



A Community Response to Homelessness

Nestled in south-central Alberta, Lethbridge is not always the first place you think of when it comes to mental health and addiction. The reality is Lethbridge is home to a growing homeless population that has [increased 153% between 2016 to 2018](#) and a crisis of mental health and addiction. Lethbridge is also the home of the busiest supervised consumption site in North America with over 300,000 visits per year.

A staggering 73% of the homeless Indigenous population identify as women – this rate is three times the average rate of homeless women in Alberta and Canada. It is estimated that a minimum of 120 permanent supportive housing units are required to support Lethbridge’s homeless population with complex needs.

You might frame Lethbridge as a community in need, weakened by the opioid crisis. Think again. YWCA Lethbridge has seen its local partner organizations and residents work with each other to respond to the issues of the day. Demonstrating the true meaning of collaboration – co-creating solutions with others, YWCA Lethbridge has found the thread of community to tie its work to.

YWCA Lethbridge, recognizing the large population of Indigenous women as in the homeless population has focused on partnerships to enhance its impact. First, we work closely with the [SAGE Clan](#), an Indigenous-led and organized patrol that builds connections with street-involved Lethbridge residents. YWCA Lethbridge supports its staff and clients to participate with the SAGE Clan on their Board and patrol volunteers completing nightly walkabouts. When CEO Shannon Hansen is asked about the Sage Clan she remarks in wonderment, “it is amazing to me that people are putting in full-time work hours as volunteers to do these patrols”. This type of dedication and compassion to the community are an essential salve to the pain being experienced in Lethbridge today.

The clients we serve exhibit a need for housing stability, safety and connection to culture. YWCA Lethbridge sees much opportunity for our organization to learn to have more cultural humility and to be inclusive of our Indigenous clients specifically in order to be able to meet the needs.

The challenge that remains in Lethbridge is the continued rise an overwhelming demand for housing with supports. With [Alberta’s 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness ending in 2018](#), it’s time to reimagine what we think is possible for the future of homelessness in Alberta. To best collaborate with our provincial government partners on issues related to housing and homelessness we recommend the following considerations:

- Design - in consultation with front-line service delivery organizations, community-based organizations, first responders, Indigenous organizations, newcomer organizations and housing management bodies - a vision for homelessness policy in Alberta that is informed by best practices in prevention and intervention. This policy vision would:
 - empower government staff to do this important work and reduce cross-government barriers to collaboration;
 - remove the red tape that limits data sharing, and analysis; and
 - provide a collective vision to service delivery organizations on how to effectively work together with government on this issue.

The YWCA Lethbridge is working closely with its sister YWCAs in Banff, Calgary and Edmonton to solve provincial-scale challenges that affect our clients. To learn more about the work of YWCAs throughout the province and the systemic recommendations we have designed together, please visit their blogs:

[YWCA Banff Social Enterprise for Social Good](#)

[YWCA Calgary Stopping Domestic Violence Before it Starts](#)

[YWCA Edmonton From Crisis to Resilience: Mental Health Affects Us All](#)

This blog was submitted by Shannon Hansen, CEO YWCA Lethbridge.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Shannon Hansen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.