
*Brief presented to the Standing Committee on
Finance*

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RÉSEAU SOLIDARITÉ ITINÉRANCE DU QUÉBEC

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I. The Réseau solidarité itinérance du Québec: a key player in the fight against homelessness.

Created in 1998, the Réseau solidarité itinérance du Québec (RSIQ) comprises 13 regional homelessness coalitions, representing more than 300 organizations that work with individuals who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

The RSIQ organizes mobilization and various types of actions to defend the rights of homeless people, improve their living conditions and help the aid organizations to fulfill their mission.

The RSIQ general objectives:

- Improve the living conditions of those in need, of those who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, alleviate homelessness, contribute to the integration of those people into society and to eradicate poverty.
- Maintain a peer support, information and joint action network, including individuals, organizations and groups of organizations working with people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless
- Promoting the sharing, the development and the transfer of knowledge
- Represent and promote the interest of its members
- Support the social participation of and give a voice to the people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless

II. Homelessness in Quebec: an growing phenomenon

It is estimated that at least 150 000 Canadians experience homelessness each year¹.

In Quebec, the most recent censuses date back to approximately 10 years ago. In 1997, there were already 28,000 homeless people in Montreal and 11,000 in Quebec City².

These figures are undoubtedly underestimated and far below the actual situation. They obviously do capture what is called “hidden” homelessness. Indeed, many homeless people do not access supports and services.

Today, the members of the RSIQ who are working on the field, in the best position to witness to the reality of homelessness, report the following facts:

¹ Federal government estimate, 2005.

² Santé Québec, *Dénombrement de la clientèle itinérante dans les centres d'hébergement, les soupes populaires et les centres de jour des villes de Montréal et Québec 1996-7*, sous la direction de Louise Fournier et al., November 1998.

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- **the number of homeless people is increasing** in all regions, with supports and services now recounting overcrowding in winter and in summer,
 - **profiles are diversifying:** men as women, families as lonely people, older people as young people, natives as immigrants can become homeless,
 - **it should also be noted that situations become more complex:** homeless people experience several issues at the same time (extreme poverty, mental and/or physical illness, addictions, violence, isolation, loss of autonomy...), which makes intervention more difficult and would require more support in order to be able to provide people with adequate care.

In the last few years, many organizations that provide shelter throughout Quebec have regularly been reporting overcrowding and have been deploring that they have to turn people away. For example, in September 2011, the Centre Le Havre in Trois-Rivières had to be equipped with tents that were installed in the backyard in order to meet the increasing needs³. At the same period, the Maison du Passant in Granby was also overcrowded and had already, during the last six months of this year, turned 445 people away. Besides, in 2011, the shelter Transit in Sept-Iles declared that the number of their clients had shown a 30% increase during the last two years. This organization has to cope with 1000 admission requests per year while it can only house 350 people. Occupation rates for the last years in the Maison d'hébergement dépannage in Valleyfield exceed 100% when the two emergency beds are added up to the 18 regular beds within the annual compilation. In addition, 1090 people have been turned away by this service between August 2010 and September 2012, for lack of space, i.e. an average of 42 people per month. Since 2008, in Outaouais, the number of people who were turned away annually raised by 46%, from 204 to 378 and the number of served meals raised above 152 000 in 2011, which represents an increase of 9% for the city of Gatineau counting more than 265 000 inhabitants⁴.

Furthermore, the Nuit des sans abri on October 19th, 2012 will take place in 27 different cities in Quebec this year, which is very revealing of the fact homelessness is a public issue widely spread in the different regions of Quebec.

For the year 2012, the general data regarding shelter occupancy in Montreal clearly show that the upward trend is holding up. Thus, from December 16th, 2010 until September 13th, 2011, it has been reported that 142 215 men and 14 398 women spent the night in a shelter. During the same period this year, i.e. from December 2011 to September 2012, 145 127 men and 15 382 women have been registered.

³ Cyberpresse, "Le Havre déborde", Online. <http://www.cyberpresse.ca/le-nouvelliste/actualites/201109/15/01-4447821-le-havre-deborde.php>

⁴ Bulletin of the Collectif régional de lutte à l'itinérance en Outaouais, published in May 2012.

This represents an increase by 2,04 % for the men and 6,39 % for the women⁵. The shelter services for women are therefore regularly overcrowded, resulting in many women been turned away. In addition, this year raise follows 5 years of increase in shelter usage, for both men and women in Montreal.

According to the organizations, the current raise the homelessness sector is confronting can be explained by two main factors: one the one side, access to housing is increasingly difficult (disappearance of rooming houses, lack of social housing), and on the other side, poverty and unemployment have increased as consequences of the 2008 economic crisis. Homelessness community organizations are then facing the following paradox: the number of homeless people needing their intervention is growing, but funding is insufficient for them to efficiently address all the needs and distress situations.

III. Federal government intervention on homelessness: an investment to improve and extend beyond 2014

Since 1999, the federal Government has been bringing important financial support to the homelessness organizations, through what was originally named the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI). This funding, today's Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) has been renewed in 2009 for 5 years by the Government. The RSIQ deems this program essential to the sector. Indeed, it has been financing a diversity of actions since several years: building and improvement of shelters, housing resources, social housing units, day centers, recruitment of staff working with the homeless but also awareness activities and consultation between organizations. It supports many organizations in Quebec. It estimated that, at the province level, the HPS accounts for more than 300 jobs and contributed to the construction of 800 social housing units with community support.

Therefore, in Montreal, federal funding plays an essential role in the intervention for the homeless people in shelters, day centers, social housing units, in the work done in the street, paying the equivalent of the salaries of 80 to 90 social workers since 2002, and many organization were able to improve or relocate their facilities in order to provide better care and support to people⁶. Likewise, in Sherbrooke, the Partage Saint François was able, thanks to the HPS, to buy and renovate a building in order to open an emergency shelter, the Accueil Poirier in March 2004, which still brings today the necessary services of housing,

⁵ Montreal City data, Department of Social Diversity, September 2012.

⁶ CACTUS, Diners Saint Louis, La Maison du Père, la Mission Bon Accueil, Méta d'Âme, L'itinéraire, Comité social Centre Sud, Pas de la Rue, etc....

listening and serving meals to an average 550 men and 150 women all year long. In Gatineau, federal funding greatly contributes for example to the running of the LAB, a shelter and a place where young people in extreme precariousness can express oneself artistically. There, social workers use art as a springboard for social reinsertion as it encourages empowerment, confidence and the development of personal skills. In the region of Quebec, the HPS finances the position of over 75 social workers directly interacting with the homeless.

Nonetheless, the community sector worries about its renewal beyond 2014, and the amount of this program is highly insufficient to meet the increasing needs regarding homelessness in Quebec.

1. Concerns of the community sector regarding its renewal beyond 2014

RSIQ recommendation n°1:

That as of today, the next Federal budget includes the renewal of the HPS beyond 2014 for several years, so that a call for projects can be launched as soon as spring 2013.

The federal program supporting organizations combating homelessness is supposed to close on March 31st, 2014. To this day, the RSIQ was unable to obtain any information regarding its potential renewal beyond this date, while its continuation would necessarily imply that a call for projects is launched in Spring 2013, in a few months time only.

Simply terminating the HPS program would inevitably be a catastrophe for the homeless people and the community sector. As a consequence, homeless people could no longer have any access to community services, creating a breach in the reinsertion process and cutting the required support for the action of 300 homelessness workers. At the very moment when homelessness is spreading in Quebec, will we really deprive the community sector from federal financial support and deepen the distress and exclusion of the most vulnerable people in our society? The homelessness community is therefore concerned about this deadline and about the lack of response from the federal Government, precisely when worrying signs have emerged this year and some are yet appearing.

a) The HPS project of the RAPSIM⁷ has been rejected

On April 17th, 2012, Service Canada has informed the RAPSIM that minister Diane Finley had totally rejected its HPS project for the period 2012-2014, which makes up 20% of its budget. This is the first time

⁷ Réseau d'aide aux personnes seules et itinérantes de Montréal.

in the history of homeless federal funding that a minister in charge of the program completely rejects a project. Indeed, since SCPI 1 has been put in place, never had a federal minister refused a project that had been recommended by the Local Assessment Committee, by the Agency and by the Joint Management Committee. This financial aid was intended to support the RAPSIM action for the safeguard of rooming houses, social housing, access to services, community networking and needs identification. Following this refusal, the Government of Quebec, the city of Montreal and the whole community sector are unanimous in requesting that this decision is reviewed.

b) Position cuts for Service Canada agents

The Table itinérance Rive-Sud has recently learned of the fact that the position of the Service Canada agent, namely responsible for the HPS implementation and for the relationships with homelessness community organizations on the territory would be cut in the coming weeks. Likewise, in Lanaudière, in the Service Canada section of Repentigny, the community sector will lose four people who are working on the field and closely with the organizations. Three people will be redeployed in Laval and will no longer be present for consultation meetings. Also, the Table itinérance in Sherbrooke will see the Service Canada office of Sherbrooke close its doors. They expressed their concern in this matter in a letter to minister Diane Finley. Those cuts in or redeployments of positions in the last federal budget would aim at centralizing program agents in four cities: Montreal, Quebec, Drummondville and Laval.

This decision will surely have consequences on the collaboration with community organizations on many territories and on the service provided to users, and is a matter of deep concern within the homelessness community. Because of this choice for centralization, precious local expertise and the relationships built with organizations through project follow-up will be lost. The RSIQ wishes that this reorganization is reviewed to ensure competencies, expertise and means are maintained for the HPS implementation.

2. A budget envelope insufficient to meet an increasing demand

RSIQ Recommendation n°2:

That the Homelessness Partnership Strategy (HPS) funding should be increased to at least \$50 million per year in Quebec, by continuing to fund intervention, social housing, temporary and permanent housing, facilities and community actions.

Indeed, despite the increase in needs and costs, particularly regarding housing, the amount of the HPS budget has remained unchanged for 12 years, i.e. about 20 million dollars per year for the province of

Quebec. As there has been no indexation, the community sector ends up with less financial means today than it had twelve years ago.

Besides, this envelope is already by itself far below the needs of the community sector of Quebec, as shown in the following table:

Table 1: Estimated funding needs of the homelessness organizations, by regions

| Designated Communities | Annual envelope ⁸ | Estimated needs |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Cantons de l'Est | \$756,465 | \$2.1 million |
| Center of Quebec | \$358,465 | \$1 million |
| Chaudière-Appalaches | \$407,428 | \$1.1 million |
| Lanaudière | \$544,517 | \$1.5 million |
| Laurentides | \$861,507 | \$2.4 million |
| Laval | \$987,342 | \$2.7 million |
| Mauricie | \$602,406 | \$1.6 million |
| Montérégie | \$1,974,414 | \$5.4 million |
| Montreal | \$7,867,704 | \$21.7 million |
| Outaouais | \$791,661 | \$2.2 million |
| Quebec city | \$2,343,286 | \$6.5 million |
| Saguenay / Lac St-Jean | \$591,907 | \$1.6 million |
| Remote communities | \$1,169,158 | ND |
| Total, Regions of Quebec | \$19,256,260 | \$50 million |

IV. The cost of homelessness

In the fight against poverty, the cost of inaction or action on the mere consequences only is by far superior to the cost of the implementation of structural measures and actions aiming at the root causes. Many studies demonstrate this fact and tend to prove that, economically, investing to eliminate poverty is the best and the cheapest public policy strategy.

⁸ HPS annual funding 2011-2014.

In 2011, in its report «*The dollars and sense of solving poverty*»⁹, the National Council of Welfare asserts that, in 2007, it would have taken a \$ 12.6 billion investment to bring the whole population just over the poverty line. The total public cost of poverty in Canada that year was double, while it had no impact on poverty reduction. Regarding homelessness, the report also states that in Calgary, the annual cost per person can go up to 42,000 dollars in an emergency shelter and even reach 120,000 dollars in prison or in a psychiatric hospital.

More recently, the study «*The real cost of homelessness*»¹⁰ carried out by Stephen Gaetz, Director of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network, and published in September 2012, shows it is cheaper to provide the homeless with housing rather than emergency services. This study is based on a series of American and Canadian studies on the subject. The business-as-usual policy of the Canadian Government is, in the end, according to the author, very expensive.

Indeed, the estimated annual cost of homelessness in Canada is \$4.5 to 6 billion, which includes the direct costs for emergency shelters and food banks but also indirect costs for, among others, a higher utilization rate of health care, police and justice. For example, a shelter bed costs \$1,932 per month, while the monthly cost of one social housing unit is less than \$200.

Therefore, the study also highlights that by applying another policy, based upon structural measures namely regarding prevention and access to housing, and not only upon emergency services that manage situations as they come, governments would not only achieve better social results, they would also save money.

V. Conclusion: a request for profitable investments

Several recent studies show that a society can make substantial savings by supporting preventive actions and actions that actually help to get out of homelessness. The work of the 300 member organizations of the Réseau SOLIDARITÉ itinérance du Québec helping people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless reflect those results. The HPS funding has enabled many of those groups to improve their action in taking people to the centers, to support people getting back into housing, to promote reinsertion and avoid remaining in the street or moving away from it. The study ordered by the Government on the results of this funding («*Ce que nous avons entendu- What we have heard*», November 2009) made the same positive deduction.

⁹ Nation Council of Welfare report, Autumn 2011, volume 130.

¹⁰ «The real cost of homelessness, can we save money by doing the right thing?» Canadian Homelessness Research Network, September 2012.

This is why the next federal budget should include the pursuit of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy beyond March 31st, 2014. It has to be announced as soon as the coming winter in order to swiftly launch a call for projects in 2013 so that funds can be available on time on April 1st, 2014. This is a crucial element, because, on several occasions since the implementation of the homelessness federal program, there have been delays in funds availability. This makes the organizations more vulnerable, leads to departures among social workers, which causes a breach in the relationship with the homeless people. This also damages the benefits of financial support.

Regarding the housing projects, the HPS brought an essential support to the construction of more than 800 social housing units and to the improvement of shelters and refuges. However, uncertainty and delays in financial support have often endangered the implementation of those projects and too often have they caused additional costs. By securing the HPS for 2014-2019 already in the budget 2013-2014, and by increasing its annual budget from \$20 million to \$50 million, the Government will reinforce the action of the homelessness community.

In the same perspective of making investment in order to reduce the cost of poverty, the RSIQ requests that the Government resumes the financing of social housing. Many units are used upstream and downstream in the fight against homelessness. This is indeed a very costly investment.

Yet, as the National Council of Welfare reminded us in September 2011, poverty does have a cost in Canada, i.e. more than \$25 billion a year. Investing in social housing would greatly reduce this cost and contribute to economic development at the same time. With its recovery plan 2009-2011, the federal Government had made a more than welcome contribution to the development of housing cooperatives and non-profit organizations. The need for planning new investments into social housing in the next budget is still as relevant.