

Qualitative Data Report for Waterloo Region Sheltering Needs Assessment

July 2005

Social Planning, Policy and Program Administration



**Qualitative Data Report for Waterloo Region
Sheltering Needs Assessment**

by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2005, the Region of Waterloo initiated a process to assess current and future needs for sheltering services in Waterloo Region by exploring the following key questions¹:

1. What are some of the current trends, issues and needs in terms of sheltering in Waterloo Region?
2. What is missing from the current formal shelter system?
3. What is the impact of the informal shelter system, transitional housing/programs and supportive housing on the formal shelter system?
4. What changes need to be made over the next five years in the formal shelter system, transitional housing/programs and supportive housing for those who are homeless?

As one component of this needs assessment process, the Region sought to gain a better understanding of the perceived needs of stakeholders in terms of what is missing now and what is needed in the future.

Between March and May 2005, therefore, the Region conducted qualitative research to gather experiences, observations, and insights from people directly involved in shelter services in the region, providers of other supports for homeless people in the region, and people who use those services. Methods used included a series of focus groups with service providers and service users, interviews with shelter residents and guests of Out of the Cold (OOTC), and a survey of OOTC volunteers (please see “Methodology” below for further details). The complete Sheltering Needs Assessment Report is planned for completion in the winter of 2005/2006.

To support this qualitative research process, the Region contracted the services of the Centre for Research & Education in Human Services (CREHS). The Region administered the OOTC survey and conducted the focus groups itself, and provided summary data to CREHS for analysis. The CREHS research team consulted on research tools, interviewed shelter residents and OOTC guests, analyzed all qualitative data gathered during this phase of the needs assessment process, and reviewed previous research done by the Region on sheltering issues.

The following report by CREHS summarizes the findings of the qualitative research conducted between March and May 2005 with people who have experienced homeless, people currently experiencing homelessness, and those working with the homeless in Kitchener, Waterloo and Cambridge.

¹ Sheltering Needs Assessment Project Charter (2005). Homelessness, Policy and Program Administration Unit, Social Planning, Policy & Administration, Region of Waterloo Social Services.

Overarching themes and perceived needs

Qualitative data gathering uncovered a multitude of experiences and insights related to sheltering needs and issues in Waterloo Region, from a broad range of perspectives. Across the broad range of experiences and perspectives, nonetheless, a number of important themes emerged from the analysis of the data. Table 1 below summarizes the overarching themes and perceived needs that emerged across the data sets, and lists the concrete ideas for solutions that participants identified.

Table 1: Overarching themes, perceived needs, and suggested solutions

Perceived Issues	Details	Suggested Solutions
1. Lack of Affordable, Stable, and Appropriate Housing	Housing costs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - can't afford rent - housing that is affordable on low income is often precarious, poorly maintained and shabby - need to share creates dependence on roommates and landlords; forces tenants into vulnerable relationships and destructive social networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - low rent housing - safe, appropriate housing - policy development (see point 3 below)
	Insufficient income <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - insufficient social assistance - difficulty getting first and last month's rent - inflexible social assistance - employment problems - difficulty attaining references 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - information & advocacy services (see point 6 below)
2. Addictions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - separated out as a theme on its own due to prevalence and pervasiveness in the data - addictions affect all aspects of homelessness, sheltering and housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - specialized supports for addictions (see point 8 below)
3. Policy, Policy Integration, and Political Will	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - homelessness and housing not seen as a high priority in government - provincial policies, such as previous social assistance cuts and downloading of housing responsibility to the Region seen as major contributors to current housing and homelessness situation - affordable housing and homelessness not integrated adequately into land use planning - not enough affordable housing being built 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - all levels of government need to work together more to address housing and homelessness - departments within Regional government need to work together to integrate housing and homelessness into all aspects of planning and policy development - policies needed to ensure that a certain proportion of new housing developed must be affordable housing
4. Stigma and Discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - landlords hesitant to rent to those who have used shelters, those who are suspected of mental illness/addictions, youth or those who receive social assistance - pervasive victim-blame societal attitude toward homelessness supports complacency at senior policy level, and disrespectful attitudes at service-delivery level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - staff/volunteer training and capacity building to prevent burn out, maintain professional approach, and ensure implementation of best practices

Perceived Issues	Details	Suggested Solutions
5. Value of Independence & Self-help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - service users seek independent living and services that support them in living independently - lack of control and ownership among residents in shelter system seen by some as barrier to effective shelter services and transition to stable, independent housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - enhanced information and supportive services (see point 6 below) - establishment of peer-managed shelter and transitional housing services - more co-operative housing - programs to make home ownership accessible to homeless
6. Finding and Maintaining Housing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - supportive/supported housing - transitional housing - housing/income supports and information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - not enough transitional and supportive housing - not enough access to on-going support for people making the transition. - lack tools such as telephone and transportation - need help navigating through housing and social assistance bureaucracies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - more supportive housing spaces - life skills building opportunities - housing bulletin boards at OOTC - advocates in shelters and OOTC to assist in securing housing/social assistance - transportation to housing - access to telephone, internet, photocopier - financial skills orientation - trusteeships
7. Need for Specialized Shelter and Housing Options <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - addictions - mental health - youth - families 	Addictions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - presence and tolerance contributes to chaotic and volatile atmosphere in shelters - presence and tolerance creates difficulties for people trying to recover from addiction - those with addictions need somewhere to stay - competing pressures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - stricter enforcement of rules prohibiting substance use in shelters - creation of shelter and housing supports tailored to addictions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o exploration of wet shelter possibilities o increase recovery follow-up services and supports - separate shelters for people wishing to avoid drugs and alcohol
	Mental health <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - contributes to unpredictable/frightening atmosphere in shelters and OOTC - interferes with ability of individuals to connect effectively to services and housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increased supportive housing spaces - mental health supports attached to shelters - support/supervision for treatment (keep appointments; help taking medication) - individualized counselling
	Youth <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - tension between youth and older shelter residents - exposure of vulnerable youth to high risk activities/life styles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - more shelters and housing programs tailored solely to youth - improved coordination/discharge planning with F&CS
	Families <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increase in families in need of emergency shelter - mother and father-led families - very few shelter spaces for families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - creation of more shelter spaces for families

Perceived Issues	Details	Suggested Solutions
8. Need for More Coordination Among Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - parallel shelter systems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o competition between two systems o some see OOTC as undermining formal shelter system - homelessness and shelters perceived as separate from mandate of Region's Housing Department - lack of coordination between social workers and police - too many people leaving F&CS, hospitals and corrections end up in shelters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - improved communications and coordination between OOTCs and formal shelters - increase coordination and collaborative planning between Region Social Services and Housing - improve discharge planning and coordination among service providers for people leaving hospitals, child welfare and corrections systems
9. OOTC and Shelter Environment	<p>Personal safety and security of belongings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - need for improved security while in the shelter - need for secure place to leave belongings during day - relationships staff/volunteers have with residents important for creating welcoming, secure atmosphere 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lockers - locks for bedrooms - more space between beds - volunteer orientation and training; staff training and continuing education - consistent application of rules - flexibility to accommodate pets in shelters
	<p>Hygiene</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - poor hygiene in shelters increases risk of infectious disease - need for showers, laundry and more washroom facilities in OOTCs - access to washrooms limited during the day for homeless people in downtown Kitchener 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increase resources for shelters for cleaning/hygiene - more shower and washroom facilities - access to laundry – especially at OOTC - public washrooms in downtown Kitchener
10. Increased funding for shelters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - current funding does not cover all costs - fundraising puts shelters in competition with each other - demand on shelters is increasing - need funding for improving hygiene, for staff development, for provision of one-on-one support - enhancing supportive services requires increased funding - existence of OOTC obscures the demand on shelter services and the level of funding required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - get rid of per diem funding - Region to cover all shelter costs directly
11. Choosing between Out of the Colds and the Shelters	<p>many people use both</p> <p>OOTC:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - free - warmer, more informal atmosphere - fewer rules - shelters are full or crowded - banned from shelters <p>Formal shelter</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - strong interpersonal connection with 	

Perceived Issues	Details	Suggested Solutions
	supportive staff/volunteer - more structured; stronger enforcement of rules - quieter at night - OOTC too crowded - amenities such as showers, laundry, telephone, lockers - connection to supportive services	
12. Impact of OOTC on Formal Shelter System	- confuses course of action for youth - conflicting perspectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o undermines formal shelter system, and priority given to homelessness and shelters at government level o fills a need that formal system is not able to fill - many OOTC guests say they would sleep in the streets, under bridges, or even go to jail for shelter if OOTC closed; unclear how many would use formal shelter systems if OOTC did not exist	

Methodology

Data for this phase of the needs assessment project was collected from the relevant stakeholder groups using a variety of qualitative methods. For all methods, responses were collected on similar questions, which focused on trends in the use of formal and informal shelter systems, barriers to permanent housing, needs of shelter users, and gaps in the formal shelter system. For further detail on data gathering protocols, please see the Sheltering Assessment Project Charter, pages 7-9.

Focus groups

The Region conducted a total of 11 focus groups with the following groups:

- service providers in Cambridge (two groups)
- health care providers
- transitional and supportive/supported housing providers
- formal shelter providers
- Waterloo Initiative for Supportive Housing (WISH)
- Out of the Cold steering group
- homeless advisory group (two groups)
- other homeless supports or services (e.g., housing services, street outreach, etc.)
- other supports or services (e.g., Family and Children’s Services, police, school boards, etc.)

A total of 84 individuals participated in the focus groups.

Individual interviews

The Region contracted the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services (CREHS) to conduct interviews with guest of Out of the Cold and shelters in Kitchener,

Waterloo, and Cambridge. CREHS researchers interviewed a total of 51 people, in March and April 2005, at four Out of the Colds and four shelters. For further detail on interview methodology, please see *Section I: Users of Sheltering Services and Supports* below.

Out of the cold volunteer survey

The Region also surveyed Out of the Cold volunteers to gather their perspectives and insights related to sheltering needs in Waterloo Region. The Region distributed the survey to all OOTC sites, and received a total of 51 completed questionnaires from 9 sites in Kitchener and Waterloo.

Existing data

In addition to gathering new data, the CREHS research team reviewed data from two previous studies:

- *Shelter Guidelines Summary Report*: data from 5 focus groups conducted between April 16 and April 25, 2004, from people who have lived homelessness experience
- Appendices 5 & 6 of the *Waterloo Community Homelessness Plan* (December 2001): interviews conducted between May and June 2001 with people who were, had been, or were at risk for homelessness, and a survey of service providers conducted in May and June 2001

Data analysis

The CREHS research team analyzed the data using a four-phase qualitative analysis approach consisting of a data organizing phase, the generation of categories and themes for each data source, analysis of categories and themes across data sources, and verification of findings. The verification phase includes consultations with the Region's project team and with stakeholders through a community forum held on June 13, 2005 in Cambridge.

Limitations of the study

The approach to sampling used in this study does not allow us to generalize the findings with 100% confidence to the broader community of service providers and shelter/OOTC users. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling methods, and as such cannot be assumed to be completely representative of the populations they were drawn from. A certain degree of self-selection is likely to have occurred in both service provider and service user samples based on who was present, or who was able and motivated to participate. In the case of the OOTC guests and shelter residents interviews in particular, convenience sampling and self-selection is likely to have excluded certain types of people from participating in the study.

One specific group of homeless people who are under-represented in this study are those who use neither the shelters nor the OOTCs. While the focus groups conducted with the Homelessness Advisory Group and St. John's Kitchen went some distance in reducing this sampling bias, reaching homeless people who do not connect with services is a challenge for research of this kind. Similarly, while researchers were deliberate in recruiting participants to reflect the diversity of people using the shelters

and OOTCs, very few visible minorities and very few people with disabilities were present at the shelters and OOTCs relative to the diversity in the community at large. Understanding why so few visible minorities and people with physical disabilities use the shelters and OOTCs will require further investigation.

A further limitation of the study has to do with the subjective nature of the data. The information presented in this report is largely based on peoples' opinions, perceptions, and personal observations and experiences, and no attempt was made to verify findings against direct factual evidence.

Despite these limitations, however, we believe that the findings of this study provide important practical insights for improving the sheltering system in Waterloo Region. The samples of service users and service providers, while not perfectly representative of their populations, were nonetheless large and representative enough to have a good degree of credibility, and the strength of the consensus that emerged across data sets on the overarching themes and perceived needs inspires confidence in the findings.

Section 1: Overarching themes and perceived needs

1.1 Lack of affordable, safe, and appropriate housing

The strongest, most consistent theme running through service user, service provider, and OOTC volunteer data was the significance of the lack of affordable housing in keeping individuals from finding and maintaining permanent housing. Many of the people using shelters and OOTCs simply cannot afford rent, and even when they can afford rent, the housing they can afford often leaves them dependent on roommates and vulnerable to landlords. Both service users and service providers stressed the lack of and need for low-rent housing that is safe and appropriate, that is adequately equipped, and where tenants feel safer than they would on the streets.

“If I had money...Kitchener is not expensive. If I had enough money I would get an apartment and I would be all set”.

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

Lack of sufficient income

Related to affordability of stable housing, an observation running through all data sets was that most shelter residents and OOTC guests simply do not have enough income to secure and sustain rental housing. Many of the people who use the shelters and OOTCs, according to the study participants, experience employment problems, and in many cases social assistance provisions are simply insufficient or too inflexible to meet their housing needs. With little income and the limitations social assistance benefits, many people using the shelters and OOTCs are unable to come up with the first and last month’s rent that is needed to secure a rental unit. On the other hand, for those who are able to secure a rental unit, the housing they can afford is often insecure and substandard, forces them into dependent relationships with landlords and roommates, and exposes them to risks, such as drugs and alcohol, that can precipitate a return to homelessness.

1.2 Addictions

Consistent with focus groups conducted during the development of the Waterloo Region Community Homelessness Plan (2001) and the Shelter Guidelines Feedback Summary (2004), one of the strongest themes running through all three data sets was the impact of addictions on shelters and housing. Addiction was recognized by all participant groups as a significant impediment to finding and keeping permanent housing, and as a significant variable in the quality of shelter provided by both the formal and informal shelter systems.

For many of the study’s participants, the presence and tolerance of substance use in shelters and OOTCs is seen a major contributor to a chaotic and volatile atmosphere, and makes it difficult for those struggling to stay off drugs or alcohol and recover from addictions. For these participants, the answer is stricter enforcement of rules prohibiting substances and substance use. On the other hand, both service user and service provider data also suggest a need for shelters and housing supports specifically tailored to individuals with addictions, including wet shelter options and addiction recovery

follow-up supports. At present, the shelter system appears to be struggling to accommodate these competing pressures to anyone's satisfaction.

1.3 Policy, policy integration, and political will

For some participants in both the service user and service provider samples, the lack of affordable housing and overcrowding in the shelters can be attributed to poor policy and a lack of political will to address poverty and housing. At a political level, participants suggest that decisions such as the allocation of millions of dollars to the building of a garage for snow ploughs rather than to affordable housing and improved shelters is indicative of the lack of priority given to homelessness at various levels of government.

At the policy level, a number of participants highlighted the impact of provincial policy on housing and homelessness in the Region, and talked about the need for governments to “get away from silos” both within and across the levels of government. All levels of government need to work together, according to study participants, to ensure that coordination in planning and policy development that impacts on housing and homelessness. Similarly, some participants believe that relevant departments of the regional government need to work together more than they currently do to ensure that questions of affordable housing and homelessness are an integral aspect of community planning.

“I don't know if it is up to the shelters and Out of the Cold, I think it has to do more with the region and getting low income housing for people that desperately need it. If they had that we wouldn't need Out of the Cold would we?”

(OOTC guest, Cambridge)

1.4 Stigma and discrimination

Stigma and discrimination was another theme that emerged across the three data sets as a significant barriers to permanent housing. Service users, service providers, and OOTC volunteers all spoke about reticence among landlords when it comes to renting to people who use shelters, who are suspected of having addictions or mental illness, or who receive social assistance. This finding is consistent with data from focus groups conducted in May-June 2001 during the development of the Waterloo Region Community Homelessness Plan. Moreover, in the view of some study participants, stigma and a pervasive attitude of victim-blaming in regards to homelessness is what supports complacency on homelessness and sheltering issues at a senior policy level.

1.5 Value of independence and self-help

A strong theme underlying responses to almost every question asked of both service providers and service users was about the value of independence for those struggling with housing, and the importance of providing people with the support they need to take control over their own housing situations. Maintaining or increasing independence was implicit in what interview participants perceive as barriers to permanent housing, in the kinds of housing they said they need, in the information and support services they want, and in the existing sheltering services they identify as valuable. Conversely, some study participants suggest that the lack of ownership and control that many homeless people experience in housing and the shelter system perpetuates attitudes and behaviours that

make finding and keeping permanent housing difficult. For these participants, the development of peer-run shelters and peer-managed supportive housing is part of the solution.

1.6 Finding and maintaining housing

Housing information, advocacy and supports

Both service users and service providers identified a lack of access to information and support around housing, income assistance, and employment as a barrier to finding and keeping housing. The qualitative data revealed a strong consensus across all three data sources that people experiencing homelessness are not always aware of the full range of services available to them (including emergency shelter options), do not have ready access to information on housing or employment, often have difficulty attaining references and other credentials needed to secure housing or employment, often need help in navigating their way through social assistance and housing bureaucracies, and lack access to even basic housing and job search tools such as telephone and transportation.

A similar theme can be found throughout the data from interviews conducted during the development of the Waterloo Region Community Homelessness Plan in 2001 with people who were, had been, or were at risk for homelessness. Participants in the 2001 study consistently described the need for concrete supports such as telephones and transportation, as well as emotional support during the search for housing.

Transitional, supported, and supportive housing

More generally, the qualitative research suggests a need for more supportive and transitional housing, and more access to on-going support for people making the transition to private accommodations. Participants noted that once housed, very little ongoing support is available for assisting tenants in maintaining their housing – supports such as trusteeships to assist more vulnerable groups, daily living skills-building opportunities, or friendship for people who are isolated or do not have family or friends. Some participants also felt that shelter stays were too short or too expensive to facilitate the transition into stable, private accommodations, and that wait lists for supportive housing leave people residing in shelters for too long.

In addition to identifying the problem, participants in the current study, the 2001 interviews, and the Shelter Guidelines Feedback focus groups all described a number of ideas for services to fill the need, ranging from the maintenance of a housing bulletin board in each OOTC site, to the deployment of advocates to shelters and OOTCs to assist guests in securing housing, income assistance and employment. These types of services are available in some formal shelters in the Region, and the positive experiences of study participants who have used these services affirms their value. Findings of this research suggest that such services need to be made more widely and universally accessible.

1.7 Need for specialized shelter and housing options

In addition to supportive and transitional housing, service providers, service users, and OOTC volunteers all indicated a need for different shelters and housing supports that are tailored to the needs of different populations including people with addictions, people with mental illness, youth, gays and lesbians, multicultural communities, seniors, and families (father- or mother-led). The need for support around addictions, as described above, was particularly strong within this theme, as were sub-themes related to people with mental illness, youth, and families.

“They should separate [parents] with children and the rest of the other people because they are different people and there are some rowdy people and it is hard with the baby. There are people that don’t sleep till 2 o’clock and they are making noise.”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

Specialized shelters: Mental health

Mental health emerged as a significant theme in all three data sets of this study, and runs through the interview data gathered in 2001 during the development of the Community Homelessness Plan and the “Shelter Guidelines Feedback” focus groups as well. All stakeholders recognize mental illness as not only a potential barrier to stable housing, but as a significant contributor to an unpredictable and sometimes frightening atmosphere in the shelters and OOTCs. OOTC volunteers in particular stressed the need for mental health supports attached to shelter services and OOTCs such as individualized counselling and help with taking medications.

Specialized shelters: Youth

All participant groups perceive an increase in number of youth at OOTCs and shelters over the past few years, along with a growing resentment of youth and older guests/residents towards one another. Whether due to actual experience or misconceptions about one another, the relationship between youth and older adults in the shelters is an uncomfortable one, and one that prompted a number of individuals from all three participant groups to suggest the establishment of separate sites, and more shelters and housing options tailored solely to youth.

Specialized shelters: Families

Service providers who participated in the focus groups say they have observed an increase in the number of families in need of shelter in Waterloo Region, and report a lack of appropriate emergency shelter for families. One interview participant expressed concern at having to take shelter with her children in the volatile, unpredictable shelter environment. The research suggests that more family units are needed to meet the demand.

1.8 Need for more coordination among services

Service providers who participated in the study observed that many good resources exist in the Region, but that they are not very well connected to each other. Service provider participants stressed the need for more communication and linkages between shelters and other organizations, between shelters and Out of the Colds, between Social Services and Housing, and between social workers and police officers. Concrete suggestions for improving the coordination of information and services include the

establishment of “wrap around” services, the creation of a central vacancy list, the maintenance of a housing registry and roommate bank, and the attachment of housing services to existing community supports like libraries.

1.9 OOTC and shelter environment

Threaded throughout the interview, survey and focus group data also were comments about the atmosphere and physical environment of the shelters and OOTCs.

Shelter environment: personal safety and security at shelters and OOTCs

Many of the study participants who have had experience staying in shelters or OOTCs expressed concern for their personal safety and the security of their belongings. Data from both service providers and service users highlight the importance of providing lockers for residents of shelters and guests of Out of the Cold, and suggest the need for stricter rules and more space between beds or locks for bedrooms. The Sheltering Guidelines Feedback Summary, similarly, reported that all five of the focus groups conducted during the feedback process identified personal safety as a significant issue in the shelters. Important to improving personal safety and security in the shelters, according to the Summary report, are the key role of staff members and their relationships with residents, the establishment of a welcoming atmosphere, the availability physical security apparatus (e.g., privacy in bathrooms, lockers, security personnel), the capacity to effectively address the needs of people with serious mental illness, and the consistent application of rules.

“There are 45 men or 50 men for one toilet and 4 or 5 women for the same toilet. The women’s toilet is almost always empty and the men’s toilet every time is occupied...I had to go sometime out of the church and I had no other choice. I couldn’t hold it back anymore and 3 people were waiting before me for the toilet. Very sticky situation.”

(Out of the Cold guest, Kitchener)

Shelter environment: hygiene at shelters & OOTCs

Another theme common to service providers, service users, and volunteers in the current study was related to hygiene. From the perspective of service providers, insufficient funding is a primary contributor to a lack of cleanliness and consequently to increased risk for outbreaks of infectious diseases at shelters. For OOTC volunteers and service users, discussions of hygiene focussed more on the need for more shower and washroom facilities, an adequate supply of toiletries, and improved access to laundry facilities, especially in the OOTC sites. Focus group participants also talked about the need for people without homes or offices in downtown Kitchener to have access to public washrooms for the times they are not in the shelters or OOTCs.

1.10 Increased funding for shelters

Service providers who participated in this study raised the need for more funding and staff for shelters, and many of the needs and solutions identified by all participants suggest the same. Service providers presenting this theme stressed that homelessness is increasing, that shelters and beds are full, and that when Out of the Cold ends each season, the formal shelter system is even more overwhelmed. According to the service providers who participated, more funding is needed in the formal shelter system in order to adequately meet emergency shelter needs in the Region, let alone to provide the individualized support many shelter users need to make the transition to more stable,

permanent housing. Current funding arrangements do not cover all costs, and independent fundraising is time-consuming and difficult in the context of services to stigmatized groups such as sex trade workers and drug addicts. Moreover, fundraising in the community puts shelters in competition with one another.

1.11 Choosing between out of the colds and the shelters

The contradictions in the reasons service users give for choosing to stay at OOTC instead of a shelter, or vice versa, suggest that the choice of where to stay depends a great deal on personal preference and individual needs. Some interview participants told us that they prefer shelters because they find the OOTCs too unstructured, too tolerant of disruptive behaviour or substance use, or too crowded. Others told us they prefer the OOTCs for exactly the same reasons. Some participants said they find OOTCs to be warmer and more accommodating than the shelters, while others said they found more personal and social support in the shelters, and found the OOTCs too anonymous.

A recurring theme in the data related to the choice of where to stay is that, while some people generally prefer one option over the other, many others use both depending on the circumstances.

Choice of shelter: why choose OOTC instead of a shelter?

A theme that comes through clearly from the research data is that although some people prefer the shelters and many use both, many people prefer OOTC over the formal shelters. Out of the Cold does not require a financial contribution from guests regardless of their ability to pay, is less structured, and (at some sites at least) has better food. When asked where they would stay if OOTC did not exist, in fact, most OOTC guests do not say they would stay in the shelters. Rather, most OOTC guests say they would live on the streets, in garbage bins, abandoned buildings, under bridges or with friends or family if OOTCs did not exist. Some OOTC guests also told us that they could not stay in shelters because they cannot afford the cost, because they had been banned from the shelters, or because the shelters were full.

“The Out of the Cold program doesn’t ask me to pay. The House of Friendship asks me to pay and it just gives me one week for free and then I have to pay.”

(OOTC, Kitchener)

In some cases, participants may simply not have known about or thought about the shelters when answering the question about alternatives to OOTC. A minority of OOTC guests did say that they would stay in the formal shelters if OOTC did not exist; nonetheless, the fact that most did not mention the shelters seems quite significant.

Choice of shelter: Why choose a shelter instead of OOTC?

Clear in the data, as well, is the fact that many of the people using the shelter system appreciate some of the services and amenities that shelters provide and OOTCs do not. Asked what kinds of services they have found helpful in their efforts to find employment or housing, in addition to a meal and a bed, interview participants identified a range of support services provided by some of the shelters including access to telephones,

transportation to potential homes or jobs, the assistance of housing coordinators, and linkages to mental health or addictions services.

Less clear in the data, however, is the extent to which support services provided by the shelters influences people's choice of shelter or OOTC. People staying at the OOTCs when we interviewed them were just as likely to have used and benefited from support services provided by the shelters as were shelter residents. A few shelter residents stated explicitly that they prefer shelters to OOTCs because they prefer the more structured environment, or so they can have a shower, get a bag lunch to take with them, and/or have somewhere to leave belongings during the day. More typical among the shelter residents we interviewed, however, were people who said they 'chose' to stay in a particular shelter because it was the only option they knew about.

"I came here because I wanted to make sure I can be clean and here they have showers and stuff like that and plus they make you lunch when you have to go to work... Some [Out of the Colds] have showers but not all of them have showers right and plus with here you can rest a lot sooner as well."

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

1.12 Impact of out of the colds on formal shelter system

Research participants had different opinions about the impact of Out of the Colds on the formal shelter system. Some consensus appears to exist among service providers, including OOTC volunteers and steering group members, that OOTCs confuse the course of action for youth by providing them with an alternative to more structured programs. More generally, some service providers worry that OOTCs undermine the priority given by government to both the shelter system and to longer-term housing solutions, by diverting homeless people away from the formal shelter system and thereby obscuring the level of need in the community. On the other hand, the choice of OOTC over formal shelters by many homeless people seems to indicate that the OOTCs are filling a need that the formal shelters are not, and evidence from OOTC guests suggests that many of them would avoid the shelters even if OOTC did not exist. Despite the lack of amenities, programs, and privacy, relative to the formal shelters, people prefer OOTC because it is less formal, does not require a financial contribution from guests, and is more anonymous.

Section 2: Users of sheltering services and supports

2.1 Data sources:

- Interviews with shelter residents and guest of Out of the Cold (OOTC)
- Focus groups with Homeless Advisory Group, St. John's Kitchen, and Waterloo Initiative for Supportive Housing (WISH)

2.2 Methods

2.2.1 Focus groups: Homeless advisory group, St. John's Kitchen, & WISH

The Homeless Advisory Group is an advisory group of the Kitchener Downtown Community Health Centre composed of volunteers who have lived experience of homelessness. The group supports each other, serves as a resource to the community on policy and service issues, provides education and undertakes community action to support people who are homeless. St. John's Kitchen is a haven in downtown Kitchener serving up to 300 meals per day and providing a refuge from isolation. At St. John's Kitchen, patrons come together to support one another, and to work together toward the redistribution of food that would otherwise be wasted. The Waterloo Initiative for Supportive Housing is a community-based organization concerned with expanding and improving supportive housing for consumers of mental health services.

The Region conducted one focus group with the Homeless Advisory Group itself, one with a group of patrons of St. John's Kitchen organized by the Homeless Advisory Group and St. John's Kitchen, and one with members of WISH. The Region conducted the three focus groups using the questions outlined in the Sheltering Needs Assessment Project Charter (page 10).

2.2.2 Interviews: Shelter residents and guests of out of the cold

A research team of the Centre for Research & Education in Human Services (CREHS) conducted qualitative interviews with shelter residents and guest of Out of the Cold in a number of sites in Kitchener, Waterloo, and Cambridge. To balance research expertise with an understanding of context, CREHS hired and trained three people with experience and contacts in the sheltering system to work as "community researchers" for the project along with two professional researchers. For further information on the research team, please see *Appendix A: CREHS Research Team*.

Interviews: Sites and recruitment

CREHS conducted interviews in four Out of the Cold sites and four shelters. Shelter sites were identified for CREHS by the Region project team, and Out of the Cold sites were selected based on needs and logistics from a prioritized list provided by the Out of the Cold Steering Group. Table 2 below lists the interview sites.

Table 2: Interview sites

Site	Date
Out of the Cold	
Cambridge, Wesley United Church	Tuesday March 8 Tuesday March 15
Waterloo, First United Church	Friday March 11
Kitchener, Trinity United Church	Monday March 14
Kitchener, Benton Street Baptist Church	Tuesday March 22
Shelters	
Kitchener, YWCA-Mary's Place	Thursday March 31
Kitchener, House of Friendship Charles Street Men's Hostel	Wednesday April 6
Cambridge: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Argus Young Men's House • Argus Young Women's House 	Thursday April 21

Researchers recruited the participants for the study directly with some assistance from shelter staff and Out of the Cold volunteers. The level of assistance requested of and provided by staff and volunteers varied from site to site depending on research needs and volunteer availability.

Researchers attended the sites during the evening meal and conducted the interviews after the meal. To recruit participants, researchers approached OOTC guests and shelter residents, introduced themselves, explained the study, discussed concepts of informed consent and voluntary participation, and asked for participation. In addition to a verbal explanation, researchers provided each potential participant with a letter outlining the study, its purpose and the request for an interview (attached as Appendix B). Researchers asked each potential participant whether s/he was staying the night before conducting the interview. Only people who indicated that they were spending the night and who readily agreed to participate were interviewed.

Interviews: Informed consent and interview protocol

Prior to beginning each interview, researchers explained the purpose of the study again, and discussed with the potential participant how the interview data would be used, how confidentiality would be ensured, and how the researchers could be contacted for follow-up if desired. At this point, researchers also emphasized the right of potential participants to refuse to participate or of participants to withdraw their participation at any point during the interview process. Each participant was provided with a form outlining provisions for ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation, and was asked to sign it to indicate informed consent. A copy of the informed consent form is attached as Appendix C.

Interviews were conducted following an open-ended, standardized protocol (Appendix D). Researchers were trained in the use of probes for generating more fulsome responses or for following up on themes raised by interview participants. At the end of

the interview, time was made to answer any questions the participant had about the study or the research team.

At the end of each interview, researchers thanked the participants for their time and insight, provided them with the research team leader’s business card and invited them to contact him if desired, and provided with a \$5 gift certificate for Tim Horton’s as a concrete gesture of appreciation. Whenever possible, participants were introduced to the research team leader who answered any remaining questions, thanked participants himself, and invited them to contact him with any remaining questions or concerns about the study.

Interviews: Participants

CREHS interviewed a total of 51 people who were either staying at Out of the Cold or at one of the shelters. Of those approached to be interviewed, eight declined. CREHS endeavoured to interview a representative mix of men and women, people of different ages, and people from different ethno cultural groups. Table 3 below shows the number of interviews conducted in each site. Table 4 shows the breakdown of participants by gender and age. All but six participants self-identified as Canadians of European decent. Among the six were 3 who identified themselves as “native”, two who identified themselves as “African”, and one who identified herself as “Jamaican”.

Table 3: Participants by site

Site	n
Out of the Cold	
Cambridge	11
Waterloo	11
Kitchener	6
Shelter	
Kitchener-Women	6
Kitchener-Men	7
Cambridge-Men	5
Cambridge-Women	5
Total	51

Table 4: Participants by gender and age

Total	Gender		Age				not known
	Male	Female	16-24	25-45	45-64	65+	
51	31	20	20	14	16	0	
Refusals							
8	6	2	3	1	4	0	

Participants ranged in experience with homelessness from someone in her first week of being homeless for the first time, to people who had been homeless on and off for the past five years.

2.2 Overarching themes (Interviews)

2.2.1 Dealing with addictions

Addictions are clearly a major factor in shelter/OOTC life and in the struggle to make the transition to more permanent housing. While issues related to addictions recur frequently in the interview data, opinions differ when it comes to service users' feelings about substance use. For some, the presence and tolerance of drug and alcohol use in shelters and OOTCs is seen a major contributor to a chaotic and volatile atmosphere in the shelters, and makes it difficult for those struggling to stay off drugs or alcohol and recover from addictions.

“When I was staying there there was so much of that stuff and I have seen good friends of mine come in there with trying to make the best of it and get back on their feet and now they are addicted to some pretty heavy drugs.”

(OOTC guest, Waterloo)

On the other hand, some shelter users suggest that more flexibility be shown in accommodating people with addictions:

“Be flexible for addictions. [Staff and volunteer attitude] is always negative and step on you for having addictions and this kind of thing. Turn it around, turn it into a positive thing. Give them their fix everyday and let them have a normal life based on the idea that they are an addict... For addictions, special rooms and sending them to detox is not a solution. It causes anger and resentment.”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

2.2.2 Housing affordability

A particularly strong theme in the interview data was about the need for improved incomes and/or lower rent. In regard to barriers to permanent housing, interview participants point to a need for better employment opportunities, for changes to social assistance benefits and provisions, and for more subsidized housing.

“I don't know if it is up to the shelters and Out of the Cold, I think it has to do more with the region and getting low income housing for people that desperately need it. If they had that we wouldn't need Out of the Cold would we?”

(OOTC guest, Cambridge)

2.2.3 Quality and appropriateness of low-rent housing

Affordability, however, is not the only factor influencing the transition to more permanent housing according to the interview data. Housing options available to many people coming out of the shelter system are limited to shared accommodations in the cheapest places available. Marginal housing, according to interview participants, often places

tenants at the mercy of the landlord, and the need to share rent can force tenants back into destructive social networks or make tenants vulnerable to their roommates.

2.2.4 Supports and information on shelters, housing, and social assistance

Another common theme running through the interview data was the need for support and information on housing, social assistance and other services. Several participants mentioned that they simply were not aware of the options available to them once they were homeless. Some became homeless suddenly and did not have access to information on shelter and housing options once they had found their first shelter.

Even people with experience in the shelter system, however, say they need assistance in finding housing or employment, or connecting to other services. In this regard, interview participants suggested a range of concrete supports such as transportation to possible rental sites, phone access to inquire about renting and employment, internet access for job or housing search, references in support of renting and employment, and general information on what's available both in the shelter system and housing system.

In addition to these concrete supports, a number of participants identified a need for more hands-on support in finding housing and negotiating leases, and advocacy support in navigating subsidized housing bureaucracies and Ontario Works. Such supports and services do exist in some shelters, and the positive experiences described by people who use them underscore their value.

2.2.5 Personal security and security of belongings

Concerns about personal safety and security of belongings were another common theme the interview responses. With the exception of the Argus youth shelters, participants who stay in the shelters and OOTCs describe the shelters and OOTCs and insecure and volatile:

“There is no privacy and there is always the thought that somebody will steal from you... which happens in the shelters... somebody will get angry at you and damage your things. The feeling of insecurity is always and I mean, and then having families and not women only... there will be a difference in the atmosphere.”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

2.2.6 Choosing between OOTCs and formal shelters

According to what the research participants told us, many people appear to use both OOTCs and shelters. The choice of where to stay on a given night appears to depend on a variety of factors including how crowded the shelter or OOTC is, who is staying there and what the social atmosphere is like, and even what food is being served. One young participant, for instance, said that he usually stays at the OOTC because that is where his friends stay, but that he stays at a shelter every third or fourth night in order to get a good night's sleep and a shower. Other participants, however, did express a general preference for either OOTC or a shelter.

OOTC instead of a shelter

Among the reasons for staying at OOTC instead of a formal shelter, interview participants cited the following:

- no cost
- warmer social atmosphere
- fewer rules
- better food
- shelters are full

Shelter instead of OOTC

- more structure
- better enforcement of rules
- more amenities

2.3 Findings by interview question

2.3.1 Barriers to finding and keeping permanent housing

When asked what kinds of things make it hard to find and keep permanent housing, responses of Out of the Cold guests and shelter residents tended to focus on either problems with the housing options that are available, or with problems maintaining enough income to afford decent housing.

Barriers: Cost of housing

“Everything is too expensive...government type of housing availability is very scarce, very limited.”

(OOTC guest, Waterloo)

Barriers: Income/poverty

Related to the cost of housing, the second most prominent theme in participants’ articulations of the barriers to finding and keeping permanent housing was a lack of money:

“If I had money...Kitchener is not expensive. If I had enough money I would get an apartment and I would be all set”.

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

Employment

In relation to a lack of income, some participants spoke about the impact of losing one’s job on their living situations:

“Some people are here got laid off or fired.”

(Shelter resident, Cambridge)

Social assistance

Many of the participants also talked about the limitations of social assistance:

“You have \$500 from welfare for rent and food; you tend to eat first.”

(paraphrased from Homeless Advisory Group focus group)

Sustaining the level of income

Others talked about challenges they have in maintaining their income from employment or Ontario Works:

“Myself, I have difficulty keeping a job and even when it comes to things like welfare, I have difficulty keeping up with the requirements that they have and that is the reason I have difficulty [with housing].”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

Barriers: Problems with cheap housing

In the context of high housing costs and low incomes, finding an affordable place to rent does not guarantee secure housing.

In order to afford any kind of rent, people using Out of the Cold and shelters who wish to rent an apartment often must share with a roommate(s). The roommate relationship can be a mutually supportive one, but it can also prolong vulnerability through dependence on another person:

“...if you are rooming with somebody and they just move out on you, you are pretty much stuck. It doesn't matter if it happens at the beginning of the month, the money is not there to cover the rent and then before you know it you are evicted because of somebody else's lack of respect.”

(OOTC guest, Kitchener)

Having to share accommodations can also prolong vulnerability by reinforcing destructive social networks:

“It is like a lot of people here do have very special needs. A lot of people here are not emotionally stable and so they have special needs in addition to lack of housing and for people like that to end up somewhere where they could get drugs or alcohol or go back to prostitution that is not good.”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

Barriers: Discrimination

A number of service users feel that many landlords are hesitant to rent to them due to their age and/or their being on social assistance:

“I think it is my age. Like a lot of landlords won’t, like, rent out to most adolescents because most of them have parties and disrespect the place and it is the reputation that it is a teenager. It is age-ism, but it is apparent everywhere. I have applied for a few places and they said that they wouldn’t take in teenagers because of past experience.”

(Shelter resident, Cambridge)

“You tell them you are on social assistance and you are living in a women’s shelter...they don’t really tell you no because, but they will find a way [to tell you no]...I think that they think maybe that you are a drug addict or something.”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

Barriers: Lack of political will

Related to themes about stigma and discrimination, several participants stated a belief that the primary barrier to permanent housing for all people in the region has to do with political priorities. To illustrate the point, participants point to a decision to build a \$35 million garage for snow ploughs, rather than put the money toward housing and improved shelters, and express frustration at being consulted “every year” and not seeing any improvements.

Barriers: Waterloo Region coordinated access list

About half of the interview participants said that they were not on the Waterloo Region Coordinated Access List. Shelter residents were considerably more likely to be on the list than were OOTC guests. Most participants knew about the list, and those who were not on it cited long wait lists, problems qualifying, and the use of other housing supports as the main reasons for not being on it.

Wait list

Many of the interview participants who were not on the coordinated access list for housing said they did not bother with it because they felt the wait was too long to be useful to them:

“I think honestly it would be faster if I went out to try to find my own place... My sister she just went through it and that took her about a year to get into and she has got two kids.”

(Shelter resident, Cambridge)

Problems qualifying

Other participants shared experiences of having been removed from the list due to bureaucratic technicalities, having been unable to apply due to a lack of identification and other documents, and difficulties applying as a couple. Participants did not offer further details on the specifics of the “bureaucratic technicalities” and other difficulties they experienced in the housing system.

Other supports in place

Still others were either on wait lists in other jurisdictions, or felt adequately supported by other agencies such as CMHA or Lutherwood.

2.3.2 Needs and gaps in the sheltering system

When asked what is missing from the shelter system or what changes should be made, shelter residents and OOTC guests talked about a need for more individual supports, more flexibility to accommodate different needs, the importance of maintaining a friendly atmosphere, and the need for improved physical amenities. When asked if they had experiences with specific shelter programs that work well and address some of these needs, interview participants identified only a few, concrete services. In some cases, when asked about needs and gaps in the sheltering system, participants also talked about the need for policy change.

Needs: Individualized supports

Welfare/housing support/information

One strong theme in the shelter service user data was the need for better access to information and support related to employment, housing and social assistance. Participants talked about the need for more information on where to look for housing, as well as support in finding housing and negotiating leases:

“If one of the staff could help us—be our reference—I think that would help us rent...maybe they will believe a caseworker that works there thinking that she knows me better...or if staff could call for you.”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

“I think they should have a bulletin board in every church during the Out of the Cold times to give them that help where they can search for those places that are available. To be able to get an intent-to-rent form, they should be on hand here. You know if people want you to get an apartment they can easily take those instead of having to go to Welfare all the way in Waterloo or having to go up to ESP and get one. They should be readily available here.”

(OOTC, Waterloo)

Transportation emerged as an important sub-theme in participants' descriptions of supports that they would like better access to. A shelter resident from Kitchener described an example of a helpful service of this type that already exists:

“They have...a gentleman here he drives—if you are looking for jobs or housing—he drives us around, that is his job... I think it would be better if they had one more person doing something like that. If you have housing or something that you have to go look at,

one person could be out with one guy and there could be two or three people waiting.”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

Several other participants, similarly, described services they accessed at shelters that they found very supportive in their search for housing:

“ROOF helps me out up to date right now. I have a housing worker... She helps me out once a week, once or twice a week. Just financial stuff. She helped me with getting furniture for my place that I am moving into at the end of this month...there isn't very much that hasn't worked. Everybody is a really big help in every way”

(OOTC guest, Cambridge)

“[A staff person or volunteer at Lutherwood] called people – like she knows the landlords and stuff – and ask them, and then she gave me a bus ticket to go and look at them and then she helped me to the Kitchener housing waiting list.... Then she referred me to Kitchener Housing she had an interview with and then from there I got the place.”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

Housing alternatives and transitional housing

Another theme in the interview data was a wish for more housing geared towards those in transition, in addition to emergency shelter, such as hostels:

“I think they should open more hostels too. Not these Out of the Colds. They should have hostels where you can book in and come to the city or cities, book in and you could have a place where you could start all over again or start your life up. [Because] a lot of people are getting out of jails and hospitals...they are putting you out on the street and you got nothing there to go to.”

(Out of the Cold guest, Cambridge)

“I would like to see a temporary place where I could go and wait for my permanent apartment if I am not allowed to stay here.”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

Emotional counselling

A few interview participants identified having someone to talk to about emotional difficulties as a service they could use more of:

“...especially if you are coming from an abusive relationship. You are emotionally drained. You need some people to talk to. Here they just offer you a place to stay and nothing else, really.”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

“One of the things that I miss here is a person who is trained listener. Someone who with you could discuss personal problems, emotional problems. I am not sure, probably a psychologist with whom you could discuss things without them being involved in the running of this place or part of the people here. There is a difference of being able to discuss a lot of things, minor things, without them ending up in your record, quote unquote...a lot of the people here come from absolutely horrible backgrounds.”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

Financial/skill-oriented counselling

Other interview participants expressed a need for help with personal finances:

“Help people back on the go, a chance to get ahead, monitor income and what to put away to get out and back on their own again, and base it on their income proportionally...support with both work and housing.”

(Out of the Cold guest, Cambridge)

Needs: Recognition of different lifestyle needs

Provisions for different groups

- Youth

Tension between youth and older people emerged as a strong theme in the interview data. Many older guests commented that many of the youth are “not really homeless,” and complained about the late hours they keep and their sometimes loud behaviour:

“After the lights, many of the youth are disrespectful. Youth still have energy and make too much noise for those who are actually trying to get some rest and who have been walking around all day. So should have separate room for youth so that they can be as loud as they want and so the people who need to sleep can sleep.”

(Out of the Cold guest, Kitchener)

- Families

Finding a way to better accommodate families in the shelter system was a significant theme that emerged from one interview with a shelter resident:

“They should separate [parents] with children and the rest of the other people because they are different people and there are some

rowdy people and it is hard with the baby. There are people that don't sleep till 2 o'clock and they are making noise."

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

- People with physical disabilities

Ensuring that shelters are accessible to people with physical disabilities was raised as an issue in at least one service user focus group. While not an issue frequently raised by study participants, very few of the participants themselves had visible physical disabilities. Further research may be useful in assessing the breadth of the need and identifying specific accessibility problems.

More flexible hours of operation/length of stay

One strong theme that emerged from guests of Out of the Cold is that they would like to see Out of the Cold stay open longer during the day:

"I think I would change the times that they are open because like I said, a lot of them are stuck walking the streets until it opens and I know myself, everybody knows, it gets very cold. Like I said, these people have no place to go."

(Out of the Cold guest, Cambridge)

In terms of supporting the transition to more permanent housing, several interview participants also pointed to a need for more flexibility in the length and conditions of shelter stays:

"Don't kick people out as soon as they get their welfare cheque if they have nowhere to go; let them stay until they find another place."

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

Needs: Safety and security

Privacy and security

Interview participants at both OOTC and shelters also expressed a strong need for greater privacy and security in shelters and OOTCs:

"There is no privacy and there is always the thought that somebody will steal from you... which happens in the shelters... somebody will get angry at you and damage your things. The feeling of insecurity is always and I mean, and then having families and not women only... there will be a difference in the atmosphere."

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

Stricter rules

A related theme in OOTC guest interviews was a wish for more consistent rules across church sites, and for more stringent enforcement of rules related to fighting, drinking and drug abuse:

“Make sure there is nobody pushing drugs around there. When I was staying there, there was so much of that stuff and I have seen good friends of mine come in there with trying to make the best of it and get back on their feet and now they are addicted to some pretty heavy drugs.”

(Out of the Cold guest, Cambridge)

Needs: OOTC and shelter environment

Physical amenities

- Communication tools

A concrete support a number of interviewees said they would like better access to is things like telephones and internet to assist them in their search for housing or employment.

“They could let you use the phone to call for apartments. If you legitimately say I am calling this place for an apartment then they shouldn’t make you use your laundry money. I only have like 2 or 3 dollars a day barely. I don’t get welfare cheques...I am not saying let them use the phone for anything but if they are legitimately are looking for apartments then they should be able to use the phone for that.”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

The interview data suggest that these kinds of amenities are available at least to some residents at some shelters, but that more of this kind of support would be beneficial.

- Hygiene and bathroom facilities

A theme emerging from the interviews and focus groups was a need for more access to showers, and bathroom facilities. For one thing, more facilities are needed at the OOTC sites, according to many of the OOTC guests we interviewed:

“There are 45 men or 50 men for one toilet and 4 or 5 women for the same toilet. The women’s toilet is almost always empty and the men’s toilet every time is occupied...I had to go sometime out of the church and I had no other choice. I couldn’t hold it back

anymore and 3 people were waiting before me for the toilet. Very sticky situation.”

(Out of the Cold guest, Kitchener)

Additionally, some focus group participants identified a need for the public bathrooms in downtown Kitchener that were done away with during the restructuring of the downtown core. These focus group participants point out that not having public bathrooms in downtown Kitchener has negative implications not just for those who would use them, but for public health when people find less hygienic alternatives.

- More sleeping space/beds

Both OOTC guests and shelter residents feel the shelters and OOTCs need more beds and more space:

“You can’t stand the snoring and then you got a problem when you got to go to work the next day.”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

Needs: Friendly attitudes and atmosphere

Attitudes of staff

One of the themes emerging from the interview data has to do with burnout they see among some shelter/OOTC staff or volunteers, and a perception of differential treatment of guests/residents.

“I don’t think they should be allowed to work there for more than two years at a time... they become burnt out and don’t care about the people that are there anymore because they are seeing the same thing day in and day out, same problems over and over again...[they] just learn not to care anymore... I was here 8 years ago and quite honestly, the people here are completely different than they were. I loved the place the first time that I was here. They did great by me, they really did. And this time, I am just a number to be shuffled off.”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

“I actually see anger and resentment from the staff toward certain people because they don’t see that individual the way they do as the person standing beside them because there was a problem. That is not right, if you are going to be working in any of these kind of fields, you really have to step back and be able to say I have this resentment towards that person, I shouldn’t be dealing with them anymore.”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

Conversely, participants who were happy with their shelter situation cited the warm, homey atmosphere as a primary factor:

"[My shelter] is like a home. I don't consider it a shelter, it is like a home and you make the best of yourself."

(Shelter resident, Cambridge)

Attitudes of other guests or residents

OOTC guests and shelter residents also talked about a need to do something about the atmosphere created by tension among residents:

"People are very touchy...become very easily annoyed regardless almost of what one says to them."

(Shelter resident, Cambridge)

In some cases, residents experience a feeling of vulnerability to abuse from other residents:

"There is one other thing: if somebody doesn't like me, I have a baby, they call children services and they just come like that... If somebody say something to me and I got to say words back at her, some people are known to be like big bullies so you are not supposed to say things back to them."

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

"You can't feel like a human being, being there and you have to be careful because if somebody doesn't like you then they will create problems to have you kicked out just to satisfy their needs."

(Shelter guest, Kitchener)

Some residents were also unhappy with the amount of swearing and the mess often left behind by other residents.

Needs: Models that meet the needs

When asked about sheltering programs they were familiar with that worked well and met their needs, interview participants offered relatively few concrete examples. Of the examples participants did identify, many were discreet services and amenities such as housing workers at ROOF and Lutherwood, a volunteer driver at House of Friendship, and access to telephones at the Working Centre. Other specific examples include the following comments:

- "Argus is a well-structured program."
- "Argus youth shelter program provides references for housing"
- "John Howard Society; they help you with jobs and help you search for an apartment."
- "Cambridge Career Connections. They do help you with apartment searching."

Needs: Policy issues

In the focus groups in particular, a number of participants commented on the need for more proactive policy and planning around housing and development. Some participants called for legislation that obliges the Region to ensure that a certain number of affordable housing units are built for every new housing development that is approved. Others spoke more generally about the need for more “creative planning” to decide how to “manage land within a community.”

Another aspect of policy development that focus group participants noted was a need for better coordination and integration of policy and planning related to housing among the four levels of government. Participants called for more active participation on housing issues among local councillors, and more collaboration in planning and policy making among federal, provincial, regional, and municipal governments.

2.3.3 The choice of out of the cold instead of a shelter

The following are the main reasons people say they choose Out of the Cold instead of a shelter in order of prominence in the interview data.

Choice of OOTC: Cost

“The Out of the Cold program doesn’t ask me to pay. The House of Friendship asks me to pay and it just gives me one week for free and then I have to pay.”

(OOTC, Kitchener)

Choice of OOTC: The social atmosphere

Some volunteers offer a friendly, non-judgmental ear to listen to some of the guests’ problems. Other guests go to Out of the Cold to meet with friends and see how they are doing.

Choice of OOTC: Fewer rules

Among both OOTC guests and shelter residents there is a perception that some people at least are drawn to the OOTCs because of less structure and less stringent rules:

“I think people use just Out of the Cold because they can get drunk and stoned and still go there and not have to worry about staff kicking them out.”

(Shelter guest, Kitchener)

Choice of OOTC: The food

“I would probably have to say because the food is a bit better than a regular men’s hostel.”

(Out of the Cold guest, Waterloo)

Choice of OOTC: Shelters are full

The other time people say they stay in the OOTCs instead of the shelters is when the shelters are full or too crowded.

2.3.4 Alternatives to OOTC

Alternative to OOTC: Informal shelter

When asked where they would go if Out of the Cold did not exist, most participants said they would find accommodation outside the formal shelter system.

“I don’t know what I would do. I would have to sleep in stairwells or anywhere that I could find a little bit of warmth. Take a sleeping bag with me and I don’t know what I would do other than that.”

(OOTC, Cambridge)

Out of the Cold guests said that if OOTC did not exist, they would sleep in parks or stairwells, in cars, or with family or friends.

Alternative to OOTC: Formal shelters

Other participants, however, indicated that they would turn to the shelters if they could not stay at OOTC.

“I might go like one day to sleep on the street and maybe next day go to House of Friendship next day to pay for it. I think I have to pay \$10 a night or something like that. Maybe every other night I be able to pay them \$10.”

(OOTC guest, Kitchener)

Alternative to OOTC: Bridges

Guests at the Cambridge OOTC were asked if they think they will use the new Bridges housing facility when it opens. Out of a total of 11 interviews, 8 people had heard about Bridges. Of those 8, 5 said they and others would stay at Bridges when it is open: “I think there is going to be a lot of people that applied for it. I think in concept it is a really good idea.” Two of the participants indicated that they were already “on the list” for housing at Bridges.

The main appeal of Bridges, for the respondents who said they would stay there, is that it is new and clean. One respondent also said he would stay there because “it is close to Cambridge” and because “I know they are not going to let any schmuck in there.” Only one participant cited the closing of the OOTC as a primary reason why people will stay at Bridges:

“I think they will use it because it is the only place to go. Rather than go wherever they go like parks or I think it will be very busy.”

(OOTC guest, Cambridge)

Other interview participants were less certain that they would stay at Bridges. For most, Bridges appeared to be simply another shelter option that they might access occasionally or might not. Given that only one OOTC guest noted that Bridges would be the only shelter option in Cambridge once it is open, however, interview responses identifying Bridges as just another option may reflect a lack of knowledge about the plans for Bridges and OOTC. Three participants said they had heard nothing about Bridges. Another possible explanation for the relatively low number of participants who said they would stay at Bridges is that many OOTC guests either do not see themselves as requiring shelter in the long run, or, at least, as requiring shelter in Cambridge. Asked whether he will stay at Bridges, one respondent put it this way:

“Nope, not if I can help it. Like I said I am doing this for now and hope to finally get out of this location.”

(OOTC guest, Cambridge)

2.3.5 The choice of shelters instead of OOTC

For some users of the shelter system, the formal shelters offer something OOTC does not:

“Over here it is a little more leeway. You have your phone and bed and people you know. Staff numbers if you have medical reasons. It is more convenient here in town. Out of the Cold you have to go to churches and carry all your clothes with you and here you have lockers and everything else.”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

“I came here because I wanted to make sure I can be clean and here they have showers and stuff like that and plus they make you lunch when you have to go to work... Some [Out of the Colds] have showers but not all of them have showers right and plus with here you can rest a lot sooner as well.”

(Shelter resident, Kitchener)

Section 3: Service providers

3.1 Data sources:

- 8 focus groups with a range of health and community service providers

3.2 Findings

3.2.1 Current trends, issues and needs in terms of sheltering in Waterloo Region

Trends: Homelessness on the rise

No shelter vacancies

According to service provider focus group data, since the 1990s when welfare was cut by 22% and senior government curbed its funding for new housing, the rate of homelessness has dramatically increased in Waterloo Region. Service providers felt that Waterloo Region has not yet recovered from this increase, noting that shelters in the Region are full and facing growing demand. According to at least one focus group participant, for instance, enough applications have been received for housing at Bridges to fill the facility four times over.

Cycle of homelessness

Service providers who participated in the study talked about the cycle of homeless, parents first coming into the subsidized housing system and then their children entering it fifteen or twenty years later. Furthermore, even when granted subsidized housing, many people often fall back into homelessness due to a lack of support for mental health, addictions, and other issues that they face. In addition to those who cycle through homelessness, the service provider focus group data also observed that the number of individuals in the Region who have never been homeless before is also on the rise.

Increasing number of homeless youth

Consistent with the interview data, the focus group data reveal a perception of an increase in the number of youth – especially youth under the age of 19 – who are attending Out of the Cold. Focus group participants have observed that youth are leaving home at an increasingly early age. One service provider reported, for example, that 17% of individuals at one youth shelter had left home for the first time at the age of 12.

Increasing number of homeless families

Service providers say they are also witnessing an increase in the number of homeless families in Waterloo Region. Service providers say that too few spaces are available in shelters specifically for women and children in crisis, and that women and children are therefore appearing at the shelters more regularly than in the past. In addition to the increasing length of stay and number of women and children at shelters, service providers also reported a growing number of father-led families who are homeless. Service providers in some areas said the need is for twice as many family shelter spaces as currently exist.

Trends: Addictions and mental health concerns

Service providers who participated in the focus groups reported an increase in drug addictions in the Waterloo Region, especially with highly addictive drugs such as crack. Service providers pointed out that many homeless individuals have mental health issues, estimating that 40% or more of the guests of OOTC have mental health issues.

3.2.2 Barriers to finding and keeping permanent housing

Barriers: Lack of safe, affordable, and appropriate housing

The lack of safe, affordable, appropriate, and accessible housing was a strong theme brought up by service providers in the focus groups. Participants noted that the type of housing available for \$350 often excludes cooking appliances, making it difficult for tenants to buy reasonably priced food products, even if they are employed. Participants also noted that low-income housing situations often make it difficult for tenants to maintain a new lifestyle and stay off drugs or alcohol. For example, one service provider reported that when you live with people who have serious mental health issues or in a crack house where you can not sleep, it is sometimes safer on the street than at home.

“The only rooming house you can actually afford with welfare is a crack house.”

(Service provider focus group participant)

Barriers: Lack of transitional, supported, and supportive housing

Another theme emerging from the service provider focus groups was the lack of supportive (pre and post) and transitional housing. In addition, participants noted that once housed, there is a lack of ongoing support for tenants to maintain housing; supports such as trusteeships to assist more vulnerable groups, daily living skill-building opportunities, or friendship for people who are isolated or don't have family or friends. Participants also felt that the waiting lists for supported/supportive housing are too long to expect people to wait in shelters.

Barriers: Difficulty finding and keeping employment

Difficulties in finding and keeping employment was another theme that emerged from the service provider focus group data. Service providers talked about the difficulty of getting or keeping jobs for people with few marketable skills, and about the low pay and vulnerability to replacement of workers in low-skilled jobs.

Barriers: Difficulty with the welfare process

Consistent with the interview data, focus group notes revealed a theme related to the difficulties in understanding and feeling respected throughout the welfare process. According to one service provider, “A missing piece [in the services currently available] is that no one helps with ODSP forms.” Similarly, as another service provider put it, “unless someone advocates with Ontario Works workers, the individuals who are homeless shut down immediately.” Having someone to walk applicants through the Ontario Works system, according to the focus group data, can greatly assist people in qualifying for and maintaining Ontario Works and disability benefits.

Barriers: Lack of sufficient income

Related to the difficulties with the welfare system, and consistent with the interview data, service providers data suggest that even when an individual receives welfare or is employed, insufficient income often remains as a barrier to finding and maintaining permanent housing. Participants noted that ODSP and OW allowances, like part-time or minimum wage job earnings, are insufficient to rent more than rooming houses if enough for a place at all, after paying for food or expensive prescription medications. In addition, new restrictions that limit eligibility for OW/ODSP community start-up benefits from once a year to once every two years means individuals have less revenue available for negotiating secure housing. Similarly, without money, transportation to potential housing situations or to reach other services once housed becomes a significant barrier.

Barriers: Stigma*Stigma and political will*

In the view of several of the service providers who participated in the focus groups, an important barrier to adequate shelter is a lack of political will supported by a general societal attitude that blames homeless people for their homelessness. Like the service users we interviewed, some service providers point to the general acceptance of the decision to spend \$35 million on a garage for snow ploughs, and speculate that the City of Kitchener would have faced stiffer opposition had the decision been to spend that money on shelters for the homeless. Service providers expressing this viewpoint say that current policy seems to assume that people accessing poverty-related benefits and programs may not be deserving of assistance: "If they were deserving poor, it would be a different system."

Discrimination in housing market

Service providers also say that a stigma attached to being homeless, using shelters, and experiencing addictions or mental illness presents a significant barrier for many shelter users when it comes to finding and keeping housing. The same is true, according to some service providers, for people coming out of the correctional system. Many landlords are hesitant to rent to people with addictions, mental health issues, or criminal records.

Barriers: Personal choice

One significant theme emerging from the service provider data that was not present in other data sets has to do with personal choice in remaining homeless. According to some focus group participants, some individuals choose to remain on the street because the community and sense of family they develop with other street-involved people, or because they value belonging to a particular subculture. Some service providers also suggest that individuals perpetuate their homelessness through a lack of motivation and develop learned helplessness as a result of anger and disappointment with the social welfare system and a negative relationship with their case workers.

Barriers: Mental health and addictions

In other cases, service providers noted that shelter residents are dealing with complex issues, such as domestic violence, addictions, and mental health, but that the funding to address mental health issues or addictions is insufficient, and often encumbered with so much paper work that staff have little time to help individual residents to have their needs met. Participants also felt that some individuals using the shelter system who use drugs and alcohol make the transitional difficult for people trying to recover from addictions or for people leaving correctional facilities and trying to re-integrated into the community. They also said that if individuals have a criminal record, no one wants to rent to them. In addition, service providers noted that individuals with mental health issues often have difficulty making and keeping appointments.

Barriers: Structure and bureaucracy

A final theme emerging from the service provider data was about bureaucratic and structural barriers to housing. For example, one service provider described the frustration of situations where beds are empty but unattainable, particularly in highly structured programs such as Kiwanis, due to rigid bureaucratic policies. Similarly, some of the service providers who participate in the focus groups lamented the long waiting lists for services that favour individuals who have mental health issues over those who have addictions issues. Others described frustrating situations in which individuals with undiagnosed or difficult-to-diagnose mental illness cannot access housing until they get a diagnosis, and others still identified narrow definitions of populations eligible for services as a barrier to accessing services, particularly for people with a dual diagnosis.

3.2.3 Needs and gaps in the sheltering system**Needs: Sense of ownership and self-help**

A key theme running through service provider data had to do with the degree of ownership service users feel over their shelter choices, and the value of programs that increase the degree of control shelter users have over their shelter and housing situations. In the view of many of the focus group participants, developing a sense of ownership over their shelter situation is an important step toward engaging homeless people in taking control of their housing situations more generally. One approach suggested by focus group participants would be more programs within the shelters that give residents responsibilities such as cleaning and maintenance. In the process, some service providers argue, shelter residents would gain life skills, and some current work experience.

Another approach to building a sense of ownership, suggested by focus group participants, is to give shelter residents more direct control over the shelters. A number of focus group participants, for example, would like to see the development of more peer-based approaches to managing shelters, citing the 'factory housing' model in Toronto as an example and calling on the Region to stimulate the development of small-scale transitional shelters that are peer-led. Again using the Toronto model as an example, other focus group participants expressed a need for programs that make home ownership more accessible to shelter residents. Habitat for Humanity was another model identified on this sub-theme.

As another means of strengthening the ability of shelter residents to take control over their own housing situations, service providers also call on the Region to develop more supportive housing programs. Supportive housing, focus group participants suggest, not only help individuals to make the transition to more independent and stable housing, but in so-doing take some pressure off the emergency shelter system.

Needs: Funding for more and better shelters

The need for more funding for shelters emerged as a theme related to gaps in the sheltering system. At the current funding levels, beds and facilities are full, and no money is available for building and cleaning. According to the participants, while the shelters are expected to provide shelter to all who need it, the current funding arrangement does not provide for all costs. As a result, shelters find themselves in competition with each other to make ends meet. Some participants noted that in some parts of the province, shelters receive 100% funding for all individuals using their services. Moreover, shelter providers point to the difficulty of raising money for marginalized and stigmatized populations such as injection drug users, sex trade workers, and people with mental illness.

More supportive housing possibilities

In terms of examples of good housing supports, focus group participants talked about group living arrangements such as are available at Charles Village and Kramer House in Kitchener, or places like Eby Village, which provide support for people while providing them with their own space, as successful models to build on. Doon Valley Manor dorms for seniors was also praised for its capacity to look after medication and provide 24 hours supervision, its ability to take residents to doctors as needed, and its link with CMHA and Waterloo Regional homes.

“Support to learn how to cook, how to open a bank account; they have been beaten down for 25 years, sometimes need people to hold to guide them.”

(paraphrased from service provider focus group participant)

Some service providers explained that since the Province transferred the administration and funding responsibility of housing to the Region (while retaining control of the funding model), budgets do not allow for maintaining supportive and supported housing, which they say have started to resemble “slum areas.”

Better hygiene

Consistent with the interview data, another theme emerging from the service provider data related to improving hygiene. Unlike the interview data, however, service providers identified a need for increased funding in order to ensure that proper hygienic standards are provided to shelter residents. One service provider even mentioned that because of a lack of staff to do the needed cleaning, there have been outbreaks of infectious disease at one shelter.

More amenities are needed

Like shelter residents and OOTC guests, service providers identified a need for more facilities for showering and laundry, as well as lockers and emergency storage space at shelters “so they can feel dignity.” They noted that people would love to have their own spaces, a private room and private bathroom.

Needs: More staff capacity is needed

Related to the theme of need for increased funding, a need for greater staff capacity in the shelters emerged as an important theme in the service provider focus groups.

Greater numbers of staff members

One sub-theme in focus group discussions of increased staff support was the need for more people to work with shelter residents. Participants cited ratios of one to three staff for every 50 to 70 clients, and much worse in some contexts. Even in shelters with successful programs, some participants argue, staff burn out is high. As one service provider said, “just because there are some services, doesn’t mean we have solved the problem.”

More individualized attention/care for clients

The theme of increased staff support was also related to a need for more client-centred services, such as “wrap around” or a “plan of care” and the need for supports to help people develop daily living skills. One focus group participant suggested more physicians and psychiatrists are needed at the shelters. A strong sub-theme related to the need for more individualized care was the need for case managers. In the current context, according so some focus group participants, shelter workers are so overwhelmed by the workload that they are focused on containing the residence rather than assisting people in finding housing and linking them to other services and supports.

Staff and volunteer training

Focus group participants also stressed the importance of more training for staff and volunteers to ensure that they are compassionate and respectful.

“We as a society somehow think vulnerable populations don’t deserve same quality of life... we need to be careful about keeping our humanity.”

(paraphrased from service provider focus group participant)

Needs: Policy and policy coordination

Another area where service providers identified some need was at the policy level. Like some of the service users we interviewed, service providers identify policy changes at the provincial level – namely the 22% cutbacks to social assistance in the late 1990s and the downloading of responsibility for the funding of housing to the regional level – as major contributors to the current level of homelessness in the region. In terms of addressing the problem, focus group participants talked about a need for more

coordination among those making decisions that impact on housing and homelessness: “get away from silos, especially as it related to government(s).” Some service providers expressed a view that more needs to be done even within the Waterloo Regional Government itself to better integrate the various departments and ensure that questions of affordable housing and homelessness are an integral aspect of both social planning and land use planning.

Related to community planning, some service providers suggest that the Region be careful to integrate shelters and affordable housing throughout the community to avoid creating “ghettos.” Concretely, some service providers propose would like to see it become policy that 10% of all apartments built in the Region must be affordable housing.

Needs: Housing and welfare advocacy/support

Like the interview participants, focus group participants called for more housing and welfare advocacy and support for residents on site at the shelters, including front line housing coordinators and government workers:

“Advocates are needed for individuals who are homeless as they take anything and there are a lot of failures due to the substandard or less than ideal conditions”

(paraphrased from service provider focus group participant)

Service providers also emphasized the need for immediate services, such as a 24/7 crisis hotline so that help is provided when needed: “not next year, they may be dead next year.”

Needs: More activities and programming

Like shelter residents and OOTC guests, some service provider participants underlined the importance of recreational outlets for shelter residents “other than sitting and smoking,” the need for something to keep their mind occupied, structure their time, and relieve boredom. As one service provider asked about a shelter located in Kitchener:

“Why... do they have to go out all day? Why can't you put them in programming there or transition them to other sites?”

(paraphrased from service provider focus group participant)

Needs: Rules and responsibilities

From the service providers, a strong theme in the data was the importance of rules and responsibilities for residents of shelters or housing set-ups. In this regard, participants suggest the enforcement of consistent rules across all OOTC sites and the implementation a reward system in shelters in which rent would be dropped \$10.00 per month if property is well-maintained. A sub-theme related to rules and responsibilities was the potential benefit of residents taking on the responsibility of cleaning in the shelters, as they do at Argus and Anselma House. Another idea emerging from the service provider participants was the concept of structuring shelter programs to give

residents more control over how things are run, instead of setting things up with a hierarchy and rules that residents simply must adhere to.

Needs: More coordination among services

Service providers noted that there are many good resources in the Region, but observed that they are not connected to each other. Participants stressed the need for more communication and linkage between shelters and organizations, between shelters and Out of the Cold, between Social Services and Housing, as well as between social workers and police officers. One participant referred to the Cambridge Action on Homelessness Group (CAHG) as a good example of coordination in action as “they work with people to see they don’t come back, by transporting them to treatment for example.” Also noted was the importance of one central vacancy list, a housing registry and roommate bank, as well as “one-stop shopping for housing,” and attaching housing services to community supports such as the library.

Discharge planning (family and children’s services, corrections, etc.)

A sub-theme related to coordination among services that emerged from the focus groups was about the need for better planning and support for people being discharged from psychiatric hospitals, the corrections system or the child welfare system. Having nowhere to go and often without so much as a piece of identification, many people discharged from jail, psychiatric hospitals and the child welfare system very quickly end up on the street and sleeping in the shelters and OOTCs.

Needs: Variety and flexibility of specialized options

Service providers emphasized the importance of providing a wider variety of shelter and housing options (including dry and wet shelters, and shelters for seniors and youth) that are tailored to specific communities and populations, because different populations do not always mix well. For example, with regards to multicultural communities and new immigrants, they noted that in addition to the need for interpretation services, cultural differences when it comes to living habits for families need to be taken into account. They also stressed the need for sensitivity to gay and lesbian communities, the need for accessibility for individuals with disabilities and people with developmental disabilities, the need for single-unit apartments for parents, and the need for supports and shelters for the medically fragile and the senior homeless.

Youth

Youth in particular are a unique group with different needs to meet, especially those youth over 16 who fall outside the mandate of Family and Children’s Services. In the absence of a formal shelter for youth between the ages of 16 and 17 in Kitchener and with very limited space in the shelters for youth in Cambridge, participants witness increasing numbers of young people staying at the shelters for adults where addictions and mental health issues are prevalent, and where programs are adult-oriented. Focus group participants talked about the need for separate emergency beds for youth shelters, and transitional supportive housing designed for youth up to age 21.

Mental health supports

In addition to the need for health care in shelters, service providers noted that more support needs to be built into the shelter system for mental health issues, especially current/con-current disorders and dual diagnoses. Noted also was the need for more provisions for assisting shelter residents in taking their medication, and more generally for more coaching on mental health issues. Charles Village was one concrete model identified by a focus group participant: “Wonderful – we need 10 more of them.” Also emerging from focus group discussions was the need for a tenfold increase in 24/7 outreach and mental health services, and a more drop-ins where people can feel safe and chill out, meet their basic needs, and form healthy relationships. Such places could also provide clinical support and trained professionals who treat people with respect instead of warehousing them as do the hospitals, as some participants put it.

Addictions supports

Another issue emphasized in service provider focus groups was the need for more help for individuals with addictions. In some of the focus groups, service providers discussed the possibility of wet shelters and the establishment of more harm reduction options, where individuals could have a safe transitional place for recovering and stabilizing prior to and after treatment. Other service providers focussed on the need for follow-up support for people recovering from addictions as they leave structured shelters for more independent living. One concrete suggestion emerging from the focus group data was that the men’s shelter in Kitchener should move to a 24 hours model so that if an individual is drinking he can go to his room and sleep it off. Cinnamon Toast Program in Peel was referred to as a potential model program for supporting people in learning skills and getting away from addiction.

Need for experimentation with new models

Finally, service providers suggested that the Region experiment with different shelter models, including smaller shelters, transitional shelters that use a peer-based model (such as the open factory model in Toronto), or the creation of more flexible emergency shelter options. As one service provider said, “Options need to be more radical than community is willing to accept; education of community is needed.”

Suggestions included a central spot where someone could help people and build relationships, such as the “Library model” for a day shelter, with the same warm, quiet, and safe atmosphere as a library, where individuals can go to read or connect with staff who could support them in finding housing. As one service provider said, “the library is a normal environment with no stigma.” A similar model was noted to be effective in Saskatoon. The Christian Community Model was noted to be another example of an alternative success model, involving 30 days in a rural transitional shelter with private rooms so they can sleep with peace and feel safe, to help individuals stabilize and then transition to housing.

3.2.4 The impact of out of the cold on formal shelter system

OOTC impact: Level of commitment of government

Some service providers expressed ambivalence toward Out of the Cold, seeing it as a program that takes the responsibility off of the formal system and “reflects lack of vision by society and government” that should instead be committed to a long-term commitment based on needs of people. Some service providers referred to OOTC as a short-term solution that only lasts for part of the year and that does not help people get off the streets.

OOTC Impact: Confuses course of action for youth

Also mentioned by some service providers was that Out of the Cold enables youth to segregate themselves rather than helping them to integrate into the community. Service providers on the Out of the Cold Steering Group acknowledged a lack of clarity in OOTC’s role with youth, and with their partnership with ROOF and F&CS, noting that police and F&CS often instruct OOTC to keep youth there if youth cannot get into shelters. Service providers suggested that this is something that needs to be sorted out by agencies responsible for children protection when it comes to OOTC.

OOTC Impact: Increases chronic homelessness/lack of responsibility

While most service providers recognized the benefits of OOTC, in terms of increasing access to shelter and relieving some of the pressure on the formal shelter system, some focus group participants suggested that OOTC promotes learned and chronic homelessness by providing people with a “crutch.” For these service providers, OOTC is seen to increase the length of time individuals stay on the street by making it easy to drink and providing an open, unstructured social atmosphere.

Section 4: Out of the Cold

4.1 Data sources:

- Focus group with OOTC Steering Group
- Responses to qualitative survey of OOTC volunteers (51 completed surveys from 9 sites in Kitchener and Waterloo)

4.2 Findings

4.2.1 Barriers to finding and keeping permanent housing

Among the questions asked of OOTC volunteers that were not asked of the OOTC Steering Group was the question of what barriers exist that prevent people from finding and keeping permanent housing.

Barriers: Income/poverty

Like other study participants, OOTC volunteers identified poverty and the high cost of housing as a central barrier to permanent housing. Volunteers stated that the cost of first and last month's rent is too high for homeless individuals, essentially eliminating the option of renting an apartment on their own. Contributing to their poverty, according to OOTC volunteers, is that many OOTC guests and shelter users have poor money management skills, often due to factors such as mental health problems, lack of education, and/or addictions. Adding to their poverty is their difficulty in obtaining much needed social assistance for a variety of reasons including the lack of a permanent address needed to qualify.

In a similar vein, many OOTC guests, according to the OOTC volunteers, face the daunting task of finding employment without a fixed address. Moreover, when OOTC guests do find work, the jobs are typically part-time at minimum wage, which does not generate enough income to cover rent. Also, mental and physical health difficulties, as well as a lack of job skills and poor attitudes, often interfere with their ability to find a job and keep it.

Barriers: Mental health concerns

Another common theme in the OOTC volunteer survey data was the impact of addictions on the ability of the homeless to find and keep permanent housing. Addiction to alcohol and other drugs makes it difficult to find and hold jobs, deteriorates one's finances, and can negatively impact one's living environment, and can precipitate eviction.

Besides addiction, OOTC volunteers said that other mental health issues such as depression and schizophrenia make it difficult for many OOTC guests to manage finances and interact with those in charge of their housing needs. Additionally, OOTC volunteers point out that some OOTC guests have physical disabilities of one form or another that make it difficult to find housing and employment.

4.2.2 Needs and gaps in the current formal shelter system

Both OOTC volunteers and the OOTC Steering Group were asked about the needs and gaps in the current formal shelter system. One of the strongest themes cutting across both data sets is a lack of knowledge among service users of the available services and how to make good use of them. OOTC volunteers, for instance, cited detox, incarceration, and other shelters such as Mary's Place as common 'services of choice' among many guests of Out of the Cold. The observations of both OOTC volunteers and the OOTC Steering Group suggest a need to make other services more accessible to OOTC guests, particularly in the following areas.

Needs: More shelter spaces

Most generally, OOTC volunteers and steering group members emphasized the need for more government funding for shelters, and for more shelter spaces. OOTCs are full and are running out of beds and space for beds. In the view of many OOTC volunteers and steering group members, more shelter spaces need to be created.

Needs: Mental health support services

OOTC volunteers and steering group members stressed the importance of offering the homeless more services aimed at the root causes of their situations. They felt that many homeless people are battling addictions, which interfere with their ability to save money and organize their lives. Mental health issues such as depression and schizophrenia were also seen as common among the guests of the OOTCs. Several participants expressed a feeling that, even without a diagnosed mental health condition, many OOTC guests need counselling to boost self-worth and confidence.

Needs: More youth-only facilities

Tension between youth and other guests emerged as a very strong theme in discussions with OOTC volunteers and steering group members. According to the study participants, the number of youth staying in Out of the Cold has seemed to increase noticeably over the last 3 or 4 years, and many participants feel that youth are vulnerable and should not be living amongst the older homeless population. A number of the participants also mentioned the strain that this mix puts upon the guests, as the different lifestyles often clash. The OOTC volunteer and steering group data suggest a need for more shelter services dedicated to homeless youth.

Needs: Financial/housing information and assistance

Another theme in the OOTC data was the need for assistance for guests in finding jobs and keeping them. Ideas about the form this assistance might take range from having street outreach workers provide concrete assistance in opening bank accounts or completing housing forms, to educational activities on financial management and other life skills. A small number of volunteer survey respondents also suggested having guests at OOTCs do general maintenance and cleaning in order to help pay for their stay.

Needs: Discharge planning

Also noted by some members of both the OOTC volunteer sample and the OOTC steering group was the need for improved planning and coordination in the discharge of people from the care of hospitals, prisons and the child welfare system. According to the participants, many of the young people who use the OOTCs are kids who, upon reaching 16 years of age, are no longer cared for, supported or protected under the provincial *Child and Family Services Act*. Similarly, OOTC volunteers and Steering Group members told us that the OOTCs regularly encounter guests who are discharged from hospital with nowhere else to go but the OOTC. For this group of people, their still-fragile physical conditions seriously interfere with their abilities to find employment and shelter. The OOTC data indicate a clear need for better supports for people making the transition from the child welfare system or hospitals and other institutions to independent living in the community.

Needs: Improved coordination of services

One theme that emerged from the OOTC Steering Group focus group, which was not visible in the volunteer survey data, was the need for better coordination of services. A variety of services and supports are available to users of the shelters and OOTCS, but these services tend to be housed in different agencies and different locations around the region. Some OOTC steering group members believe that creating a single, centralized access points for many of those services will make them accessible to more people, and will create a venue for building relationships between service users and service providers.

Needs: Improved hygiene

A theme in the OOTC volunteer survey data that was less visible in the steering group discussion was about hygiene. Volunteers, specifically in reference to things heard from guests, feel that more shower facilities are needed in the OOTCs. Keeping with this hygiene theme, an adequate supply of toiletries and laundry facilities, as well as general education on hygiene, were said to be lacking in area shelters and OOTCs.

4.2.3 The choice of OOTC instead of a shelter

According to Out of the Cold volunteers and steering group members, the main reason guests choose to stay at Out of the Cold instead of a shelter because of the general atmosphere of Out of the Cold. In particular, OOTC is seen as less structured, more anonymous, safer, and more welcoming (e.g. atmosphere and staff) than the formal shelters. Also of great importance, according to the OOTC data, is the fact that OOTC is free. Other important, though less frequently mentioned factors include: “friends stay there”; “users aren’t allowed back into other shelters”; “there is always room at Out of the Cold”; “the location is convenient”. Appendix E provides a summary of what OOTC volunteers cite as the reasons some people choose the OOTCs over the formal shelters.

Choice of OOTC: No rules, responsibilities, accountability

According to OOTC volunteers and steering group members, one of the main reasons some people prefer OOTC to the shelters is because volunteers befriend people and do

not ask a lot of questions, and because there is less responsibility and no accountability or commitment involved. At the OOTCs, curfews are less strict than at shelters, intoxication and even substance use off-premises is tolerated, people don't have to cook or fill out forms, and individuals can hide out from criminal activities. At the OOTCs, guests can get a good meal and a place to sleep with no questions asked.

Choice of OOTC: Better safety and security

OOTC volunteers and steering group members also noted that some people perceive OOTCs as safer than the shelters, the streets, or even some supportive living sites. Focus group participants also observed that some guests experience frustration at paying at shelters to lock up belongings and then being robbed nonetheless.

Choice of OOTC: No charge

Another major reason why some people prefer the OOTCs, according to OOTC volunteers and steering group members, is that OOTC is free. Rather than paying to stay at a shelter, guests of the OOTCs can save money for other things.

Choice of OOTC: Cannot go to a shelter

Also noted by participants was that some individuals stay at OOTC because they can not stay at shelters, either because they have broken rules at shelters, because there is not enough room at shelters, or because they exceed the time limit allowed at shelters.

4.2.4 The alternative to OOTC

When asked what they thought OOTC guests would do if OOTC did not exist, most OOTC volunteers and steering group members replied that OOTC guests would most likely live somewhere in the streets, in ATM terminals, parking garages, and abandoned buildings. The option of staying in a formal shelter was also present in the survey and focus group data, but was a far less commonly cited than was "living in the streets," and slightly less frequently cited than "living in sheltered areas." Additionally, OOTC volunteers and steering group members also raise the possibility of guests staying with family or friends in the event of Out of the Cold being unavailable.

Choice of OOTC: Nowhere else to go

OOTC volunteers and steering group members believe that many homeless people would have a very hard time without Out of the Cold. Although some individuals could go to a different city or stay with friends or parents, OOTC research participants believe that individuals would end up on the streets, on porches, or under bridges, in tents, parks, abandoned buildings, bank kiosks, abandoned trucks, or garbage bins on company lots. OOTC volunteers and Steering Group members also suggest that some people would get arrested so that they can stay in jail, some would break into cars, and others would offer sex to stay with people. One service provider mentioned that there is only one shelter for adult men in Kitchener, so if men break the rules they have no place to go, even if they have children.

Appendix A: CREHS research team

Robert Case, Team Leader. Robert Case, M.S.W., a Centre Researcher with strong research and community development expertise, solid project management experience and a strong interest in poverty and urban issues. Robert's work experience has included work as an welfare rights organizer and advocate in Montreal, as assistant director of a house of hospitality for homeless people in Montreal, and as a child protection social worker. Robert's poverty-related research experience includes published social policy analysis, thesis research on political participation in Vancouver's downtown eastside, and qualitative research with squeegee kids in Toronto.

Nadia Hausfather, Centre Researcher. Nadia is a Centre Researcher with exceptional research and analysis skills, and a firm grounding in grassroots, community development. Nadia's experience with homeless populations includes work with street kids in Nicaragua, and thesis research involving homeless youth in Kitchener-Waterloo. Nadia is well-known to street-involved youth and outreach worked in Kitchener, and is currently working with the Kitchener Downtown Community Health Centre on a Homelessness Handbook for Kitchener.

Brian Barlett, Community Researcher-Kitchener. Brian Barlett works as building manager for Heartwood Place, and volunteers on the board of directors for the Kitchener Downtown Community Health Centre (KDCHC). Brian has been involved in poverty and housing issues in Kitchener for a number of years. His volunteer activities have included 5 years of involvement with the KDCHC, and participation in the Region's Employment and Income Support Advisory Committee. Among Brian's many accomplishments is the establishment in April 2002 of the Mayfair Hotel Residents' lounge, a community space where residents can get to know each other as neighbours, connect with supportive services and emergency food, and spend time socializing. Brian has first-hand experience with the shelter system, and is well-known to shelter users and shelter providers in Kitchener alike.

Christine Traves, Community Researcher-Kitchener. Christine Traves is also an active member of the downtown Kitchener community. In the past five years, Christine has volunteered on the "Growing Up Downtown" working group of the Kitchener Downtown Community Health Centre (KDCHC), has been active in Pay the Rent and Feed the Kids Working Group, and has been involved as a speaker in a program to educate social work students and other professionals about the realities of poverty. Christine has first hand experience with homelessness, and now lives in downtown Kitchener with her two sons.

Reina McIntyre, Community Researcher-Cambridge. Reina McIntyre lives in Cambridge and has been a volunteer at Welcome Aboard for over a year.

Appendix B: Participant letter



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and Education
in Human Services**

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Letter to Participants

Re: Waterloo Region Sheltering Needs Assessment Interviews

The Region of Waterloo Social Service Department would like to find out how to make the sheltering system work better. The Region is especially interested in finding out what could be done to make the sheltering system better at helping people find and keep more permanent housing.

The Region would therefore like to know what people who use the shelters and Out of the Colds think about them, and so has hired the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services in Kitchener to interview people at shelters and Out of the Colds in Kitchener-Waterloo and Cambridge. The purpose of these interviews is to find out about people's experiences with the shelter system and to get their ideas about how the shelters could be improved.

If you have stayed at a shelter or Out of the Cold in the past five years, or if you have not had a place with your own entrance key and private space, we would like to get your perspective on the shelter system. Your experiences and ideas could make a very important contribution to the way in which the Region of Waterloo provides shelter services in the future. If you are willing to share your thoughts and experiences, we would like to do an interview with you, following the questions on the back of this page. The interview will be between forty-five minutes and an hour long and will be done in one of the shelter offices or in the dining room, depending on where you feel more comfortable.

We need your experience and ideas to improve the shelters in Waterloo Region. Thank you so much for considering to be part of this.

Yours truly,

Robert Case
Research team leader

Appendix C: Informed consent form

Consent Form

I have read and understood the information provided in the letter to participants.

I understand:

- that I am being asked to be interviewed about my experiences as a user of Out of the Cold and other shelters and my thoughts about how these shelters could be improved
- that what I say in the interview will be used by the Social Services Department of the Region of Waterloo to decide how many and what kinds of services are needed to make the sheltering system work better
- that the interviews will be done by researchers from the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services (Kitchener) who have been hired by the Region of Waterloo to interview guests of Out of the Cold

I agree to be interviewed understanding that:

- my name will not be mentioned in any part of this research project; my confidentiality will be protected by keeping any recordings or notes from my interview in a locked drawer, and then destroying them six months after the project ends
- I can decline to answer specific questions or end the interview early without it affecting me or the services I get at Out of the Cold
- I can withdraw my interview answers from the study by contacting the project coordinator at any time if I have second thoughts about being part of the study
- what I say in the interview can only be used to decide how many and what kinds of services are needed to make the sheltering system work better
- I am provided with contact information for the project coordinator in case I want to get in touch with him at (519) 741-1318 or robert@crehs.on.ca

Name (please print:) _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

I also agree to have this interview tape-recorded:

Agree _____

Disagree _____

Appendix D: Sample interview protocol

Interview Questions for Guests at Cambridge OOTC

- 1) Are you staying here tonight? (Or, if you already know: “So, you said you’re staying here tonight, right”?)
 - How long have you been staying here?
 - Have there been other times in your life when you have stayed in shelters or didn’t have your own place with an entrance key and some private space?
 - For how long? How many times? When was the last time?

- 2). If Out of the Cold didn’t exist, where would you go? What would you do?

- 3) If you got to say what the existing Out of the Colds and shelters should be like, what are the 3 things you would change first?
 - Do you think you will use the new Bridges shelter when it opens?

- 4) What kinds of things make it hard for you to find and keep permanent housing?
 - What kinds of supports or services do you think could help you find and keep housing?

- 5) Do the kinds of housing or services you just mentioned exist now that you are aware of?
 - Where?
 - Have you used any of them?

- 6) We need to make sure we interview older people and younger people, people with children in their care and people without children, men and women, people from different cultures, etc. So,
 - How old are you?
 - Do you have children that live with you right now?
 - What is your cultural background?

- 7). Do you have any questions for me (or us)?

Appendix E: OOTC volunteer survey results: reasons for choosing OOTC

Table 5 below summarizes the reasons OOTC volunteers cite as people's reasons for choosing to stay at OOTC instead of a formal shelter.

Table 5: Reasons cited for staying at OOTC by frequency

Reason cited	Frequency
Less structured environment	21
Doesn't cost money	16
Welcoming atmosphere and staff	14
Safer	9
There is always room	8
Friends stay there	7
Convenient location	6
Not allowed back into other shelters	6
Anonymity—no I.D. or personal information required	4
Free hot meals	4
More quiet	3
Past conflicts with staff and/or guests at other shelters	3
Cleaner	2
Men and women allowed	2
No restriction on length of stay	2
Open to those with mental health issues	2

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