



Three Models of Rural Emergency Shelters: Exploring the Participant Experience and Lessons Learned

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Objectives

- Illuminate how rural homelessness and the supports needed are unique
- Compare 3 models of emergency shelters attempted in one rural community of southern Ontario
- Share lessons learned and how to improve the shelter experience within a rural context

Context: Rural Ontario



- Largest town population 4000
- 1.5 hr. drive to any mid-sized city
- Mining and lumber industries shifted to tourism
- Low-income rate 25% and 1/3 children live in poverty (Statistics Canada, 2017)



Housing Crisis

- Low stock, high rents, people moving in from city
- 48 individuals homeless during 2022 enumeration
- 500 people on waitlist for social housing
- Increasing awareness of individuals living in tents, sheds, trailers, small encampments



How is Rural Homelessness Unique?

- Few Services and Limited Transportation
- Lack of Privacy, Rural Reputations, Surveillance

Strengths of Rural Communities

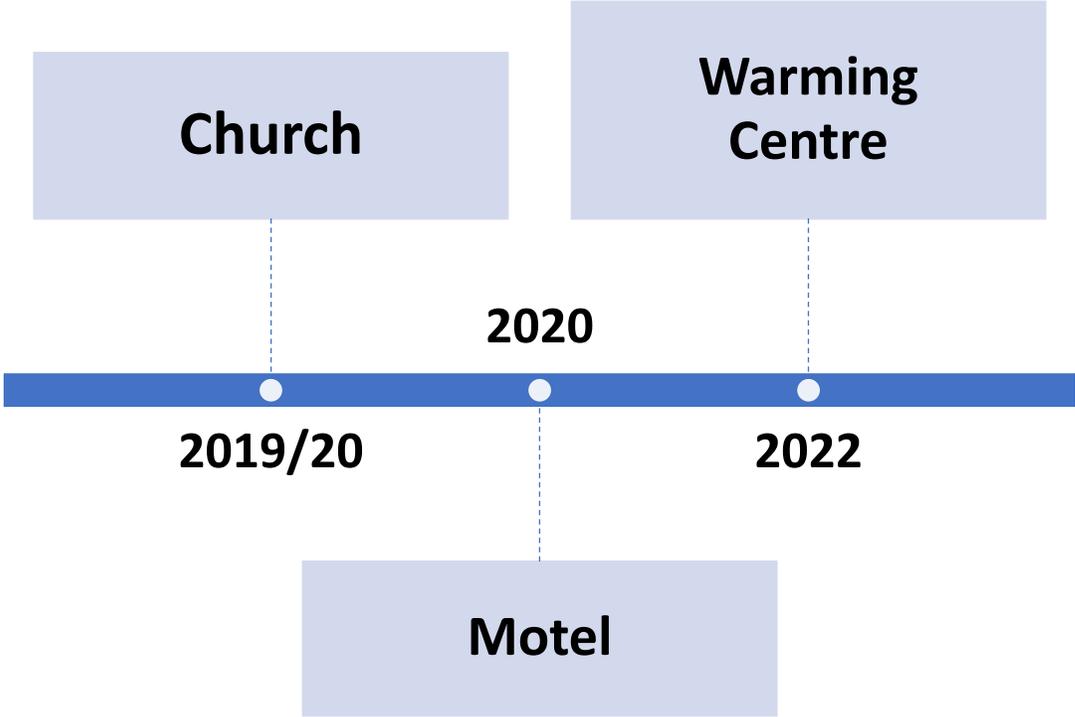


People know and help one another



Community rallies to address issues

3 EMERGENCY SHELTERS IN 3 YEARS



Shelter Models

Church

- Volunteer run
- Community donations
- Hot meals
- Up to 20 guests/night

Closed after 3 wks.

Motel

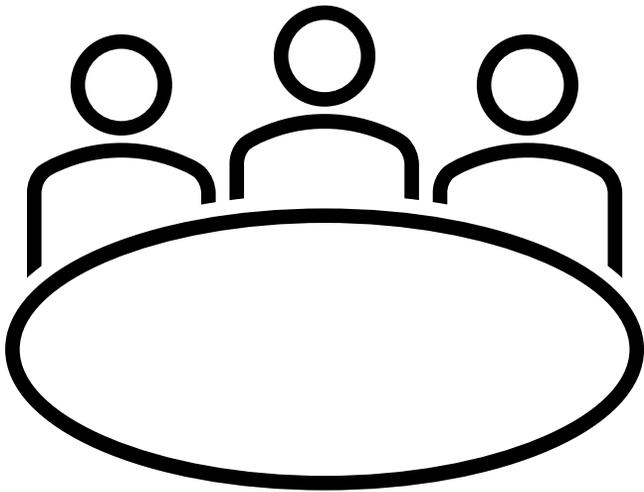
- Reaching Home COVID funding
- Private rooms with bathroom
- Non-profit staff visited daily
- 17 individuals

Closed after 6 wks.

Warming Centre

- Funded by county
- Staffed by 2 security guards
- Chairs and tables
- Drop-in by 0-13 individuals/night (average 4)

Open 64 nights



Qualitative Study

Findings from interviews with 16 participants:

- 11 shelter users and 5 service providers

Strengths and Challenges of Church Model

“...**food galore**. And they would actually ask us in the mornings what we wanted that night.”
(#5)

“They were just completely doing it as volunteers, and **it became pretty overwhelming.**” (#1SP)

“...fewer and **fewer people were willing to volunteer**. The food kept coming, the clothes and the blankets kept coming...” (#16SP)

Strengths and Challenges of Church Model

“I thought it was great, but the ladies there were **too nice** ... they got walked on.” (#5)

“It was just elderly people trying to do a kind thing and they **didn't know what they were getting themselves into.**” (#4)

“...**we were totally ignorant** of the fact that people would bring drugs in or that people would steal” (#16SP)

Strengths and Challenges of Motel

“I could lock the door and **I could sleep**. And I did, I slept for sometimes for days.” (#13)

"being housed...even for 2 or 3 or 6 weeks, you know, we really saw the **stability** that that brought to people. We could get them back on, or start them, on certain medications...**chronic health problems**, ongoing wounds that wouldn't heal, we were able to address those.” (#1SP)

“they would take already **depressed people and lock them in a room** and tell them they had to stay there by themselves all the time...that just doesn't work.” (#5)

Strengths and Challenges of Motel

“we want to have guests in our room, we **should be allowed to have guests**, we should be allowed to stand outside and **smoke without being judged...**” (#6)

“it actually had this pretty **negative impact on the community**...now the motel owners want a \$500.00 deposit” (#10SP)

“being part of a community where resources are scarce, and if someone who's unhoused had resources, **they were used to just sharing** them amongst themselves. So how to not, you know, share your place or your shower was something to navigate.” (#1SP)

Strengths and Challenges of Warming Centre

“everybody was just using it as a drop-in centre ... there was no way to get sleep there hardly, because **people just coming and going**, coming and going...” (#4)

“I don't think I ever really slept there. But now some people did, I guess. Well, they had no choice, right? ... I didn't like it. **You're on the cement floor ... no blankets, no nothing.**” (#5)

“I explained over and over that this is a warm room. This is not a shelter. It's not an emergency shelter. It's **not a homeless shelter.** It's a warm room.” (#2SP)

Strengths and Challenges of Warming Centre

“...crackers with little packs of peanut butter and jam and oatmeal and drinks or whatever. And a couple of times they (security) got pizza for us...but **it wasn't stuff all the time** either. So that kinda sucked” (#7)

“I ended up having like **belongings stolen** and stuff there so. But I mean it was still a place to sleep...It's **better than in the snowbank**, so I didn't mind it.” (#14)

“Just if you're desperate for a place to sleep right, it wasn't, it wasn't bad, **it was warm**, right?” (#11)

Shelter Models

Church

- No costs
- Donations & volunteers
- Up to 20 people

Motel

- \$38,637 for 6 weeks
- \$920/night
- Up to 17 people

Warming Centre

- \$76,735 for 64 nights
- \$1200/night
- Up to 13 people (average 4.4)

Comparison of Rural Models



CARING



CAPACITY
BUILDING



SECURITY AND
STRUCTURE



HEALTH
PROMOTION



How are the needs and experiences in rural shelters unique?

“There was a lot of idiots that **wrecked it for us all**. ... they were going in the daycare and cooking up crack and shit in the daycare where kids are going...” (#13)

“...in each situation, **we all got thrown out from what a couple individuals do**, and I don't think that's fair. ... that's happening in every one of those situations.” (#5)

Actions of a Few Impact All

Bathroom door must stay open

Showers cancelled

Shelters closed



How are the needs and experiences in rural shelters unique?

“They even started **locking the banks** in town because of us being in there ... There's only so many places to go, and they keep **kicking us out of the bandstand**, so they'll charge you with trespassing...and like, **locking the bathrooms**, that is so fucking stupid.” (#7)

“If it only opens at 9 and the drop-in is closed at 3, **what are you expected to do between 3:00 and 9:00 in a small town?** ... at 8:00 or 8:30 at night, you're going to say, hey, I'm going to go leave here and go there, especially knowing that you can't sleep, that there's no food, there's no showers...” (#1SP)

Few Local Supports

Nowhere to go outside of shelter hours

General feeling of being pushed out



How are the needs and experiences in rural shelters unique?

“Well, **our house is pretty much a warming centre** anyway. Like for 3 years we were, here in town we used to take everybody in. Yeah, and that's why we got kicked out...” (#11)

“We all have spats I guess, but pretty much **we're all friends.**” (#7)

“I knew there was a lot of people that **had our backs**, that knew us, that were there (shelter). If someone started crap with us, they would be at our, our back in no time.” (#8)

Small Community

Core group of chronically homeless

Support one another

Lessons Learned



Integrate caring with structure



Build community



Offer lockers, food, showers



Tailor hours to local services or infrastructure

References

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