach out to and support the dignity and quality of life who are at imminent risk of losing their housing or already have.

Everyone Wants to Help, and are asking “How”?

Be it the person working in the LCBO, the local Tim Hortons, members of a church of 9 people, pastors, priests and reverends, 90-year old widows, public works employees, police officers, existing and past crisis workers, business leaders, service club volunteers and any and all residents we had the privilege of meeting with and listening to One theme emerged more brightly than any other. Everyone wants to help.

SUGGESTIONS, REQUESTS AND OFFERINGS

“Help us help others.”

Participant

We asked all those we consulted to give us some ideas about how to address the issue of homelessness and precarious housing in Caledon. These came in the form of suggestions, requests and in typical (so we’ve learned) Caledon style, offerings. Overwhelmingly the view was that Caledon should take care of Caledon, and that individuals shouldn’t have to seek assistance outside of town.

Suggestions

- That the supports and services come together under a homelessness strategy umbrella
- Form an alliance of sorts in order to “connect us all up” and improve any communication gaps between service clubs, faith communities, and service provision.
- Ensure that the voice of those who are being served is present on any decision-making body
- Commence an outreach function, perhaps first as a trial
- Make CCS the HUB, a central agency, everyone/thing else a tentacle
- Tap into service clubs
- Help families who take in youth
- Work with business owners looking to a group of them who will routinely employ individuals at imminent risk of losing their housing due to unemployment.
- Educate, confront biases and blame. As one youth said “Stigma steals Opportunity.”

- A *Know-your-Neighbour* campaign was suggested – for it was often remarked upon that many residents in Caledon don't know their neighbours anymore and therefore don't know if anyone is silently suffering.
- A “You reap what you Sow” campaign – coordinated support led by and for farmers
- More affordable youth activities – “FREE is best.”
- Replicate the free drop in for youth currently running at the Albion-Bolton Community Centre in other villages/hamlets across the region.
- Explore Stationview's waiting list – there may be opportunities there to support more residents in need of transitional housing
- Look at and focus on prevention – a know the signs public awareness campaign
- Factor in the animals/pets in the lives of those we serve/support. Animals matter.
- Use schools as a conduit in case finding, sharing information on local resources and to facilitate a relationship between those in need and people who can help
- Address information gaps by providing community notice boards (partner with a business or Staples in order to obtain these info boards) in common public gathering places listing resources.
- Develop ties between CCS, service clubs, faith based communities
- Facilitate a database of names of people who can assist and how. Start first with FB communities.

Requests

- Please include us in your ongoing correspondence regarding the issue.
- Keep the community posted via radio, email blasts, newspaper articles
- Please provide us (faith-based communities) with a list of resources that we can not only post but also keep for our outreach and support personnel so we are better equipped with knowledge when approached by those in need

Offerings

- Service clubs overwhelmingly offered to help, immediately

Faith leaders offered to get the issue “out there” via their ‘pulpit’

- Faith communities have offered food, clothing and community-specific support now to any individuals known by CCS
- Many faith communities have offered their spaces for services and support services

IN CLOSING..... at least for now.

Reflecting upon our eight months traversing across Caledon talking to residents, support workers, Caledon-based employees, faith communities and others, what presents as prudent is the need to ensure Caledon has adequate supports in place in order to work with those who are in fact precariously housed. There are too many at risk of being homeless in Caledon. People in need have to wait too long and are often forced to leave their beloved *Home* in the *Hills*. Homelessness exists in Caledon, and it’s not new and it could get worse. The community is galvanized to support those individuals and families who find themselves at risk for becoming homeless or already are.

What is also clear is that there remains a continued need for community engagement and immersion in order to continue to build partnerships and linkages with community members, groups, agencies, and those who would benefit from sustainable systems of

support right here. This would enable Caledon to build on the wisdom of many, in order to co-create a sustainable, responsive plan to reach out to some of our most vulnerable.

Across our wonderful region of Ontario, we heard a strong desire to help and that one homeless person suffering is simply one too many. And further, that those who find themselves on the edge of homelessness truly need not. It makes sense to prevent this sort of distress, and Caledon is well suited to come together in order to do just that. Caledon is ready and looks to CCS to take the lead in showing us how to help.

This experience has been a privilege.