

Youth Homelessness Protocol

Community Protocol to Respond to Youth Homelessness in Elgin County and St. Thomas

Introduction

The Community Council for Children & Youth in Elgin (CCCYE) acknowledges the existence of homeless youth in the City of St. Thomas and Elgin County. Youth are considered homeless when they lack stable, permanent, acceptable housing, or the immediate prospect of acquiring it. In this protocol, youth are defined as between the ages of 12 and 24, inclusive, and are considered “homeless youth” only if they are unaccompanied by parents or legal guardians.

Homeless youth can be understood in terms of a typology consisting of three categories - Low Risk, Transient, and High Risk Youth. The CCCYE recognizes that High Risk Youth are the most vulnerable, being youth who are more likely to have dropped out of school or inconsistent attendance at school, have unstable or non-existent relationships with their families, are more likely to have compromised mental wellness, and/or are more likely to be using substances.

This Protocol has been developed to assist homeless youth to obtain or regain housing by improving access to and quality of services, and minimizing the negative impact that homelessness has on their lives.

The protocol is initiated for any identified homeless youth.

Legal Status of the Protocol

The Protocol is an agreement by government and non-government agencies to respond appropriately to homeless youth. It does not prevent agencies from taking appropriate action where public health or safety is at risk or a breach of the peace or unlawful behaviour has occurred.

The Protocol does not override existing laws, statutory requirements or regulations. It does not reduce the powers of agencies or their authority to enforce specific laws and regulations. In particular, the Child and Family Services Act requires that any member of the public has a duty to report any concerns or suspicions that a child is in need of protection. A child in need of protection is (or appears to be) under the age of 16 and has experienced neglect, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or is at risk of experiencing neglect, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. If any person has suspicions that a child is in need of protection, or a youth under age 16 is reported to be homeless they are legally obligated to report the situation to Family & Children’s Services (F&CS).

Aim

The primary aim of the Protocol is to develop a coordinated service response by clarifying the roles, responsibilities, and obligations of each service provider within St. Thomas and Elgin County who deals with youth who are homeless.

Objectives

- To enhance the voice of youth in decisions made about their lives.
- To ensure that no youth remains homeless.
- To improve the co-ordination of service provision to homeless youth.

- To ensure homeless youth have access to information, informal/formal supports and to relevant protective and referral services.

Using the Protocol

This Protocol is intended to be applied whenever a youth is determined to be homeless. In applying this protocol, it is expected that service providers will offer assistance, while respecting the right of homeless youth aged 16 or older to choose not to accept that assistance. However, in serious matters relating to health and safety it is expected that service providers follow up with appropriate authorities (i.e. police, hospital, Public Health, Family & Children's Services) even if assistance is refused.

For each of the Principles (described below) which the Elgin Community agreed to address, it is expected that a service provider who comes into contact with a homeless youth will apply the Protocol and Actions, as recommended below:

Principles and Actions

211

If a youth is discovered to be homeless at any time, there will be one number to call in order to obtain assistance.

An emergency hotline will be accessible 24 hours each day, 7 days each week. 211 South West Ontario, in collaboration with its partners, will be responsible for having accurate and comprehensive information about what services are available for homeless youth and will suggest appropriate services for the youth. If required a follow-up call to the youth seeking assistance will be made within 24 hours to determine if the Youth is now connected to services.

Any person encountering a homeless youth is recommended to obtain assistance for the youth by phoning the hotline.

211 will follow the guidelines developed with Salvation Army and Family & Children's Services. 211 will connect homeless youth callers aged 15 and under to Family & Children's Services for immediate assessment and placement in emergency housing. 211 will connect homeless youth callers aged 16 and older to the Salvation Army for immediate assessment and placement in emergency housing. 211 will provide appropriate referrals to youth aged 16 and older, who are at risk of homelessness. 211 will connect the youth caller to an appropriate crisis agency if there is an immediate emotional or physical risk. 211 will conduct a follow-up call with the youth caller if needed.

Identify adequate and appropriate emergency shelter for a newly homeless youth.

211 will transfer the call to Salvation Army or possibly the Police Department or other community agencies. Upon receipt of the call, Salvation Army will provide transportation to the appropriate emergency shelter- YWCA for female youth and Youth For Christ for male youth. An assessment of the youth's basic needs will be undertaken by Salvation Army which will include a consent form to be

signed by the youth. The assessment will also determine if the youth is in need of urgent Mental Health care, addictions services, or is under the age of 16. Once they are transported to an emergency shelter the completed assessment and consent form will be left in a sealed envelope for the YWCA Staff to pick up. Once the transfer has been made Salvation Army will call the YWCA Client Advocate to alert them that there is a youth in need. Salvation Army will leave their business card and the YWCA Client Advocate business card with the youth to use in the interim.

Once a homeless youth's immediate shelter needs are met, follow up contact will be made within 24 hours. The youth's long term housing and other needs will be further assessed.

Upon receiving a call from the Salvation Army the YWCA Client Advocate will attempt to make contact with the youth within 24 hours. The initial face to face contact will continue to assess the youth's needs. The assessment will be completed in full (if not already done so). The youth will be engaged in a discussion about the circumstances leading them to need shelter. The goal will be to establish contact and develop a relationship using a holistic perspective so that their needs can be fully understood and appropriate resources/services can be accessed. Referrals to these resources will be made. The Client Advocate will continue to maintain a relationship with the youth in order to assist them in their next steps. Referrals for short term housing will be made to Youth for Christ. Longer term supportive housing referrals will be made to the YWCA Fair Winds and Harmony House and support provided to those seeking independent living. Depending on individual circumstances referrals for longer term housing may also be made to the YWCA Women's Residence or Second Story. Rural youth can also access the Host Family Homes through this referral process.

Youth should be reunited with their families if it is safe and feasible to do so.

The needs assessment will include a question about whether or not the youth would like to reconnect with his/her family (please note that this does not have to mean a parent). Potential safety issues will be assessed. If a youth is interested in reconnecting with family, a more in-depth assessment can be completed. This assessment can be done by service providers already involved with the youth, an Oxford-Elgin Child and Youth Centre (OECYC) staff or the staff who completed the needs assessment. If a youth (up to age of 18) is homeless, or at risk of being homeless, they will be prioritized by OECYC. Adults can access services through Elgin Counselling and Mediation Centre. However, a youth who had previous involvement with Family & Children's Services may also be eligible for further services. Through the assessment, the worker will determine what, if any service options are applicable. These can include: group work, counselling for the youth (including skills training and mental health or addictions counselling), family counselling, parent counselling, parent education, specialized assessments and mediation. The case manager involved will refer to appropriate agencies to access these services. Family mediation is available through Elgin Counselling and mediation.

Adopt a harm reduction approach when interacting with homeless youth.

A harm reduction approach does not prevent police officers from enforcing laws, nor teachers from encouraging youth to avoid drugs and alcohol, nor addiction services from providing appropriate treatment. Harm reduction is seen as one of the four pillars of effective policy, to be used alongside enforcement, treatment, and prevention.

Housing services delivered by host homes and formal housing providers will be encouraged and supported to utilize harm reduction strategies and principals. The aim is to provide non-judgmental access to shelter to the homeless youth population. Harm Reduction strategies such as and not limited to promotion of safer needle use and/or safe practices (including safer sharps disposal), will be integrated into delivery of services for those youth who engage in risky behaviors.

Research-indicates that a key to successful implementation of a harm reduction approach and achieving the ultimate wellbeing of the youth depends primarily on education of those providing the support. Taking this fact into account, the goal of the Harm Reduction Committee is to ensure all providers have the appropriate education and access to resources to ensure safe and adequate shelter delivery.