

# A Home in the Hills:

*Homelessness and Precarious Housing  
in Caledon*



A Report of the Community Consultation Sub-Committee  
CCS' Homelessness Partnering Strategy  
March 2011



**A HOME IN THE HILLS:  
HOMELESSNESS AND PRECARIOUS HOUSING IN CALEDON**

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# OVERVIEW OF THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

## *Community Consultation Background*

Homelessness in Caledon, for some, is a foreign concept. The assumption is that Caledon is affluent and that these sorts of social “problems” don’t exist here. But the wisdom of Caledon Community Services (CCS), the central hub of community services in Caledon, tells us otherwise. Together with a group of concerned residents, CCS launched the *Caledon Homelessness Partnering Strategy* (CHPS) to explore homelessness in Caledon and provide recommendations that point to viable and efficient solutions. A sub-committee was struck with the task of consulting with the community to provide a “snapshot” of the issue of Caledon-specific homelessness and precarious housing; this report will present the findings of an eight-month exploration into Caledon’s homelessness problems.

## *Who was Consulted*

A four-member committee set out to meet with as many individuals across Caledon as possible (see Table 1.0). Individual interviews with persons with lived experiences of homelessness; formal and informal discussions with support workers; focus groups with concerned members of various faith-based communities, and listening to individuals attending community awareness-building forums. The committee made use of various opportunities to better understand homelessness in Caledon. It concluded that homelessness is best understood through the eyes of those living it and from the observations of those who support our community’s most vulnerable. Faith leaders, police, outreach workers, youth, guidance counsellors, chaplains, mental health professionals, volunteer drivers, town employees, crisis teams, service clubs, landscapers, and everyday people who live and work in Caledon were consulted. Individuals with past or current experiences of homelessness (PWLE) shared their stories. While few in number, their stories informed the collective consciousness of the CHPS

committee. However, the committee acknowledges its desire to continue with these consultations and in particular, to tap further into the wisdom of individuals with the experience of being homeless in Caledon either currently or in their past.

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

*Questions Asked*

The committee met with a wide array of individuals. The following questions were asked of all those consulted:

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

# FINDINGS

## *A Beginning Brushstroke*

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

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

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

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

violence and individuals working in the area but cannot rent or find affordable housing.

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

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

### *Faces*

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

- Individuals living in other residents' barns.
- Children whose parents are facing eviction after long-term unemployment being fed and clothed by a neighbour.
- Young to middle-aged men “passing through”.
- Couch-surfing teens post irreconcilable differences.
- Moms or dads with little means and many children.
- Young men seen leaving for work from a ravine setting.
- Many individuals who are unemployed or underemployed.
- Women in dangerous domestic partnerships with no place to go.
- People living in their car.
- Seniors heating their houses with the oven set to 400 degrees.
- Executive home at the end of the cul-de-sac whose bread winner lost his job yet the bank doesn't care.
- Seniors left to fend for themselves who “don't want to bother anybody”.
- Farmers who have lost so much in the last several years.

- Children whose both parents passed away, too old for CAS, too young to work.
- Women in the motel with a pet who can't find housing that will take them both.
- Seniors who have alcohol and nothing else.
- The older gentleman living ten years in a ravine on a farm.
- Widowers struggling to survive on a pittance of a pension.
- People with mental health struggles, already feeling different and alone.
- Children of ailing parents/living with dementia with no in home supports.
- The financially over-extended ... treading water.

### *Contributing Factors*

While many of the community informants were not sure of the exact causes of homelessness in Caledon due to their inexperience with individuals living on the edge of homelessness, others were able to articulate what contributes to this important social issue. Most assuredly, it was the crisis/outreach workers who knew best of the barriers to sustainable housing for Caledon residents. Others were able to give our committee a snap-shot view of other causes and contributing factors. Some of these include:

- Unaffordable housing.
- Family transition/crisis/conflict/breakdown/re-constitution.
- Losses of many kinds (job, spouse, child, health, spirit).
- Huge mortgages being provided by banks.
- Precarious employment.
- The necessity of a car to be employed in Caledon due a lack of public transit.
- Parental addiction struggles/anger/domestic violence.
- Abuse.
- Irreconcilable differences often result in youth being blamed and kicked out.
- Women fleeing violence.

- Marital break up.
- Job loss.
- Lack of education opportunities/skill development leads to dead end jobs...

low job skills can create difficulty keeping jobs.

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

### *What Exacerbates Homelessness/Precarious Housing?*

“People often become homeless before they become houseless.”  
 ~~Participant

- No-one wants anyone to know of their situation ~ leading to further isolation, desperation and poverty.
- Lack of public transportation.
- Inadequate housing support (to find or to keep housing).
- Lack of a well-known co-ordinated hub to go to /refer to/consult with.

- Shame.
- Individuals not knowing their neighbours.
- No second-stage housing in Caledon.
- Policies (like ODSP, or rental policies) that say “no pets”. Individuals love their pets and will *not* leave them in order for themselves to be housed. That is a deal-breaker.

### *Strengths in Caledon*

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

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

- Hamlets: A strong affiliation with hamlets and villages and a desire to help within that specific area first. Often there are gathering places or within each hamlet, places to provide outreach and support.
- Farmers: The backbone of Caledon most assuredly. With great resilience, many connections and time plus experience factor in heavily when considering the strength that farmers and farm families bring.
- Faith-based presence *everywhere*.
- The palpable frustration of residents ready to help but who state “we can’t find people to help. Who are they? How can we help? Can you help us help others?”
- The presence of homelessness has not yet reached insurmountable levels so it can be addressed strategically and preventatively now.
- The Region of Peel has street outreach and has provided support for the

CHPS initiative. It is offering to amplify its programming in Caledon and provide consultative services.

- There are people in Caledon taking in youth who are couch-surfing.
- The churches/faith-community wants to create a network.
- There exists a strong foundation of supports via CCS.
- No NIMBY found during eight months of consultations.
- Of all those consulted be it in individual, focus group or community forum formats, only two individuals verbalized negative viewpoints about precariously housed or homeless persons.
- The sentiment of “they are ours, even when they’re only passing through”.

### *Challenges and Growth Opportunities for Caledon*

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

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

## THEMES

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

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

### *Hamlets Matter*

Possibly the most common finding was the deep affiliation residents have to their given hamlet and a desire to start where they live, i.e. in their village. This affinity for, pride and identity with one’s own village had nothing to do with a disinterest in reaching out to other areas in Caledon but is rooted in an understanding of the area and a wish to start local and join other hamlets in a bid to reach out to all. Residents and other individuals wanted services in their area and provided many suggestions regarding how their church, village council or other mechanism could assist. The rural psyche is tied to a wish to preserve and celebrate history – and one key historical memory shared by many of those consulted had to do with a long legacy of “caring for our own”.

### *Animals Matter*

This theme emerged several times, including in discussion regarding farmers, seniors and single individuals who were looking for affordable housing but faced barriers due to their friendship with/concern for their animal(s). We also heard stories about individuals buying dog food for families who had no food to give

their pet. The animal shelter staff told us that they are often approached by individuals for animal food, and that they often have donated food that is ready for distribution to those in need. As these discussions emerged, a strong desire to have animals factored into the plans to address homelessness and precarious housing was verbalized.

### *Seniors/Farmers Matter*

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

### *Employed but Homelessness*

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

### *Youth Need Places to Be, Become and Matter*

Concern was verbalized about youth having nothing to do in Caledon and that many things offered to youth were expensive or inaccessible due to geography and a lack of public transit. Churches verbalized a desire to offer more for youth to do and wondered about working in partnership with agencies such as CCS or Parks and Recreation. Concern was raised about the presence of youth couch-surfing and the lack of an organized system of support for the families who take youth in. Further, that youth matter and need to be able to find their way and develop their talents often came up in conversations.

### *Passing Through /No Option but to Leave*

We came to understand that some individuals known primarily to churches and to outdoor workers seemed to be “*passing through*” Caledon rather than originating

“from” Caledon (although most people see that as irrelevant). Others, when facing eviction or looking for alternate housing, had no option but to leave due to a lack of affordable, transitional or emergency housing in our community.

### *Invisible ..... Or is it?*

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

### *It's About Being At-Risk*

What emerged was a realization and embracement of the importance of focusing upon vulnerability. The questions often focused on two areas of inquiry: 1. Who is at risk and how? 2. How can we as a community prevent homelessness by reaching out and supporting the dignity and quality of life of those who are at imminent risk of losing their housing?

### *Everyone Wants to Help...But How?*

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

## SUGGESTIONS, REQUESTS AND OFFERINGS

“Help us help others.” ~~Participant

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

### *Suggestions*

- Supports and services come together under a homelessness strategy umbrella.
- Form an alliance of sorts in order to “connect us all up” and improve any communication gaps between service clubs, faith communities, and service provision.
- Ensure that the voice of those who are being served is present on any decision-making body.
- Commence an outreach function, perhaps first as a trial.
- Make CCS the HUB, a central agency, everyone/thing else a tentacle.
- Tap into service clubs.
- Help families who take in youth.
- Work with business owners looking to a group of them who will routinely employ individuals at imminent risk of losing their housing due to unemployment.
- Educate, confront biases and blame. As one youth said “Stigma steals opportunity.”
- A *Know-your-Neighbour* campaign was suggested – it was often remarked that many residents in Caledon don’t know their neighbours anymore and

therefore don't know if anyone is silently suffering.

- A “You Reap What You Sow” campaign – coordinated support led by and for farmers.
- More affordable youth activities – “FREE is best.”
- Replicate the free drop-in for youth currently running at the Albion-Bolton Community Centre in other villages/hamlets across the region.
- Explore Stationview’s waiting list – there may be opportunities there to support more residents in need of transitional housing.
- Look at and focus on prevention – a “know the signs” public awareness campaign.
- Factor in the animals/pets in the lives of those we serve/support. Animals matter.
- Use schools as a conduit in case finding, sharing information on local resources and to facilitate a relationship between those in need and people who can help.
- Address information gaps by providing community notice boards (partner with a business or Staples in order to obtain these info boards) in common public gathering places listing resources.
- Develop ties between CCS, service clubs, faith based communities.
- Facilitate a database of names of people who can assist and how. Start first with faith-based communities.

### *Requests*

- Please include us in your ongoing correspondence regarding the issue.
- Keep the community posted via radio, email blasts, newspaper articles.
- Please provide us (faith-based communities) with a list of resources that we can post and also keep for our outreach and support personnel so we are better equipped with knowledge when approached by those in need.

## *Offerings*

- Service clubs overwhelmingly offered to help, immediately.
- Faith leaders offered to get the issue “out there” via their ‘pulpit’.
- Faith communities have offered food, clothing and community-specific support now to any individuals known by CCS.
- Many faith communities have offered their spaces for services and support services.

## **IN CLOSING.....AT LEAST FOR NOW....**

Reflecting upon our eight months traversing across Caledon talking to residents, support workers, Caledon-based employees, faith communities and others, what presents as prudent is the need to ensure Caledon has adequate supports in place in order to work with those who are in fact precariously housed. There are too many at risk of being homeless in Caledon. People in need have to wait too long and are often forced to leave their beloved Home in the Hills.

Homelessness exists in Caledon and it’s not new and it could get worse. The community is galvanized to support those individuals and families who find themselves at risk for becoming homeless or already are.

What is also clear is that there remains a continued need for community engagement and immersion in order to continue to build partnerships and linkages with community members, groups, agencies, and those who would benefit from sustainable systems of support in our community. This would enable Caledon to build on the wisdom of many in order to co-create a sustainable, responsive plan to reach out to some of our most vulnerable.

Across our wonderful region of Ontario, we heard a strong desire to help and that one homeless person suffering is simply one too many. It makes sense to prevent this sort of distress, even for those who find themselves on the edge of homelessness. Caledon is well-suited to come together in order to do just that. Caledon is ready and looks to CCS to take the lead in showing us how to help. This experience has been a privilege.