

2015 Pollution Probe Award

Acceptance Remarks by

Jaime Rogers on behalf of the Community of Medicine Hat

Thank you Bob, Pollution Probe, for recognizing Medicine Hat for this award. And to Shell and Great West life for being presenting sponsors.

I am ever so grateful and honored to be here today, on behalf of the city of Medicine Hat, the Medicine Hat Community Housing Society, service participants, program and community partners, and frontline workers who walk alongside those experiencing homelessness.

We are reminded daily about the path that we stepped foot on with eagerness and resolve many years ago -- ending the experience of homelessness. Through the ups and downs with the economy, environmental challenges, and changes in all levels of government, the community has persevered through to keep ourselves in a position to succeed. We've had many supporters and champions, most notably our Mayor, who has talked about his shift from being opposed to the initiative, to being one of our champions. He's given the message of hope.

Our commitment to Community is the most compelling reason ending the experience of homelessness has been successful in Medicine Hat. Creating a sense of belonging is the foundation of the work we do, and can be found throughout the fabric of this community. Our commitment to community, and making good on our promises means that those experiencing homelessness are connected to the appropriate programs within 10 days to help them on their journey home.

In 2006, when I first became involved in the homelessness initiatives, I was not a fan of housing first. I had first heard about housing first right here, in Toronto. I travelled back to Alberta and started asking one gentleman experiencing homelessness - if he wanted a house. My intent was to prove that housing first doesn't work, that life doesn't work that way...provide a house then wrap around supports. I asked Dave for months if he wanted a house, and he replied no many, many different and colorful ways.

Then on a cold winter morning while waiting in line at a coffee shop with my daughter, he gestured us over to his table, with his ragged face and tired eyes, and plain as day, told me was ready for that house now. In that moment, I was all in. And I was wrong.

Since the implementation of Alberta's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness in 2009, more than 10,000 formerly homeless individuals and families across Alberta have found housing through the application of Housing First. This was made possible with significant investments by the Government of Alberta, the Government of Canada, and unparalleled collaboration among all orders of government, the 7-Cities of Alberta, community-based providers, and system partners. Communities leading local planning, implementation, and monitoring of investments has been critical to the success achieved in Medicine Hat and throughout Alberta. Until recently, Alberta was the only province to have a plan.

From April of 2009, to this morning, through the collective efforts in Medicine Hat, the community has housed 943 individuals, 653 adults and their 290 children.

Ending homelessness is not possible with efforts to prevent it from occurring in the first place. While housing first works to get people experiencing it out of the state of homelessness, prevention measures are now, more than ever, critical due to the longstanding housing crisis, and economic downturn.

Alberta's winters were unforgiving on Dave. Especially those clear dark nights when the crisp, untouched white cover of a fresh snowfall served as his bed and blanketed him. This resulted in him having one leg amputated and later, having a partial amputation of his other foot, leaving him confined to a wheelchair. Not only did he face physical challenges, but the grasp of addiction and the stronghold of compromised mental wellness also took hold. This is not unlike the individuals served in our programs – 51% of those housed in Medicine Hat reported having a physical health condition, 39% reported a substance abuse condition, and a staggering 78% reported a mental health condition.

In those early days prior to Dave being housed, he was a frequent inappropriate utilizer of public systems. When individuals are housed, we see a significant decrease in the inappropriate use of public systems. For example, based on 228 individuals at the time of initial housing in a housing first program, and those same individuals' utilization 12 months later, we've seen a 53% reduction for days in hospital and 58% reduction in the number of days in jail, 32% reduction in ER use and 12% reduction in EMS. Bottom line, is that housing individuals is more cost effective, and more importantly, is the right thing to do.

Educating community about ending homelessness, and strengthening partnerships continues to be a constant effort. 2014-2015 was a year of significant growth, with partnerships from many different schools. Notably, Elm Street School, who provided the artwork for the Year 5 Progress Report, and Calendar through their project called 'What does 'home' mean to you?' This project included grade 6 students interviewing formerly homeless individuals and families, and depicting what home meant to them through art. It is this type of collaboration that brings a community together that creates a vehicle for discussion and a platform for understanding at a deeper level.

Knowing and working with Dave taught me two very important things:

First, he taught me how much courage it takes to walk through the door.
Second, he taught me about impact, and the kindness of the human spirit.

He has been just one of my many teachers, and is someone I think about and reference often in the busyness of this collective work, but mostly, I think about him in the quiet moments in between. I think about how fortunate and how much better the community is for having him part of it.

Thank you so much for recognizing the work achieved in Medicine Hat. It always seems impossible until it's done. Our success is your success.