

# Homelessness in Charlottetown Needs Solutions

By John Sutton

An increase in community awareness, coupled with necessary long-term funding, constitutes the major elements necessary for alleviating the escalation of homelessness in Charlottetown.

Fortunately this long-ignored subject has come to the forefront of community affairs thanks to a committee of concerned citizens dedicated to achieving a solution to what has become a major issue in our provincial capital.

"Our main concern right now lies in determining the immediate needs of people who are in a desperate situation," said Morris MacIntyre, chair of the Steering Committee on Homelessness. "From there we can set up the necessary steps [to solve the problem]."

The committee defines homelessness as being absolutely without a dwelling place where one has a right to remain, at any time and on an extended basis. As well, those found to be living in unfit premises in combination of dirt, vermin, rodents, lack of amenities, lack of heat, physical danger, wood rot, crowding, or otherwise unhealthy and unsafe conditions, also qualify as homeless. In considering these guidelines MacIntyre stated that there may be as many as 100 homeless people living in Charlottetown at any given time.

"Being homeless doesn't necessarily mean you're out on the street with nowhere to live," MacIntyre pointed out. "There are many more people living in Charlottetown who are forced to survive in inadequate shelter."

Currently the Supporting Community Partners Initiative (SCPI) program has been implemented to help curb the severity of the homeless issue in

Charlottetown. The program, funded by the federal government, has provided one million dollars to the province of PEI over the next three years. After that, as MacIntyre explained, the program will be shut down.

"One of our top priorities lies in figuring out how to support this action beyond three years," he said. "We need financial sustainability in order to continue in a positive direction."

"It's up to the organizations involved in this effort to make sure there will be funding in place beyond three years. I'm sure the community will get behind us as well."

The issue of homelessness in Charlottetown has only recently come to the forefront of public attention. John Eldon Green, the lead consultant with the Steering Committee on Homelessness, cites federal government policy with regards to unemployment insurance and welfare assistance as being major contributing factors in the continual upswing of homelessness on the Island over the past few years.

"The situation has changed drastically in recent years as a result of the federal government's tightening of the unemployment insurance policy," Green explained. "The changes reduced the number of people eligible for unemployment. Combined with changes to welfare assistance programs these changes have created a new population of homeless people [in Charlottetown]."

Both MacIntyre and Green cited a lack of emergency shelter and affordable housing as immediate needs to be addressed. In particular, a lack of adequate housing for youth, single mothers, those coping with addictions, and former offend-

ers was revealed in a preliminary report dealing with the homeless situation. The report determined that an emergency (short-stay) facility for up to 10 males and 8 females was a priority need. As well, an 8 to 12 person shelter for persons exiting the addictions detoxification program and an eight unit shelter for adult women also qualify as being of the utmost importance.

"One of our main aims is to provide shelter for youth who, for one reason or another, are unable to live at home with their parents," MacIntyre said. "Currently there are two or three locations in Charlottetown that we are considering as being suitable venues for shelters."

With an increased need for shelter comes an increase in the need for proper counselling services for homeless people as well. MacIntyre stressed the importance of developing a directory of available services in the Charlottetown area for people in need.

"We need proper counselling and support systems in place," he said. "We must be able to relate to these people if we are to help them."

Once the Steering Committee's final report is released on March 10, a major effort will be put in to raising enough money to maintain adequate shelters and services for homeless people. Without sufficient funding the committee's plan would be unable to be implemented and, as MacIntyre pointed out, the problem of homelessness would remain an unsolved issue.

"We have funding in place for the next three years but once that money runs out we can't just shut the operation down," he explained. "The provincial govern-

ment has been approached and once our study is completed and we have the pieces in place we'll be able to determine what they can contribute."

Green echoed MacIntyre's sentiments in calling for a means to continue raising funds for the project.

"We need an action plan in order to determine where to receive on-going funding," Green stated. "People are waiting to take a more active role in solving this problem."

In order to increase community support and funding MacIntyre cited the need for improved coordination between the various social entities which are eager to lend their aid.

"We have many people and various organizations coming on board to lend their help," MacIntyre stated. "Right now these people and groups are not working together."

Public support of the Steering Committee's intentions, though slow in developing, has been increasing as more people become aware of the increasing seriousness of the homeless issue in Charlottetown. As well, municipal support on behalf of city council and the Charlottetown Police is on the rise.

"The city is behind us but it's too early to tell what they can do to help," MacIntyre said. "Once the study is complete we'll have a better idea of what can be done."

"Word is getting out in the public and people are realizing there is a very serious problem."

A public meeting dealing with the issue of homelessness in Charlottetown and on PEI will be held upon the release of the Steering Committee's report on March 10.