

# RURAL HOMELESSNESS



## GROUP ACTIVITIES HANDOUT

### GOALS

- To learn about rural homelessness and how it is different from urban homelessness
- To learn about a specific organization working on issues of rural homelessness
- To reflect on the role of community in social issues

### MATERIALS REQUIRED

- Laptop (or other device with internet access)
- Large sheets of paper
- Markers

### INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is often thought of as an urban issue, and many of the stereotypes associated with homelessness mainly apply to urban locations, but homelessness can happen in many different locations. Start by discussing the following questions with your group:

1. What stereotypes do you know of surrounding homelessness?
2. What kind of community do you live in (urban, rural, big city, small town, etc.)?
3. What does homelessness look like in your community?
4. What organizations do you know of in your community that are related to homelessness?

### KEY FACTS ABOUT RURAL HOMELESSNESS

- Hidden homelessness is most common in rural areas
- Shelters and other supports that are common in urban areas are less available in rural areas, leading more people to couch surf, or rely on support from neighbours
- Indigenous people, women, children, and members of the LGBTQ2SIA+ community are disproportionately affected by rural homelessness
- Rural communities have closer social ties than many urban communities, so homelessness can be more personal, and more stigmatized
- Fewer housing options are available in rural communities, meaning more people settle for **relative homelessness** (when someone is living in an unsuitable shelter or is at risk of losing their home)



## RURAL HOMELESSNESS IN ALBERTA /NEIGHBOUR AID CAMROSE

Camrose is a small city in rural Alberta, located about an hour's drive away from Edmonton. About 19 000 people live there, and it's nicknamed the "Wild Rose City" after the roses that grow in the nearby greenspace. It's also home to an organization called Neighbour Aid. The program director, Jo-Anne Tweed, had much to share about how the organization works to combat homelessness in a rural setting.

Neighbour Aid is a great example of a community coming together to make a positive change. It began as a joint venture between eight churches that decided to work together to provide better services for individuals and families in need. Since then, it's expanded to a network of 20 churches in Camrose and the surrounding area, with volunteers coming from churches, local groups, businesses, and the community at large. Volunteers answer phones, drive clients to medical appointments, pick up donations, and serve at Martha's Table (Neighbour Aid's free soup and sandwich program). Jo-Anne described it as "a 'common sense' organization, meeting the needs of others".

The organization itself is multifaceted – its Food Bank helps community members dealing with food insecurity by sharing surplus food as well as providing bread and bakery items three mornings a week. Martha's Table operates out of local churches and serves between 20 and 40 meals to those in need, three days a week. The Food for Kids Breakfast Club Program serves breakfasts in six local schools, totalling 1000 kids each month. Volunteers drive clients to medical appointments in Edmonton, sometimes leaving as

early as 6:00am, and provide comfort and support, and the Emergency Fund supports families and individuals with financial assistance when they are in crisis. Members of the community who are homeless are often referred to this program by the city's police, and are given assistance until other organizations can help get them back on their feet. Because of these different programs, Neighbour Aid is able to take a comprehensive approach to confronting local issues and supporting the Camrose community.

The program supports youth who are at risk through their food bank programs, and by directing them to other local services that can provide them with aid. There are also youth involved in the work that Neighbour Aid does, unloading donations, helping run food drives, and cleaning. Jo-Anne said, "building relationships and bridging the gap between the younger and the older generations is an important part of what happens here."

Above all, Jo-Anne noted the importance of community in the work that Neighbour Aid does. She said, "it takes many hands to pull everything together and we are fortunate to live in such a caring and giving community. We wouldn't be able to help as many people as we do without their support... Sometimes it is difficult to ask for help. There may be fear of someone saying 'no' or being judged by others. Sometimes we put too much value on what others will think and choose to go without, or try to accomplish something on our own, when we need help."

*You can find out more about Neighbour Aid at <https://www.neighboraid.ca>.*

## REFLECTION AND ENGAGEMENT

Have your group think about the following questions and discuss their responses.

1. Do you have an organization like Neighbour Aid in your community? How have (or can) you support this organization?
2. Why do you think Neighbour Aid's approach is so effective in a rural setting? Do you think it would work the same way in a different place (e.g. a bigger city? A smaller town?)?
3. How does knowing more about rural homelessness change your idea of homelessness in general?
4. Neighbour Aid focusses on building community through networks and different projects that support community in different ways. Why is community important to you? How does community affect how we deal with different issues? How is community important in working on issues of rural homelessness?
5. Read Hebrews 10:24-25, Romans 12:16 and 1 John 4:11. How are we called to live in community with each other? How does this relate to homelessness, urban or rural?