

**Homeless Youth in Waterloo Region:
A report on two pilot projects**

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in collaboration with

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Waterloo Catholic District School Board
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Studies of this kind are never created by one person alone. I was simply the listener and the writer. Now you are all ready to take these results and generate healthy change with young people.

Gloria DeSantis

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries has been involved in identifying, defining and assisting in the resolution of issues pertaining to homelessness in Waterloo Region since the early 1990s. The Social Planning Council is a community-based non-profit organization that actively participates in building and strengthening communities through research, analysis, facilitation and public education.

In December 2001, staff of both Argus Residence for Young People located in Cambridge and Reaching Our Outdoor Friends (R.O.O.F.) located in Kitchener approached the Social Planning Council to assist in formulating data collection tools and methods for two new pilot projects. Argus and ROOF have been integrally involved in homeless youth issues for many years in Waterloo Region. The Regional Municipality of Waterloo funded both of the pilot projects. One requirement of their funding was a research component. The two pilot projects were Off the Street, Into Shelter (OSIS) and Project Warmth.

At the December 2001 meeting between Argus, R.O.O.F., and the Social Planning Council, there was agreement to attempt to collect some similar data from young people. These data collection tools are explained in more detail in the methodology section of this report.

A few months later, the Region's Youth Homelessness Coordinating Group (YHCG) – a large group of service providers - indicated their interest in the analyses too. This report is based on the data collected by the staff of the two pilot projects, which were then processed by the Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries and collectively interpreted at meetings with members of the Youth Homelessness Coordinating Group.¹

1.2 The Two Pilot Projects

a) Project Warmth

Argus Residence for Young People and the Chaplin Family YMCA were the lead organizations for the one new pilot project, Project Warmth, which was funded by the Region of Waterloo. It was launched in December 2001 and closed its doors on April 28, 2002. It was located at the YMCA-owned vacant building beside the Chaplin Family YMCA Recreation Centre in Cambridge.

Project Warmth was a 20-bed shelter for youth between the ages of 12-18, requiring overnight shelter accommodation. Project Warmth operated between the hours of 10:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. Youth could self refer between the hours of 10:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. Youth requiring access after 11:00 p.m. were escorted by the police.

In addition to offering shelter, youth had access to: food, bag lunches, shower facilities, laundering services, movies, books, games, personal need items, clothing, staff support, recreation at the YMCA facility, bus tickets, day time referral and advocacy services. The rules of the program were simple - no violence, no drugs or alcohol on site and no leaving the property after intake at night. Mutual and self-respect were the guiding principles surrounding personal conduct and behaviour.

¹ Both R.O.O.F. and Argus were active members of the Youth Homelessness Coordinating Group.



b) Off the Street, Into Shelter

Reaching Our Outdoor Friends (ROOF) implemented the other new pilot project, which was a Ministry of Community and Social Services initiative named, Off the Street, Into Shelter (OSIS). It was launched in November 2001 through the Regional Municipality of Waterloo. Two outreach workers were hired to connect with youth on the streets and agencies in Cambridge, Kitchener, and Waterloo at various times of the day and week. These two workers were considered to be a shared agency resource for a variety of agencies providing front-line services to youth who were homeless.

The focus for OSIS was on 12 to 17 year olds who were homeless or had no fixed address. The primary goal of these outreach workers was to “establish a productive rapport with youth presenting as ‘at-risk’ on the streets of the region’s communities and to facilitate effective linkages with front-line service providers”. Meals, snacks, gloves/hats for cold days, condoms and some first aid were offered. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from youth from November 2001 to April 2002.

1.3 Objectives

After discussions with the Youth Homeless Coordinating Group of Waterloo Region (YHCG), the Social Planning Council confirmed a number of short-term objectives. The time period for the analyses of data was from December 10th, 2001 to March 31, 2002 in Cambridge, Kitchener and Waterloo.² The objectives were:

- a) to work closely with Project Warmth and OSIS representatives to draft a descriptive report (not prescriptive) based on the collected data and ensure a draft is discussed at a Homeless Youth Coordinating Group meeting(s) before being finalized.
- b) to create a profile of youth using OSIS and Project Warmth from December 10th, 2001 to March 31, 2002. (What is the total number of “unique” youth over the study period? What are the age and sex breakdown, precipitating factors, and presenting factors [including behavioural issues, addictions, etc.] of youth using OSIS and Project Warmth? Is there a core group of homeless youth? If yes, what are their defining characteristics?).
- c) to describe geographical, spatial and movement phenomena that are obvious from the collected youth data. (Are there variations in the youth data across the three different cities that comprise Waterloo Region? If yes, what are those variations [e.g., age, sex, presenting issues, etc.]? To what extent are homeless youth travelling throughout Cambridge, Kitchener and Waterloo as well as from other cities?).
- d) to explain the extent that homeless youth are aware of and accessing established social/health services like emergency shelter services and other supports. (Are some of these homeless youth accessing established social/health services? If some are not, why not? If some youth are cycling in and out of homeless, what does this cycle look like? Need to describe streets/shelters/Out of the Cold/home, risks to leaving school, law/custody issues, etc.).

² Off the Streets Into Shelters began in November 2001, but for the purpose of this report, we chose to work with data collected over the same time periods for both pilot projects.



It is noteworthy that given the short timeline for this report, it was agreed that a literature review could not be part of this document. The literature review will be conducted through the Regional Municipality of Waterloo and delivered to the Youth Homelessness Coordinating Group for discussion during the spring/summer of 2002. Recommendations can then be generated by the Group and forwarded to Regional Council.

The YHCG agreed that this report should contain a summary and observations about the data from which they can integrate their understanding with literature and subsequently write recommendations for action.

