



# HOMELESSNESS PARTNERING STRATEGY

## Summary

### **The Experience of Homelessness among Canadian Forces and Allied Forces Veterans**

Susan L. Ray and Cheryl Forchuk, Lawson Health Research Institute (2011)

#### **Who was involved in this study?**

- Canadian Forces (CF) and reservists who served in Special Duty Areas (SDAs) or Allied Forces (AF) Veterans and were homeless in the year prior to the study.
- 54 male veterans, with average age of 55, from Toronto, London, Hamilton, Vancouver, Victoria and Calgary were included in this study. Participants:
  - o served with the CF for an average of 6 years and had been released from the CF an average of 27 years ago.
  - o had been homeless for an average of 7 years.
  - o most had a high school education, some had a university or college education and a few had a grade school education.

#### **Context for the study**

- In the US, veterans comprise more than 26% of the male homeless population and in London (UK) 6% of the single homeless population.
- There is no estimate of the proportion of Canada's homeless population that are veterans.
- The Canadian Forces release about 5,000 personnel a year; 20-25% are released for medical reasons.
- This is the first study of its kind; there are neither previous studies nor statistics on the Canadian homeless veteran population.

#### **What was done in this study?**

A literature review, focus groups and 54 individual interviews.

## Results

- Some of the major issues that led to homelessness among this group were alcoholism, drug addiction and mental health problems.
- Many said their drinking had begun while in the military. Many others resorted to drinking to cope with the transition to civilian life, with their mental health issues and for other reasons. For many, drinking, drug abuse and mental health problems caused a spiral which led to homelessness over time.
- The transition from military to civilian life was also a large factor in the veterans' homelessness. Many spoke about the difficulty in adjusting to an unstructured civilian life and the lack of supports they received in moving from military to civilian life.
- Because of the time span between their release from the Canadian Forces and becoming homeless, these veterans were not eligible for CF benefits.
- According to participants, the best services were those provided by the shelter system. The shelter staff and services gave them a number of resources and referrals including helping them with treatment for drug and alcohol abuse.
- Homeless veterans described a complex relationship with Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC). Some felt abandoned by VAC once they were discharged. Others felt well supported by VAC, indicating they were getting the help they needed to move ahead in life.

## Recommendations

### To reduce homelessness for veterans

- Extend the period of time discharged veterans are monitored from six months to three years.
- Review VAC counselling programs to make sure they are effective.
- Perform outreach in shelters to find veterans and help them get benefits or a pension. VAC outreach counsellors are currently doing this in Montreal, Vancouver and Toronto; this effort could be examined to make sure it is working.
- Open shelters specific to veterans. Canada's only veteran's homeless shelter is Cockrell House in British Columbia.

## Recent Activities

In May 2012, HRSDC and VAC launched a federal horizontal pilot project to test whether providing transitional housing and intensive case management supports to homeless veterans in four cities (London, Toronto, Calgary and Victoria) would reduce homelessness and have an impact on their re-integration into the community. This project will be completed in March 31, 2014.