

Réseau
SOLIDARITÉ
Itinérance du Québec

FOR A GENERALIST AND COMMUNITY-BASED HPS

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SUMMARY OF THE BRIEF

Homelessness is a growing and increasingly complex phenomenon. While HPS funding has not been indexed or increased since 1998, the needs have been growing steadily. For decades, Quebec has been developing shelter, housing and intervention practices with a proven track record. The Réseau SOLIDARITÉ itinérance du Québec is confident that we could curb this phenomenon if the HPS budget was substantially increased and the program's generalist nature was maintained.

I. THE RÉSEAU SOLIDARITÉ ITINÉRANCE DU QUÉBEC, A KEY STAKEHOLDER IN THE FIGHT AGAINST HOMELESSNESS

Founded in 1998, the Réseau solidarité itinérance du Québec (RSIQ) brings together 13 regional homelessness coalition groups, which represent over 370 organizations that work with persons who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. RSIQ works to defend homeless people's rights, improve their living conditions and help aid organizations fulfill their mission.

RSIQ's general objectives:

- Improve the living conditions of persons who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, reduce homelessness, contribute to the social integration of those individuals and to the elimination of poverty;
- Maintain a coordination and support network consisting of individuals, organizations and groups;
- Stimulate knowledge development and transfer;
- Encourage homeless people and individuals without a fixed address to participate and speak out.

II. HOMELESSNESS IN QUEBEC: A GROWING PHENOMENON

Statistics and statements from numerous sources confirm the growth and increasing complexity of the homelessness phenomenon.¹ The Quebec government addressed this in February 2014 by adopting the first Politique nationale de lutte à l'itinérance, thereby recognizing the magnitude of the problem and the responsibility various levels of government have to resolve it.

The following statements are currently acknowledged by RSIQ members, stakeholders working on the ground and closely exposed to the realities of homelessness:

- **the number of homeless people is growing**, with resources reporting overcrowding, both in the summer and the winter;
- **profiles are becoming diversified**, and the phenomenon is now affecting women, as well as men, families, as well as single people, seniors, as well as young people, aboriginals, as well as migrants;
- **the homeless population is growing**, and the increasing number of homeless people on the streets requires services developed specifically to help them;

¹ 2013-2014 activity report from RAPSIM and dozens of Quebec groups and organizations, statistics from the City of Montreal emergency shelter services committee, etc.

- **the situations encountered are increasing in complexity**, as homeless persons are dealing with multiple issues (extreme poverty, serious mental and/or physical problems, multiple addictions, violence, isolation, loss of autonomy, etc.), making intervention more difficult.

A GROWING PHENOMENON

In 2005, the Government of Canada estimated the number of homeless individuals in the country at 150,000, about 30,000 of whom were in Montreal alone. Those numbers—which were likely significantly underestimated, as it is difficult to determine the number of individuals at risk or those living in hidden homelessness—have definitely increased since then. Men’s shelters in Montreal are constantly housing more people overnight, as reflected in the figures provided by the emergency shelter services committee. The number of overnight stays increased from 53,900 to 69,300 between 2008 and 2014. Even in the middle of July, the utilization rate of the 51 beds reserved for women in Montreal’s emergency housing resources was 115%. Although homelessness is a very present and visible phenomenon in major urban centres, it exists in all regions of Quebec, and the symptoms of its worsening can be seen across the province, be in in Trois-Rivières, Sherbrooke, Longueuil or Sept-Îles.

PROFILE DIVERSIFICATION

Although the 2008 crisis destabilized the lives of middle-class families, its primary victims were our society’s most vulnerable members. The female homeless population has grown tremendously since 2008, as has the number of older homeless individuals. At the Maison Marguerite and the Auberge Madeleine, the average age of the housed women is increasing. First Nations and Inuit individuals are over-represented in the homeless population, as are migrants—with or without status. More specific aid interventions are developed based on those people’s cultural or legal situation. Thanks to the HPS, until 2013, establishments such as Projet Refuge-Maison Haidar and Transit de Sept-Îles had trilingual workers who spoke Innu, English and French. Housing resources for homeless families are developing.

AN INCREASINGLY COMPLEX SITUATION

According to the organizations, the current growth in homelessness is primarily explained by the following two factors: increasingly limited access to housing, and a rise in poverty and unemployment as a result of the 2008 economic crisis. That growth is coupled with a worsening of the issues involved, with persons who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless often dealing with multiple difficulties, such as the following: mental or physical health problems, addictions and substance abuse, violent or abusive experiences, poverty, distress, isolation and various forms of discrimination.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS THAT FIGHT HOMELESSNESS ARE FACED WITH THE FOLLOWING PARADOX: THE NUMBER OF HOMELESS INDIVIDUALS WHO NEED THEIR ASSISTANCE IS GROWING, BUT THE STAGNANT FUNDING IS INSUFFICIENT TO ADEQUATELY SUPPORT INTERVENTION.

III. THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE FIGHT AGAINST HOMELESSNESS

Since 1999, the federal government has provided homelessness organizations with considerable funding through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS). RSIQ feels that this is an essential program, as it makes it possible to conduct a diverse range of activities, such as the following: building and enhancement of shelters, housing resources, social housing and drop-in centres; hiring of workers; awareness-raising and coordination activities among organizations. It is estimated that, province-wide, the HPS has helped build over **900 social housing units** and supports over **300 intervention positions**, making it possible to provide assistance to more than **75,000 individuals**.

Thanks to the support provided through the HPS, many organizations from across Quebec have been able to improve or relocate their facilities so as to ensure better service provision.² In **Sherbrooke**, the HPS helped Partage Saint François acquire and renovate a building to be used as a shelter,³ while supporting 70% of homelessness intervention in the region. In **Terrebonne**, the HPS supports the operations of the Café de rue solidaire, which offers a safe living environment to individuals in the 17-to-30 age group. Those young people are provided with support, food, sanitation facilities and reintegration activities. In the **Quebec City** region, over 75 responders are working on the ground thanks to the HPS.

Ottawa's announcement that the HPS would be refocused using a Housing First approach calls into question the specific nature of practices for fighting and preventing homelessness that have a proven track record in Quebec. In April 2014, the National Assembly of Quebec unanimously passed a resolution opposing the refocusing of that program and asking that its generalist and community-based nature be preserved. It is of the utmost importance to Quebec that intervention and housing stability approaches remain diverse.

² For Montreal only: CACTUS, Diners Saint Louis, La Maison du Père, Méta d'Âme, L'Itinéraire, le PAS de la Rue, La Rue des Femmes, etc.

³ L'Accueil Poirier, 2004

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

GENERALIST AND COMMUNITY-BASED

The HPS funding must support practices with a proven record in intervention and support, particularly by strengthening community housing support and work practices. Those practices have been documented, they work and could not be replaced through the Housing First approach alone.

The deployment of this funding must go through the development of regional community plans. That development puts field workers at the core of priorities in the fight against homelessness, as the Politique nationale de lutte à l'itinérance states.

RSIQ recommendation no. 1:

The HPS should maintain its generalist and community-based nature.

CAPITAL

In 2013, the Société d'habitation du Québec (SHQ) published its study on the social impacts of the organization's work in social housing. The study shows that the government has saved a significant amount of money thanks to investments in new social housing with community support.⁴ The funding provided through the HPS should allow for capital investments in order to improve the housing stock in communities where rental housing is deemed to be insufficient in number, substandard or inaccessible. The HPS should also help renovate buildings and facilities, as well as acquire furniture.

RSIQ recommendation no. 2:

The HPS should support capital and facility needs.

\$50 MILLION

Despite the growing needs and costs, the HPS budget has remained the same for 14 years—roughly \$20 million a year for Quebec. Owing to this lack of indexation, the community has fewer resources today than it did 15 years ago.

The envelope was inadequate from the outset, as reported in the brief we submitted to this committee in October 2012. In Quebec alone, the needs are estimated at over \$50 million. The HPS must be provided with additional funding, so that it can meet its objective.

⁴ <http://www.habitation.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/internet/publications/0000022972.pdf>

RSIQ recommendation no. 3:

The HPS budget for Quebec should be increased to \$50 million.

V. CONCLUSION: A REQUEST FOR COST-EFFECTIVE INVESTMENTS

A Canada-Quebec agreement on the HPS is being negotiated and should be concluded as soon as possible, so that the call for projects and access to funding can be launched on April 1, 2015. On a number of occasions in the past, delays had affected initiatives by slowing down their implementation and adding to the groups' workload. That had a negative impact on the direct services provided to the homeless population. When it comes to capital projects, the uncertainty and delays in the area of support have often threatened the implementation of those projects and led to additional costs.

A number of studies show that the government can save a lot of money by supporting actions that prevent homelessness and help people get off the streets.⁵ The work done by RSIQ members is evidence of those results, through the diverse responses they are implementing.

The experience of the first 15 years of the HPS deployment in Quebec has also shown that an effective response to homelessness must involve a variety of practices, such as the following: shelters, housing, intervention, outreach and community support. The Housing First approach is one of the potential solutions in that wide array of key responses for a variety of individuals and issues, but it is insufficient on its own. In that context, it is of the utmost importance that governments support an increase in the housing supply by building social housing units to foster housing stability and sustainable solutions to help people get off the streets.

BY STRENGTHENING THE HPS FOR 2015-2019, PROVIDING ADEQUATE SUPPORT FOR DEVELOPING SOCIAL HOUSING AND OTHER CAPITAL, AS WELL AS A VARIETY OR INTERVENTION RESPONSES, INCREASING THE BUDGET TO \$50 MILLION A YEAR, THE GOVERNMENT WOULD HELP STRENGTHEN HOMELESSNESS ACTION AND IMPLEMENT A HOUSING MAINTENANCE STRATEGY THAT WOULD BE TRULY SUSTAINABLE.

⁵ See, for example, the studies conducted by CREMIS or the Collectif de recherche en itinérance.