

Homeless issue doesn't fit stereotype

By KELLY SHIERS Staff Reporter

In the province's capital, a disturbing picture of homelessness is developing.

And those on the front lines of the problem say research is making it clear that people with no fixed addresses aren't as easy to stereotype as some might think.

"I think many people — not everyone — have a kind of stereotype in mind," says Wayne MacNaughton, co-chair of the steering committee for Community Action on Homelessness. "Maybe that's a natural reaction people have. They don't want to think it could be them, so they imagine it's something different from what they are."

"The thing I say over and over again is that the only thing homeless people have in common is the fact they're homeless."

Last week, Community Action on Homelessness released its first annual report card using data collected in 2008. Statistics on 154 of the 194 available shelter beds in Halifax Regional Municipality showed 1,252 individuals stayed in an emergency shelter at some point that year, including 77 children under the age of 16 in 138 families, as well as 82 youth under the age of 18. The largest group of homeless individuals were single men — 753 — while 340 single women spent at least one night in a shelter.

The report card also shows a population that suffers from chronic illnesses at a greater rate than the general population and provides insight into life on the streets.

With the help of volunteers, 140 homeless individuals at six shelters, seven drop-in or resource centres and 10 street areas were interviewed on the night of Nov. 13 and morning of Nov. 14, 2008.

While more than 70 per cent of them had spent the previous night at a shelter, 10 per cent had slept "rough" — staying in a car, garage, on the street, at an ATM, coffee shop or other building. One per cent had been in hospital.

Of the men surveyed, 22 per cent had been homeless for more than a year, compared to eight per cent of the women.

The vast majority of homeless women were young — under 24 — while the largest group of homeless men were between 25 and 39. Twenty-seven per cent of the men and 12 per cent of the women were between 50 and 83. About 10 per cent attributed their plight to their release from treatment or a health facility.

The report card also contained highlights from the Halifax Street Health Report, a survey of 158 people living on the street in January of this year. The survey covered everything from nutrition and access to health care to physical and mental health issues. The survey is due to be released this summer.

"The length of time homeless had significant implications for an individual's physical health — the longer a person was homeless, the more chronic and serious illnesses they experienced," the report said.

On average, individuals suffered from three chronic or serious illnesses, including arthritis, bronchitis or emphysema, hearing problems, high blood pressure, migraines and vision problems.

Half of those surveyed reported significant mental health disorders and almost half (48 per cent) said they had seriously considered suicide at some point. Of those who had considered suicide, almost half (43 per cent) said they had tried to kill themselves in the past year.

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