

## Waterloo Region Has At Least 5 Million Dollar Murrays

Malcolm Gladwell wrote an article for the New Yorker magazine, titled: *Million-Dollar Murray*. It tells the story of a Reno Nevada homeless ex-marine, named Murray Barr. He had been living on the streets for 10 years. During that time, two policemen, Patrick O'Bryan and his partner, Steve Johns, were part of a police program to clean up panhandlers off the streets. O'Bryan and Johns decided to total up the cost for three individuals, Murray being one of them.

"... Johns and O'Bryan realized that if you totted up all his hospital bills for the ten years that he had been on the streets -- as well as substance-abuse-treatment costs, doctors' fees, and other expenses—Murray Barr probably ran up a medical bill as large as anyone in the state of Nevada.

"It cost us one million dollars **not to do something** about Murray," O'Bryan said."<sup>1</sup> (*bolding my own*)

You might be shocked to learn that at least 5 people walk the streets of Waterloo Region; who have been homeless for over 10 years<sup>2</sup>. If they are similar to Murray, and they are in my experience, this has cost the taxpayers of our region at least five million dollars. Basically that is the cost of the Supportive Housing of Waterloo<sup>3</sup> (SHOW) building. This building will help get 30 people off of our streets. With two more buildings<sup>4</sup>, all of the persistently homeless in Waterloo Region could be housed.

If you were to become homeless, any relationships you had would be the first you would lose. At your job, you have work mates. You and your spouse are housed. You probably have two cars. Suddenly, you are downsized. In today's economy it can be difficult to find employment. Your first connection is gone. All those people you are used to seeing every day, all gone. You have no more water-cooler discussions in the office with your co-workers.

As time passes, and you continue having difficulty finding a job, your bills will still mount up. You and your spouse's relationship become strained under the financial pressures. In Canada marriage break-up is a precursor leading to

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.gladwell.com/2006/2006\\_02\\_13\\_a\\_murray.html](http://www.gladwell.com/2006/2006_02_13_a_murray.html) Million Dollar Murray, Malcolm Gladwell, New Yorker Magazine, February 13, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> The Out of the Cold has been in operation for ten years, and a low estimate of the number individuals we have served for ten years would be 5.

<sup>3</sup> <http://supportivehousingofwaterloo.org> (Government grants to date are \$3.6M)

<sup>4</sup> Based on Out of the Cold numbers. It has been in existence for over 10 years. At present, the Out of the Cold is sleeping 50-70 people a night (2009-2010)

homelessness. One of you has to move out. You leave your wife with the family home.

With no job, and no where to go, you soon end up on the street. Soon, you are surviving by using Out of the Cold, House of Friendship or other emergency services. Everyday becomes a challenge: Where will I eat? Where will I sleep? How will I stay warm? Will I find work?

With each day, a repeat of the last, you soon find that time has little meaning. So you try to survive, and to do this you build new relationships. You bond with your companions on the street. In no time, you are on the street for a year. Two years pass. Soon you know no other life.

Sleeping on a church floor at an Out of the Cold site does not prepare you for a permanent job. Where do you shower? How do you get your laundry done? How will any possible employer contact you? Things are definitely stacked against you. But through it all, are your new friends, your fellow street mates. Your new connections give meaning to your life.

As stressful as becoming homeless was, getting back into society must be just as hard. Just think, you've learned how to survive on the streets. You have a new network of friends. You know all about Out of the Cold. You know where the best dumpsters are.

One day you meet a street outreach worker who feels you are a candidate for SHOW. It may sound appealing, but you would now need to break with all those new friends. At least when you were downsized you could blame it on someone else. Now it is your responsibility. Also, you are being housed and your friends are not. You are confused and scared. You are unsure if it will work.

SHOW's project is working on the "housing first" model. This model works on the premise, let's house people first, and once they have stable housing, we can work on their other issues. The traditional methods look to the people to become something that they are not. For example, they might expect people to deal with their addictions first. In other words, we set people up to fail.

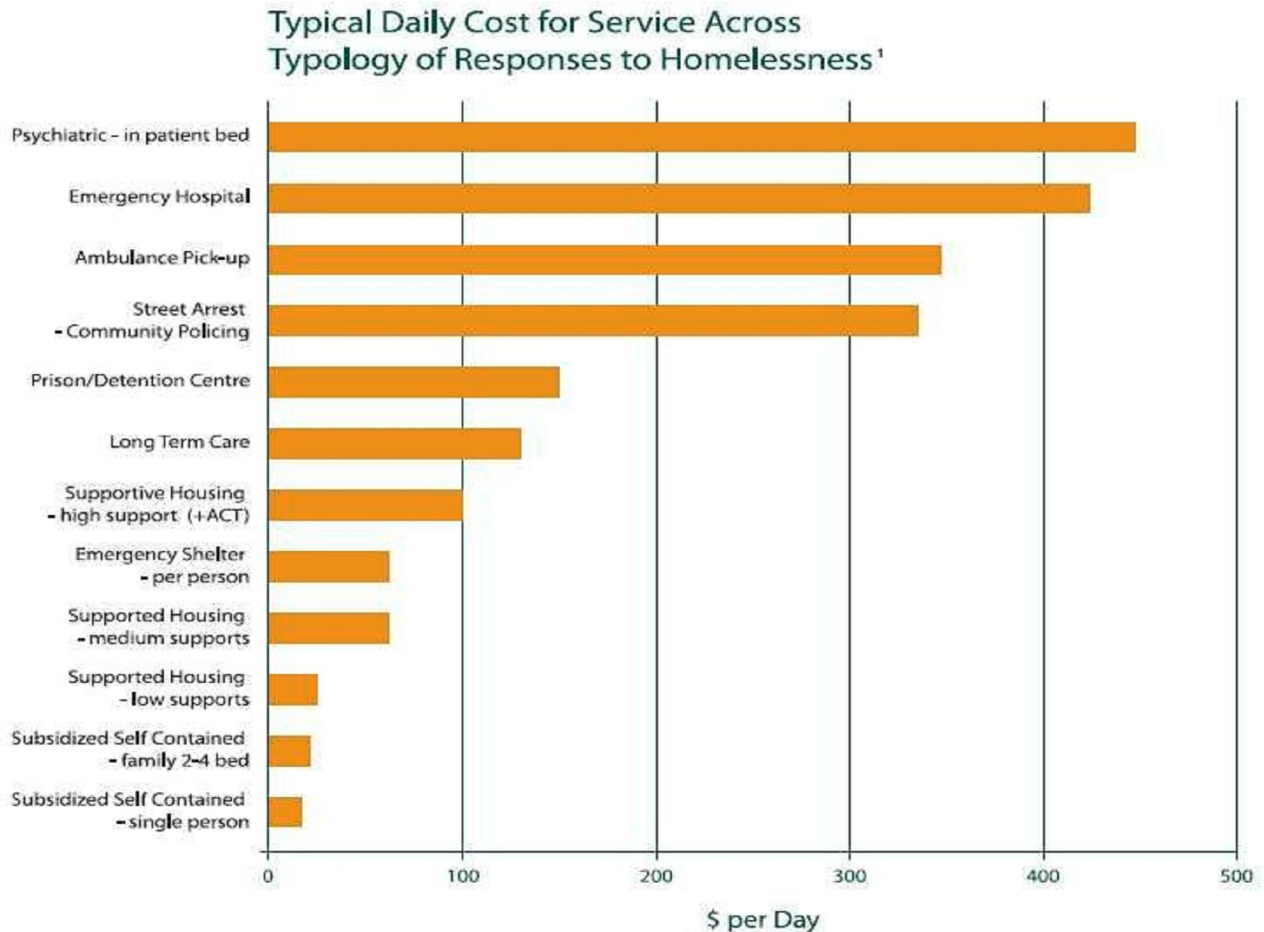
In a study done for the Region of Waterloo<sup>5</sup>. Steve Pomeroy makes the case that it is more expensive to do nothing about homelessness than to house these

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<sup>5</sup> Pomeroy, Steve (2007)., Pro-Active Versus Reactive Responses; the Business Case for a Housing Based Approach to Reduce Homelessness in the Region of Waterloo  
[http://www.region.waterloo.on.ca/web/social.nsf/DocID/8A471D6B587030678525700C004DF718/\\$file/Bus.pdf?openelement](http://www.region.waterloo.on.ca/web/social.nsf/DocID/8A471D6B587030678525700C004DF718/$file/Bus.pdf?openelement)

people. In his report, he charts the cost per day of different methods of coping with the homeless.

By examining the chart, even long-term care facilities are cheaper than doing nothing. The costs of psychiatric, emergency, ambulance, street policing and prisons are significantly higher than supportive housing. To house one Out of the Cold guest would cost about \$40/day. Even emergency shelters like House of Friendship cost us significantly more supportive housing.



<sup>1</sup> Pomeroy, Steve (2007). *Pro-Active Versus Reactive Responses; the Business Case for a Housing Based Approach to Reduce Homelessness in the Region of Waterloo*. Region of Waterloo.

Simple medical emergency care costs over 10 times as much. Your only recourse for health care is emergency care, as you no longer have a family physician. Often this is after an ambulance ride, called in by a caring cop who has found you passed out in an alley too sick to go to the next shelter.

In a study, done at the University of Toronto in conjunction with the University of Calgary, involving homeless adults gave some actual data that quantifies health costs of doing nothing compared to the similar cost for people who are

housed.<sup>6</sup> For example, it was found prior to being housed emergency care was accessed on average 9.69 times per person over two years. After being housed, this dropped to 1.31 times in a similar interval. This does not include all the other costs with homelessness, like policing, prisons or detention centres.

Living on the streets is very stressful. I challenge any of you to do it. I'm sure depression would be the least of any mental illness you might develop. In your condition people shun you... As you sink deeper into despair, you might turn to alcohol or some other substance to deaden the pain. That friendly cop is now arresting you for public drunkenness. Off to detox you go. If you can't get clean, you might end up in jail as well. As we continue to fail you, by our continuing to do nothing, you live and die your shortened life on our streets.

Homelessness is costing all of us money. We complain about poor response time for ambulance service, cost of health care, and long wait times in our emergency rooms. It is too expensive to continue to do nothing. Let us all work to make Waterloo Region a "Million Dollar Murray" free zone.

Michael A. Savage  
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<sup>6</sup> In From the Streets: The Health and Well-being of Formerly Homeless Older Adults, 2005-2006  
[http://aging.utoronto.ca/research/in\\_from\\_the\\_streets](http://aging.utoronto.ca/research/in_from_the_streets)