

Learning First-Hand about Homelessness

In the fall semester 2006, three 4th year BSW students spent 24 hours on the streets of St. John's learning about homelessness while completing their field placements with youth-serving agencies. These students were Lesley Bishop (Community Mediation Services, Community Youth Network), Charlotte Courage (Choices for Youth), and Mark Griffin (Community Youth Network, Choices for Youth Young Men's Shelter).

“...we were a burden... we were invisible to individuals and to systems.”

Lesley Bishop, Charlotte Courage and Mark Griffin write about their experience: “On October 5, 2006 at 11:00 a.m. the three of us left the Choices for Youth building and began our twenty four hour Homelessness Experiential Project. The project had a dual purpose. Firstly, it was to be an experience in empathy building and in first hand learning. Each of our fourth year field internships involved working with clients that are homeless or have experienced homelessness, and we wanted to better understand the whole experience. There were the immediate logistical experiences such as seeking shelter, finding food and money, and staying safe. There were also the emotional aspects of having to feel marginalized, like we were a burden, and that we were invisible to individuals and to systems.

Secondly, we wanted to see how easy it would be to procure the services we required as homeless people. How would a youth that was kicked out of his or her house find out about homeless



shelters, or food banks? We operated under the premise that we had no prior knowledge of the location of any of these services, and that we would not access any unless we were told about the services from someone we met. The results were felt deeply from an emotional standpoint, and from the understanding of how systems can fail those who most rely upon them.

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Each of us agreed, with all hubris aside, that it was the single worst night of our lives. Aside from facing the elements, we also had to face the fact that in the eyes of the people who passed us by, we were no more consequential than the benches on which we lay, or the walls on which we leaned. The speed with which our power and privilege was removed from us was astonishing. In every place that we sat, we became acutely aware of the fact that at any moment someone might arrive and ask us to leave. We experienced what it was like to “not belong”.

“This experience has lead us to recommendations that will hopefully save others from facing the same marginalization...”

From our deeply disheartening, eye-opening experience, we feel much good can be accomplished. We now know how difficult it is to ask for food and be rejected, beg for money, seek shelter, sleep in the elements, and feel marginalized. That experience has led us to recommendations that will hopefully save others from facing the same marginalization, and barriers to service, that we faced.

These recommendations include more comprehensive services, a network or coalition for frontline staff, and access to more resources. We would also recommend distribution of goods and services on the basis of need, consultations with those that are/have been homeless and stronger acknowledgment that the issue of homelessness exists. In congruence with those recommendations we would like to see community awareness of shelters and resources raised to a higher level. A person that is made homeless should have immediate access to the whereabouts of shelters and food, and he or she should not have to wonder where a bed is coming from, or when will be the next time that she or he eats. To facilitate these recommendations we are hoping to begin a dialogue with the community agencies we encountered so that we might work together to improve access to services for those that desperately need it. Our collaboration with community agencies will hopefully make a positive change in the reality of what means to be a homeless person in St. John's."

Where the Project is today:

At the end of the fall 2006 semester, Mark, Lesley and Charlotte held a discussion forum to present their report and seek feedback for stakeholders involved with

youth homelessness. The forum was well attended and generated much discussion. Since then, the group has presented to many organizations and groups including high school students and university students in other faculties. The work of this group also caught the attention of then Minister of Human Resources, Mr. Paul Shelley, who met with Mark, Lesley and Charlotte to discuss the issue of homelessness. The group is scheduled to present at the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Worker's Provincial Conference in June 2007.