

# A home in YEG: There is a province-city plan to end homelessness in 10 years, but many of Edmonton's street people will believe in progress when they see it

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# A home in YEG

There is a province-city plan to end homelessness in 10 years, but many of Edmonton's street people will believe in progress when they see it

*By Gabrielle Brown*

It's -14 C, mostly cloudy. Seventy-two per cent humidity makes it feel like -22 C. The wind is blowing mercilessly. The glacial air burns my lungs; a cloud dances as I exhale. My hands are red and my nails are purple. I jam my hands into my pockets and jump around a bit to fight off the shivers running down my spine. I'll be home soon, I remind myself.

I've only been outside for about 30 minutes.

According to Homeward Trust Edmonton, 2,174 members of my community aren't so lucky.

Only half will find a place in a shelter tonight. The rest may have to sleep out in the increasing cold, with a high risk of frostbite to their hands and feet, hypothermia, or death.

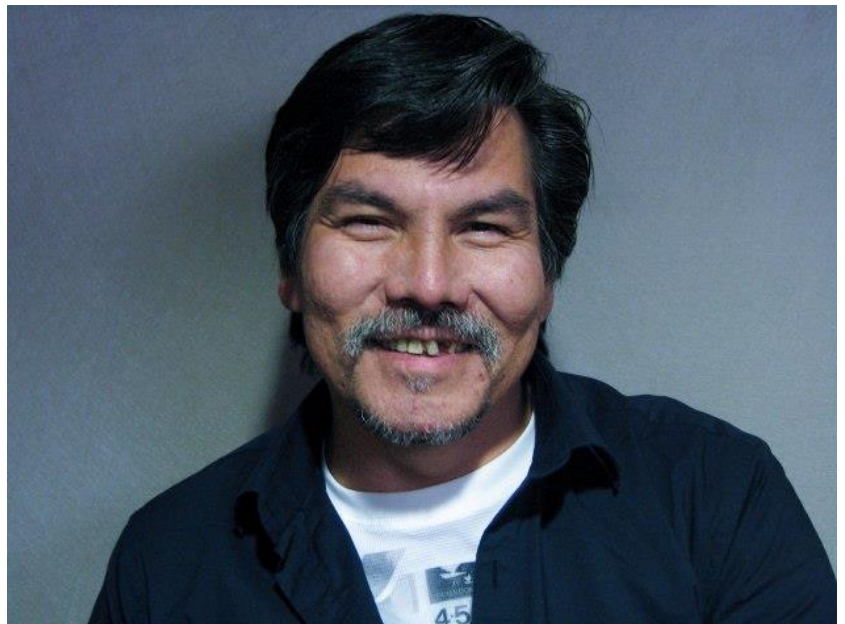
My bus is finally here. As I take a seat, I overhear a conversation between a mother and her child.

"Before I had you, I didn't really have nobody," the mother says. "If I didn't find a place to stay at night, I used to sleep there."

She points out the window to a graveyard.

"Why would you sleep there?" her little girl asks. She seems to think her mother is joking.

"It's safe. Who's going to come in a graveyard at night?"



*"If we could, there's many of us out there that would just go out in the bush and live our life," formerly homeless blogger Johnny Lee says. (Photo by Gabrielle Brown)*

I keep my eyes down on my phone and pretend not to notice as they get off the bus a stop before Walmart. The little girl complains about how far they have to walk to get home.

“Come on...it’s not really that far” her mom coaxes her. “We’ll walk fast”.

They walk toward a motel.

### **The 10-year plan**

In late 2008, the provincial government approved a 10-year plan to end homelessness in Alberta and in 2009 the Edmonton Committee to End Homelessness developed its own 10-year plan.

### **“The increased rate of poverty in Canada, and how that may affect our homeless count, is set aside and extremely understated at higher levels of government”**

According to [Homeward Trust Edmonton’s 1999 to 2010 analysis](#), both were full of “inadequate policy responses to homelessness, that for the most part included band-aid solutions such as increasing emergency shelter beds.”

The report warned, “The nature of homelessness itself... suggests that there will be

lasting effects from the boom years in terms of continued homelessness for some individuals.”

As well as individual campaigns to end homelessness in Edmonton, various organizations have formed alliances to help end poverty in the capital region. The two issues are intrinsically linked, but treated differently.

The increased rate of poverty in Canada, and how that may affect our homeless count, is set aside and extremely understated at higher levels of government.

[Edmonton’s 10-year plan](#) has come short of its goals. This past year, provincial funding for the project came to a standstill.

There have been a few victories for Edmonton’s 10-year program these past five years. Since its launch, permanent homes have been secured for 2,909 people who had been living on the streets. 84 per cent of those housed stayed in their new homes.

*The Edmonton Homeless Commission* and its partners have negotiated affordable housing for many people in private rental buildings across the city, but they have faced resistance in some neighborhoods. As a result, they have not reached their goal of 1,000 units of permanent housing by 2014. Also, the number of sheltered homeless has not been reduced 2006 levels, and training programs to help the homeless develop marketable skills have not been expanded.

Despite these shortfalls, commission literature expresses optimism about the 10-year plan’s possibility of success.

## Meet Johnny Lee

To many Edmontonians, the Stanley A. Milner library on Churchill Square is a place they walk by, or visit once in a blue moon; for Johnny Lee, and countless others, it's a lifeboat.

Johnny Lee is the father of three "and a half," has a blog he updates as often as he can, takes part in workshops hosted by EPL, stays up-to-date with current affairs, and is an active member of two choirs.

"I tell people I have 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> kids because my three have a little sister, who I love as well," Lee says. "From a fellow named Stacy, who had passed while he was still far too young. Her name is Jesse, and she was so cute when she called me 'uncle-dad,' when she was young. She's a big girl now, at 15 years."

She lives with Lee's ex-wife, Dawn. His other children, Crystal, John, and Daytona, are in their mid-to-late 20s and on their own.

On Dec. 3, 2013, Lee became a grandfather. The current image on his blog is of the day he met Crystal's son, Brady.

Lee doesn't have a pension and, because he worked casual labor most of his life, he received no money from government assistance for quite some time.

What he did have, however, is more than a decade of experiences as a foreman and roofer – which have left him with a sore back and bad knee. He has been trying to find less strenuous work, but his lack of other experience makes it difficult. His applications often went unanswered.

He says he can now receive disability assistance because of his knee.

"I get between \$800-\$900 to pay the rent and buy a few things" he says.

However, he had to rely on his own connections to get off the streets.

According to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the vacancy rate in Edmonton as of 2013, is sitting at 1.4 per cent and the average rent now sits at \$1,141 per month.

The city recognizes that this is a problem for many. Edmonton's 10 year plan even has a term for the situation: "It's the 'low-income-homelessness' vicious circle: without a permanent address, people can't access income support benefits; without money, they can't get a home. For some, getting that job doesn't help either: if they make enough to afford rent in our city, they still can't pull together first and last months' rent and a damage deposit."

## Housing and support

The website of the Centre for Public Legal Education Alberta explains: “Anyone who lives in Alberta and who is in need may apply for provincial social assistance. Alberta Works, a department of the Government of Alberta, helps people who can work, find and keep jobs, and helps individuals and families meet their basic needs. Depending on your situation, Alberta Works may provide you with income support.”

Income support is designed to help people pay for food, shelter, and clothing. People who get it generally have difficulty being able to work, are looking for work, are working for low wages, or have been unable to work. It is intended to cover expenses related to shelter and other “essentials,” such as household supplies, food, clothing, and transportation. Some of the income-support money must eventually be repaid, and funding may be taken away if a person starts making more money than when she or he applied for the assistance.

To qualify for social assistance, an applicant must have a bank account for direct deposit, proof of assets, identification, and a letter from a doctor stating the reasons the person cannot work. Special accommodations can occasionally be made.

For people living on the streets, it’s not always easy to provide those documents. Without ongoing support, completing an application can be nearly impossible.

**“I get between \$800-\$900 to pay the rent and buy a few things”**

A [report on Canada’s economic and social provincial inequality](#) by the Broadbent Institute states that “social assistance programs are deeply punitive, providing incomes far below the poverty line only after almost all savings have been exhausted. Rather than encouraging people to work, they create “poverty traps,” because benefits and child-care and housing subsidies are quickly clawed back if claimants find work.

For those living on the edge of homelessness due to low wages and high rent, ongoing support is needed to keep them off the streets.

Nicole Rose, Chair of the 2014 NAIT United Way Campaign, says she strongly believes in the importance of ongoing support.

“Because of all the presentations that I do and the events that I go to for United Way, I get to hear all the stories of the people that are affected and it truly astounds me how many different people are affected by United Way; there are hundreds of thousands. We’re trying to get to the root cause of the issue so that we can eliminate poverty.”

She says ongoing support does just that.

Since 2011, Stanley A. Milner library has been home to an [outreach program](#) that aims to connect people at risk with the resources they need. The program was once funded

by the government, but is now funded by the library. There are plans to expand the service to five other libraries in the near future.

## **Breaking the cycle**

Homelessness has been a recurring state for Johnny Lee because he has struggled with addictions.

“I was homeless on and off for nearly 15 years,” he says. “I was homeless since March, 2013 – the longest I have ever been homeless at one time.”

There’s always a reason for a return to the streets, he adds. This passage from his [blog](#) best describes the experience:

“There are many on the streets who don’t want to be there, most of us try and try again to get ‘normal.’ We go to rehab over and over, get clean and then some calamity would come along to cause a trigger, reverting us back into not caring. Usually it’s some kind of rejection or loss of someone or thing that we love. What can I say, many of us in some respects are weak, and I have only one thing to say about that. Jesus did not come for the righteous, but for the weak and poor in spirit ... I am sure that many of you have asked yourselves how we could live like that. Well many can’t, hence the suicides, and others would compile their drug use to numb the shame and ugliness of, well, their drug use. I have, on many occasions, bought more drugs than I wanted in order to mask the pain of not being the father I should have been to my kids. Silly I know, and it’s also self-defeating but it was what it was.”

On the [city of Edmonton website](#), Edmonton Homeless Commission chair Hal Danchilla describes his job as “to ensure that everyone fully understands the importance of ending homelessness as we begin the hard work tackling these barriers. Ending homelessness is not just the right thing to do – it also makes economic sense. Each chronic homeless person costs the taxpayer around \$100,000 on the streets, but \$30,000 or less to house and support.”

The [United Way Capital Region’s website](#) mentions that between \$7.1 billion and \$9.5 billion is being spent each year in Alberta in combined healthcare costs, intergenerational costs, and opportunity costs. Crime costs the community \$560 million. With proper programs that target the root cause of issues, those costs could be drastically reduced – if not eliminated.

Not everyone on the street is an addict or a criminal. Because of long wait lists for affordable housing, families, people with disabilities, and even people with jobs can all end up homeless. They don’t want to be there; they are just trying to survive. Given the tools and support they need to break free of the poverty cycle, many can rejoin mainstream society.

Or can they?

## **Real hunger games**

There has been an alarming 48.2 per cent increase in food-bank use in Alberta from 2008 to 2014.

What's more, 62 per cent of food-insecure households *earn* most of their income.

The minimum wage in Alberta is less than what the United Way estimates would be the amount needed "to ensure you have the basic essentials for living" (\$15). It has recently been increased to \$10.20 per hour from \$9.95 per hour.

Food Bank Canada's [2014 Hunger Count Report](#) estimates that the minimum cost of living for a single adult is \$17,813 a year (based on the Market Basket Measure of low income in a mid-sized city). Since people on social assistance only get \$7,975, people on disability receive \$10,711 and pensioners get an average of \$15,938 a year, they are all significantly under the basic standard of living.

The study points out that social assistance benefits have not increased in about 20 years.

Canadians making minimum wage, the report estimates, have just \$335 of "breathing room" per year.

"While the level of food bank use clearly evolves in response to larger economic factors like unemployment, the number of people receiving food assistance in Canada has not dropped below 700,000 per month for the better part of the past 15 years," the report states. "Low income is just one part of the equation that leads to food insecurity and the need for food banks. Just as important are the systems, led and managed by our federal, provincial, and municipal governments that exist to ensure Canadians do not fall into destitution. These overlapping yet under-co-ordinated and sometimes conflicting systems are failing too many."

## **Stigma, funding and inequality**

According to [Statistics Canada](#), the top 10 per cent of earners in Alberta took home more than 50.4 per cent of the total income in this province in 2012. The rest is spread among the other 90 per cent, with a high number making only minimum wage.

Yet a stigma attached to homelessness persists. This year, the residents of Terwillegar Towne expressed a strong opposition to affordable housing plans proposed by a church in the area. The end of that 60-unit project doesn't account for why the 10-year plan has fallen short of its goals. There may be opposition in other areas of the city as well.

Different levels of government fund different organizations. The rest of the money is raised by organizations through fundraising events and applications to other investors.

In recent years, organizations have been encouraged to work together toward a common goal. These mergers have caused both the creation and loss of jobs in the

aide sector. Many of the “jobs” in the organizations fighting poverty are volunteer positions that are becoming increasingly hard to fill.

As Lee says: “Why is that, in a city that has so many churches, that they are having a hard time finding people to work full time – put in the time, and stay there rather than volunteer/work there for a few months?”

The maze of bureaucracy is one reason many of the homeless prefer to stay on the street, rather than seek out help. The issues that contribute to homelessness are not a quick and easy fix due to the often transient nature of homelessness.

“It is easier for some people to be homeless rather than having a place and paying bills and putting up with the bullshit of landlords, rules and regulations and all that,” Lee says. “If we could, there’s many of us out there that would just go out in the bush and live our life. We can’t live that life because there are so many rules and regulations against it. Realistically you’re never going to end homelessness. It’s just not going to happen.”