



## Homeless crisis met head-on

**By Heather Douglas, President & CEO**  
**As published in The Calgary Sun, Thursday, May 13, 2008**

"We cannot have homeless people in our society," stated former governor general Adrienne Clarkson to a group of prominent Calgarians during one of her tours in Western Canada.

"How can the richest city in Canada have people slipping through the cracks?"

That challenge was issued in 2000.

Seven years later, as the homeless population grew from single adults to families with children, the business community quietly appointed a group of leaders to end this city's most visible manifestation of urban poverty. These unsung heroes met for a year and drafted a plan to end homelessness within 10 years.

Today, Steve Snyder, past chair of the Committee to End Homelessness and president and CEO of TransAlta Corp., delivers the committee's blueprint to the Chamber of Commerce membership.

"The Calgary Committee is a community-based initiative," states Snyder, "launched to respond to our city's growing homelessness crisis. The goal," he adds, "was not to find new ways to manage or cope with homelessness, but end it.

"The plan contains practical, results-oriented solutions that cut through the underlying systemic barriers. It rewards personal accountability and initiative; it helps people move to self-sufficiency and independence; it ensures people will receive the care and support they need when they need it; and it will result in a net cost savings to taxpayers."

Homelessness came to Calgary in the 1970s, during the last oil boom. The city's unprecedented wealth had created an appetite to clear out the run-down areas.

Most of the low-rental, low-cost housing was demolished. Then, as interest rates skyrocketed, rent controls were imposed. Rents were no longer affordable and the poorest of the poor were forced out on the streets.

Calgarians were horrified.

The recession of the 1980s and cutbacks of the 1990s created this decade's disaster. "Today, we estimate as many as 1,200 Calgarians have been homeless for more than a year," the committee reports. "Nearly 400 of those have been homeless more than five years."

Several key milestones have been set for 2008-2018:

- Retire 50% of Calgary's emergency shelter capacity within five years.
- Decrease the chronic homeless population 85% from current levels, within five years, with a complete elimination of chronic homelessness in seven.
- Eliminate family homelessness by 2010.



- Stop the growth of homelessness and stabilize the overall homeless count at 2006 levels by May 1, 2010.
- Deliver a 12.5% annual decrease in total homeless population starting in 2010.
- Reduce the economic cost of homelessness.
- Reduce the maximum average stay in emergency shelter to less than seven days by 2018.

The plan calls for 11,250 affordable and specialized housing units to be built with the necessary social services in-place to support people in their homes. It also requests special facilities for alcohol and drug abusers and those suffering from mental illness to ensure they get the care and treatment they need.

The Chamber continues to recommend the city permit secondary suites in all Calgary communities -- as long as parking, infrastructure and safety considerations are met.

The Chamber salutes the unsung heroes of the business fraternity who refused to accept the premise that governments must house the homeless.

Instead, they devised a strategy to ensure these citizens are able to re-engage in our city and share in the Alberta Advantage.

After all, the citizens of great cities look after themselves, then care for their neighbours.