



SYSTEM PATHWAYS INTO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

CASE STUDY

EMPLOYMENT & INCOME ASSISTANCE

The Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) program of Manitoba provides financial help to those with no other means of support. When youth become homeless, their lives fall into chaos, without a stable address and place to keep belongings. Addictions, trauma and learning disabilities contribute to numerous difficulties navigating the social assistance system. Finding other means of financial support, from employment or scholarships, becomes extremely difficult. Without adequate financial resources, finding and keeping housing is nearly impossible.

In 2013/2014, a research project titled *System Pathways into Youth Homelessness* interviewed 22 youth (aged 18-29) who have been homeless and 12 individuals working in front-line agencies, policy developers, and Government staff.

WHAT YOUTH TOLD US

A program of last resort

Of the 22 youth we spoke to, 18 have received EIA at some point in their lives. Half of the youth who received EIA did so after becoming homeless. Six received EIA immediately after leaving their parents' home or the care of Child and Family Services (CFS). The other respondents first received EIA when they were in very unstable circumstances – for example, one just after leaving a detox program and after leaving an abusive partner. The youth who were homeless before receiving EIA worked, found odd jobs, panhandled, squeegeed, sold drugs and relied on friends, family and partners for income before turning to the government for income support. By the time these youth met with an EIA worker, they faced significant challenges and many had lost all their possessions. A young woman told us “by the time that I was ready to face the fact that I needed assistance and not powerless anymore that I could do it on my own, I got robbed and didn't have the ID.”

Challenging to navigate

The youth's assessment of the EIA program centred on their relationships with their workers, and their difficulty navigating the system. Eight of the youth described difficulties getting on or staying on income assistance because of program requirements: “I keep missing some appointments or I keep

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Youth participant

failing to comply with certain tasks, like dropping off certain forms by a certain date, but it's only 'cause I don't have specified information and I don't understand. Then when I go and try to pick up forms they tell me I need [another] form to bring in.” Youth were cut-off assistance multiple times, often for being unable to comply with requirements. They talked about the difficulties in the re-application process. Participants also had complaints about their workers, for example, “your workers never call you back and it's kind of aggravating... and then my worker says you're only supposed to

leave one message and she never calls me back and gets mad if you leave two.”

A pathway to housing

Instability of income and housing go hand-in-hand. In reviewing the participants' timelines, it appears that a majority who were cut-off assistance had it happen when they were between couches and shelters, when addiction was an important element in their lives, or when they went to jail. The disruption in financial assistance prevented stability. All of the youth who lived independently in a house or rooming house were receiving their income from either the general assistance or disability assistance EIA programs. This highlights that stability in income is an important factor for youth in maintaining their housing.

ANALYSIS OF POLICY

Specialized Support

The MYTEAM program is a pilot project designed for youth who have aged out of the care of CFS and require support for their employment or education. It is meant to support youth to remain independent of EIA, yet has been designed in collaboration with the EIA department. Community workers told us that MYTEAM suffers from the same inflexible regulations based on government expectations more than youth's needs. Two frontline staff told us that none of the youth they have assisted in applying for the MYTEAM program were eligible. None of the youth we interviewed mentioned or received any support from MYTEAM.

Coordination

Manitoba's Strategy for Sustainable Employment and a Stronger Labour Market seeks to, among other things, improve coordination and supports for those who cannot work due to complex needs or multiple challenges. There are a variety of ways EIA is currently improving coordination. EIA program staff are participating in discussions with community organizations about EIA and mental health and there is increasing consultation on pre-employment programming. These positive steps can be built on to improve coordination specifically for youth experiencing homelessness.



Social Planning Council
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WHAT AGENCY WORKERS TOLD US

Expectations of youth

Community-based agency representatives who work with youth every day agreed that the EIA system and its workers have unreasonable expectations of youth. One worker spoke about getting someone onto income assistance in the first place, “they need to do an intake appointment, then they get a worker, it takes weeks. And if you’re five minutes late or are a little anxious then they’ll get turned away. There are a lot of hoops and they’re not at the point in life to jump through all those hoops, they’re hungry, they’re tired, they’re fed up with all these systems that seem to be letting them down.” Another spoke about youth staying in programming funded by EIA: “decisions are made by the bureaucracy that doesn’t do the frontline work. They have this idea about what kids should be. The government believes that if a youth can’t make a phone call to me, they’re not going to be successful in the program. So they expect youth to take on all of these responsibilities to be successful later on. But that’s not how a teenager dealing with all of these things in their life operates.” Agency staff told us youth do not get the support they need from EIA workers if they go to appointments on their own. According to them, this is partly because the youth do not have the skills to ask for what they need in ways that EIA workers understand. Two people suggested it was because the EIA workers have a mandate of moving people off of EIA, believing that turning people away will prevent long-term dependence.

Timing matters

According to some participants, eligibility rules for EIA are not designed to work with other systems. CFS staff working to transition youth told us youth cannot apply for EIA until one week before turning 18, but the time between application and receiving a cheque is longer, leaving youth on

their own and without any income. These delays in income were also noted for youth being released from jail. Similarly, eligibility restrictions affect young parents with children who are temporarily in the care of CFS. According to a support worker for many youth formerly in the care of CFS, a cycle of child removal continues because the parents do not qualify for increased funding to afford a larger home. Their children remain in care, not because they are unfit parents but because of EIA eligibility rules. Waiting for financial support makes it very challenging for support workers who have found potential housing and compromises existing housing for the youth: “there was a girl we knew who worked for a while and went to EIA because she was going to school, but they told her to apply for Employment Insurance (EI). And she knew she didn’t qualify for EI and EIA knew she didn’t qualify, but she had to wait for six weeks to hear no. So that’s six weeks with no money. And she almost lost her Manitoba Housing because she had no income.”

Creative coping

Almost all of the community and government agency staff we spoke to said EIA rates are too low to provide for the basic needs of youth. When basic needs are not met, longer term goals like education, training, health and healing become secondary. Many spoke of the ways young people cope with low incomes, for example, “they latch onto somebody, because they have to. They couch surf, get in a relationship, go back to their parents [whose care they were removed from].” In addition to unhealthy relationships, the low EIA rates mean vulnerable youth are left with no option but inappropriate housing: “what they get is a rooming house. What happens in rooming houses is not a lot of healthy activity...a lot of times addictions [follow].”

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Front-line agency worker

ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Issue: Youth who are experiencing homelessness need adequate financial support to access appropriate housing. Without an advocate, they struggle to access and navigate the EIA system.

Recommendation: Youth who are homeless need to be able to access EIA workers with specialized training. EIA should have a team who specialize in youth.

Issue: Advocates at agencies spend a great deal of time and energy building relationships with a variety of workers, some of whom change regularly.

Recommendation: Community-based agencies would like to be at the table to do case-planning with EIA. This could be done through EIA workers designated to agencies who serve high numbers of youth on EIA. The EIA workers should spend time at the agency to meeting with participants and their support staff.

Issue: The amount of financial support provided by EIA does not meet basic needs, including housing.

Recommendation: Youth at risk of homelessness need additional financial support for appropriate housing. Eligibility for these supports should not be based on a diagnosis or extensions of care, and should not come with work requirements. A “transitioning to independence” program outside of EIA should be explored.

Issue: Programs with strict/universal requirements create gaps in eligibility and access.

Recommendation: Programs designed to support youth in education, training and transition need to provide enough so that youth can focus on healing and achieving their goals in a healthy environment. For this to happen, such programs must be created in a truly collaborative manner, recognizing the expertise of youth-serving agencies and youth themselves to identify potential barriers and create flexible supports.