

# NOT ALL HEROES HAVE HOMES.



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## CHRA Congress Session Series 2021

# “The Sentinels of the Street”: Identifying and Addressing Housing Inadequacies for Veterans

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**Canadian Housing and  
Renewal Association**  
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## **“The Sentinels of the Street”: Identifying and Addressing Housing Inadequacies for Veterans**

### **THIS SUMMARY**

This paper is a summary of the session, “The Sentinels of the Street”: Identifying and Addressing Housing Inadequacies for Veterans” which took place virtually during the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association’s Congress on April 29, 2021.

### **THANK YOU**



Thanks to BC Housing for their generous contributions to the Congress Session Series.

Thanks to the work and information of

- Old Brewery Mission
- Homes for Heroes Foundation
- Multifaith Housing Initiative

## Introduction

During the past few years, more attention has been focused on the unique needs of veterans within the broader homeless population. In this session, speakers cited research findings as a backdrop shaping three housing approaches. Creating affordable housing, with tailor-made supports and partnerships, each approach honours our duty of care to our veterans.

### A Snapshot of Veteran Homelessness in Canada

Suzanne Le noted that in Canada, recent Point in Time counts of people experiencing homelessness reveal that between 4% and 7% of respondents self-identify as veterans, having served in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) or the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). The total number of veterans who are currently homeless in Canada can be estimated at between 3,000 and 5,000 individuals.

While numbers vary across the country, the 2018 Ottawa Point in Time Count of people experiencing homelessness found:

- 5% of respondents, or 65 individuals self-identified as former CAF or RCMP;
- 88% resided within shelters;
- 14% were female, while 86% were male;
- 35% self-identified as Indigenous; and,
- 30% had first experienced homelessness as a child or youth.

Each presenter in turn provided a deeper understanding of veterans' situations and needs, all of which shaped the three unique approaches to long-term housing for the veterans they serve.

### The Sentinels of the Street

Presenter: Hannah Brais, Montréal

Started in 2017, the Sentinelles de la rue (Sentinels of the Street) program is led by the Old Brewery Mission in Montréal. The Mission has developed a collaborative model in partnership with Veteran's Affairs Canada, other government departments, veterans peer support organizations, and local health and social services to house and support homeless military veterans.

Over the past 4 years Sentinelles has served twenty male participants aged 44 to 64. The Mission rents out apartment units from landlords. They find these private property managers are more accepting when they know they will be housing veterans. Rent is geared to income given that the veterans most often are eligible for a pension, although the certification process with the military to access benefits can take up to one and half years.



Photo credit: Old Brewery Mission/Monique Dykstra

Hannah Brais is linked with Katherine Maurer, McGill University as part of a long-term community-academic research project to consider how underlying factors in a veteran's childhood and later military life can help deepen understanding of the phenomenon of veteran homelessness and how to better respond.

While research is ongoing, early findings centre on "attachment theory", whereby early childhood bonding defines future relationships. A lack of early support can define a veteran's emotional stability throughout the life course. In the absence of stable childhood environments, it has been suggested that higher rates of adverse childhood experiences inform entry into military service where there is structure, certainty and a sense of family and community belonging.

Reintegrating into civilian life can be extremely stressful, impacting veterans' integration, well-being, and community engagement. Veterans who experienced childhood trauma often feel they are less deserving of support, making them less likely to ask for help. They also face challenges, such as chronic physical and mental health conditions, which have been shown to negatively influence housing retention.

As Hannah explained, veterans who are homeless are "the downtrodden of the downtrodden."

Coming from a military organizational culture, these veterans have distinct needs, which are different from other homelessness service users. Even though homeless veterans have access to additional supports that others do not, they face difficulties accessing them. The Mission has found that securing military collaboration is very difficult for service providers and even harder for the veterans themselves. It takes a lot of work for the Mission to assist veterans in obtaining the pension, benefits and supports that they are eligible to receive. They have found that veterans' best support is to be reconnected with the military community.

As a final word, Hannah underlined that much of the funding for the Sentinels of the Street program is uncertain. Securing stable funding is critical and essential to retaining participants. The veterans need permanence and deserve a program with permanent funding.

## **Home For Heroes Foundation**

Presenter: David Howard, Calgary

"Not all heroes have homes", but Homes for Heroes Foundation aims to change that with tiny homes that are making a big difference. The foundation was set up four years ago by David Howard in response to the growing number of military veterans who are facing crisis as they return to civilian life and find themselves on the path to homelessness. David's awareness of the plight of veterans started with his own grandfather who was veteran: "a broken man who needed help" and did not get it in his lifetime.

Starting with on-the-ground research, David spoke to over 200 veterans that were homeless or living rough. He found that out the veterans he spoke with wanted more than a home: they wanted a community of peers. This understanding guided Homes For Heroes' mission and the housing form they adopted.

The Foundation's mission is to integrate all homeless military veterans into the community through the provision of housing and support services across Canada by:

- Building unique and affordable urban villages in major cities across Canada where homeless veterans will be able to successfully integrate back into civilian life; and
  - Providing the resources, services and training they will need to achieve the goal of living independently in the long term.
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*Calgary Homes For Heroes "908 ATCO Village" opened in 2019*

Villages for veterans consist of 15 to 25 individual "tiny homes" arranged in a park-like setting. All homes face inward to facilitate peer-to-peer support:

- Each home is less than 300 square feet in size, but fully equipped with all the features of a larger home; and
- Each village also incorporates a central resource centre, counselling office, community garden and other amenities.

David explained that a village of tiny homes suits veterans because it is configured in a barracks format where each person has their own space but is among other veterans. This is unlike many other apartments for people exiting homelessness which house both veterans and non-veterans and can feel isolating. Their first village opened in Calgary in 2019, and David said it has been a good housing solution that is working well. In conjunction with the Homes for Heroes Foundation, other villages are being developed in Edmonton, Alberta and in Kingston, Ontario.

Homes For Heroes endorses the concepts of "Housing First" and "Harm Reduction", providing wrap-around service delivery through a team-based, collaborative case management approach. They partner with local social services who sponsor veterans to enter the Homes For Heroes program and then offer the structured, yet nurturing, environment required to ensure positive emotional, psychological, and physical development for our veterans.

Veterans Affairs Canada assigns a Case Manager to each veteran. When a veteran in the program needs specific supports such as financial advice, mental health counselling, addictions recovery, or family reintegration, an individualized service plan will be developed.

Residency in Homes For Heroes' villages is temporary, with the goal of having each veteran leave the village and re-enter mainstream society employed, stable and self-sufficient. This process can take several years or several months. The key is not to rush tenants to reintegrate until they are confident they will successfully do so.

In David's experience, "vets housing is convoluted" in terms of lead responsibility, funding, and minimal collaboration among veterans' organizations. He estimates that cost per resident is about \$80,000 per year. Homes For Heroes has multi-party funding, but what is really needed is co-ordinated funding.

David firmly believes that "we need to stand up for those who stood up for our country." This

commitment has inspired these Tiny Homes villages and the vision that “together we can end homelessness among Canada’s veterans.”

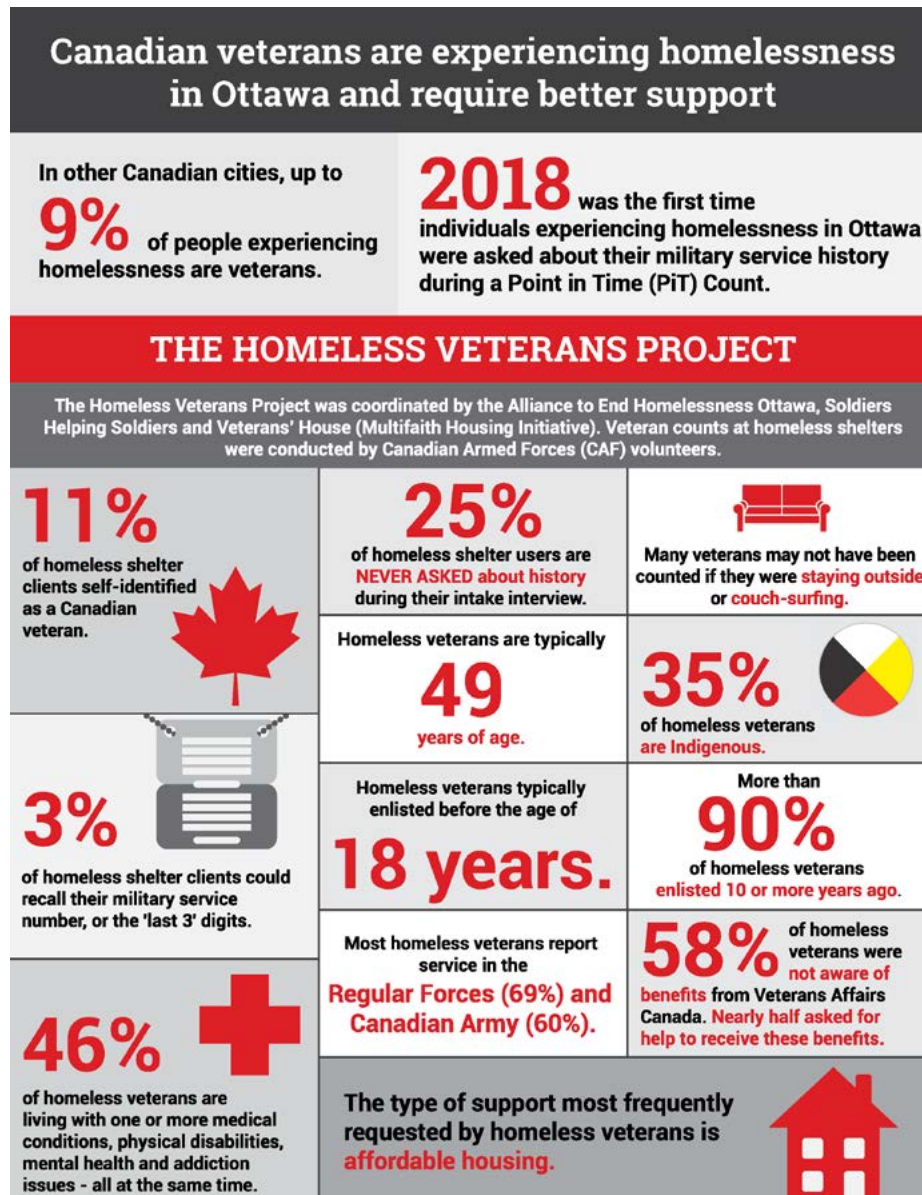
## Veterans’ House

Presenter: Suzanne Le, Ottawa

Multifaith Housing Initiative (MHI) is a non-profit charitable housing corporation established in 2002 to take action on affordable housing in the City of Ottawa. MHI owns 179 rental units providing housing to between 350 and 500 residents.

In recent years, MHI and other community partners have become increasingly concerned by the number of veterans experiencing homelessness in Ottawa and wanted to give them the support they deserve.

During the Congress session, Suzanne Le presented an infographic from The Homeless Veterans’ Project, a 2019 research and data collaboration among Ottawa’s Alliance to End Homelessness, Soldiers Helping Soldiers, and MHI. Canadian Armed Forces volunteers were engaged to talk with the veterans experiencing homelessness in Ottawa. The findings were revealing, confirming and expanding upon the unique needs of Canada’s homeless veterans.



MHI has responded by building a brand-new residence for veterans in Ottawa. Every aspect of the design and service model has been shaped by research findings and input from veteran's organizations.

Veterans' House contains forty fully furnished bachelor units of permanent, supportive, affordable housing. Applications are accepted from anyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness who served with the Canadian Armed Forces or Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The first cohort have already moved in and an upcoming cohort will include at least 10 Indigenous veterans.



*Multifaith Housing Initiative, Veterans' House, The Andy Carswell Building, opened 2021*

Significantly, Veteran's House is located on former Canadian Forces Base Rockcliffe, and from the outside the 3-storey multi-unit building resembles barracks-style military housing. Built to Passive House standards, it is highly energy efficient which will minimize ongoing operations and maintenance costs. Its many amenities focus on communal spaces to foster community and belonging among the veterans, and includes a meditation garden, fitness room and a dog park for training service dogs. Mental health and addiction support services are offered on-site, paid in full by the Royal Canadian Legion Ontario Command. At Veteran's House, "Community Building is at the Heart of the Job". Their "Beyond Housing" model includes partnerships with numerous community-serving organizations – many with military connections - for extensive community programming to support tenants.

This first Veterans' House is designed as a prototype with a robust business model that will be replicated across the country under the umbrella of "Veterans' House Canada", to be set up by MHI and separately incorporated.

Veterans' House is now up and running after several years of hard work and incredible determination by MHI and its partners. But as Suzanne Le says, "Veterans promised to give everything, even up to their lives, and because of that, we as a society owe them a duty of care."



## Summary

In addressing housing and service needs for homeless veterans, the presenters offered many important insights, including:

- Coming from a military culture, veterans have distinct needs which are different from other homelessness service users.
- The transition back from highly structured military life to relatively unstructured civilian life is dislocating, and can disrupt focus, trust and friendships.
- Research, including engagement with veterans, is an essential component of good housing and program design.
- Veterans experiencing homelessness deserve and prefer permanent long-term housing solutions with support.
- Effective support requires an understanding of both military service and homelessness-related issues.
- Veterans consistently voice a desire to re-engage with military culture and community.
- Housing form and configuration can evoke the community connection of military housing and enhance peer interaction.
- Service collaboration includes an integrated and shared response with both community services and veteran-serving organizations.
- Programming offering structure and routine, but also including leisure, are important.
- Obtaining pensions, benefits and other supports to which veterans are entitled is a long, difficult process.
- Funding is fragmented in terms of capital and operating dollars for permanent housing for veterans who have experienced homelessness. Providers have multi-party funding but what they really need is long-term coordinated funding.
- Both Homes for Heroes Foundation and Multifaith Housing Initiative's Veterans' House Canada are structured to mitigate inconsistent funding.
- In the lead up to discharge from the forces, the military can do more to support and ease veterans' transition to civilian life.

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