



Soothing Homelessness; Solving Homelessness

The Old Brewery Mission and the Practice of Homelessness Reduction

A Memorandum submitted to the Parliamentary Commission on Homelessness, September 29, 2008

Introduction

Founded in 1889, the Old Brewery Mission is Quebec's oldest continually operating shelter for men. It is also Quebec's largest shelter for men and Canada's largest such facility for women.

For about 115 years, the OBM helped to ease the isolation, fear, hunger, fatigue and discomfort associated with being homeless. We had become expert in soothing homelessness for Montreal men and women.

Several years ago, the OBM decided that it was no longer sufficient to feed, shower and lodge overnight clients only to release them back onto our streets the following morning. With the support of private foundations and donors, the OBM set about reducing homelessness by helping our clients to get off the streets into sustainably autonomous lifestyles appropriate to their particular circumstances and abilities.

Since the transition programs were implemented, over 500 men and women have moved out of homelessness and have achieved improved conditions, greater stability and enhanced personal security, confidence and well-being.

We continue to provide the emergency service of *soothing* homelessness and now also have embarked upon *solving* homelessness.

The OBM has three main service thrusts:

Emergency shelter: The OBM manages two shelters, one for men and one for women. A total of approximately 300 beds are available each night for emergency shelter. Clients receive not just nutritious meals, a warm shower, new clothes and a clean bed; they also receive respectful treatment and care. These people are amongst Montreal's most excluded citizens and rarely experience anything more than exclusion and rejection. Imagine the toll it must take on an individual to never really feel a part of the society

revolving around us all, to never really feel accepted. At the OBM, they find an openness and support to cope with their daily trial.

Transition facilities: The OBM manages and staffs programs to help homeless men and women move off the streets. This work is carried out in three locations in Montreal for 185 clients at a time. There have been over 500 organized departures out of homelessness through these programs so far. We could help many more with funds for more counselling staff.

Social Housing: The OBM manages social housing as part of the ongoing process of moving people into sustainably stable and autonomous lives. We have 30 such apartments for men at the Pavillon Marcelle et Jean Coutu and are in the process of renovating a 30 apartment building for 30 women. This facility, the Pavillon Lise Watier, will open in January of 2009. We are also preparing to manage social housing units spread throughout several apartment buildings in Montreal in a program called "Le Pont". In this way, the OBM can help move a client off the street, stabilize their condition and give them access to more permanent housing as they continue on their road to the maximum degree of independence that they can manage.

The future of the OBM lies in accelerating the process from streets to stability. We expect to increase our social housing programs as we reduce the number of emergency beds. This may sound counterintuitive given the increasing demand we have for shelter beds each year.

In fact, the OBM sees the emergency services as becoming not unlike the emergency rooms in a hospital, only with more rapid treatment and attention. Clients coming to our shelters will be greeted, assessed and moved on to the programs and treatment appropriate to their conditions and circumstances. This is especially critical for new arrivals to the shelter. We work to see that these clients do not remain homeless for long enough to normalize that reality and become comfortable and socialized to it.

Recommendations

The three main shelters in Montreal share concerns and in order to avoid repetition have made a collective presentation to the Commission. The OBM fully endorses the contents of documents submitted by Maison du Père and the Welcome Hall Mission and wish to underscore three key points and recommendations:

- 1. The OBM fully endorses the Framework on Homelessness, launched by Dr. Bolduc, Minister of Health and Social Services on September 18th at the Welcome Hall Mission.** We believe that such concerted attention and commitment to action is past due. The Québec government can count upon the OBM to be a dedicated and vigorous collaborator on the Framework leading to the development of a national policy on Homelessness.

2. **The OBM recommends the immediate establishment of a Homelessness Action Team** to guide the effort within the Framework, to establish immediate, short, mid and longer term objectives to address critical emergency needs and to reduce homelessness among men and women of Quebec. This Action Team ought to mean what its name implies: There will be action taken and a determined course set. This is not a bureaucratic working group, it is not an all inclusive cumbersome crowd - it is a small (perhaps 10 members) group representing political, government and practitioner elements. It will report regularly to Parliament on quarterly achievements. This Team can begin right away as there is already a great deal of evidence that there are needs to be filled right now. Action need not await the arrival of a policy on homelessness. The processes required for policy formulation and confirmation can take many more months and sometimes years to conclude than current timelines promise. The Framework and the coming policy cannot be an excuse for inaction today.

3. **The OBM recommends in the most urgent way that Parliament increase funding immediately to the large shelters for their emergency services.** One could think that this is yet another not-for-profit continually complaining about a lack of government support and once funds are released the demands will be renewed again and again. While the annual OBM budget is around \$6million, we do not seek to become a \$10 million organization. We want the government to accept responsibility for those of its citizens who, without the OBM, Welcome Hall or Maison du Père, will sleep on our streets this night. Imagine what the streetscape of Montreal would look like without or services. There are not optional urban add-on's, they are services essential in a caring human community.

If Quebec believes that is what we are or what we ought to aspire to then it is incumbent upon the government to follow up that belief with concerted and immediate action. If it is unacceptable to have our citizens sleeping on the streets, then it cannot be accepted. If it cannot be accepted, then action cannot await the outcome of the Framework and the development of a policy. Tonight when I return to my home and family and many of you do as well, there will be hundreds and hundreds of our fellow citizens turning to the three main shelters.

There is what ought to be an embarrassing gap between what is needed and what is available in the way of provincial funding for homelessness. This gap is apparent from at least these two perspectives:

- The OBM receives less than 20% of its funding from the provincial government. 75% of all its funds come from non-government donors. While we currently receive \$12 per bed per night, shelters in Toronto receive from their government over \$60. We have only asked for \$27 per bed per night. In comparative terms, this is hardly what could be called unrealistic. Further, once these funds are made available, we will not be seeking ever more increases save for the usual cost of living adjustment. We want to be a partner with Parliament as we work together to resolve homelessness.

- That 75% of or budget comes from non-government sources reveals the extent to which our fellow citizens feel that they must come to the aid of the most excluded. However, we provide an essential health and social service and we would not expect our hospitals to be required to raise 75% of their funds in order to keep emergency rooms open or surgeries functioning. The huge labour of dedicated staff coupled with the response of generous Montrealers allow us to raise some funds but we are facing deficits annually and are not able to provide the kinds of transition programs for all those who might otherwise get out of homelessness and cease to be a burden. Increased provincial funds for emergency services would permit the redeployment of other funds raised to enhance the reduction effort.

Our programs have demonstrated that we can do more than soothe homelessness, we can solve it. We ask only for the Province to accept their role and to join us in the effort. And to do it now.

Matthew Pearce
Director General