

## **Ottawa gets an A for efforts to house the homeless but low marks for affordability, wait times**

By Louisa Taylor, The Ottawa Citizen April 3, 2012



**A 2011 Report Card on Ending Homelessness in Ottawa by the Alliance to End Homelessness was held at a press conference at the Ottawa Mission. Brian, a former addict, lived off and on the streets for most of his adult life and is now sharing an apartment and has gained control over his addictions.**

**Photograph by: Pat McGrath , The Ottawa Citizen**

OTTAWA — For an hour before staff at the Ottawa Mission served a lunch of chicken fingers, salad and fries to more than 200 homeless men Wednesday, the dining room of the Waller Street shelter was packed with social workers, anti-poverty advocates, mental health workers and journalists. They were there for a news conference, an annual report card on Ottawa's efforts to eliminate homelessness — not the City of Ottawa, but Ottawa as a community.

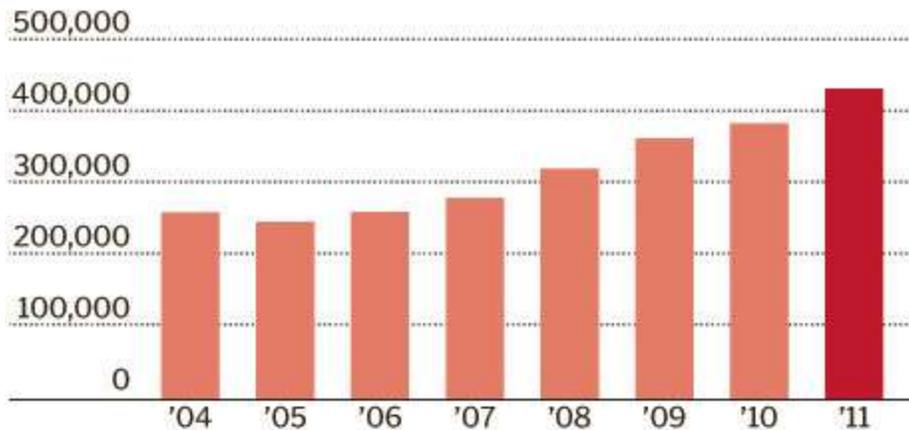
There was good news, an unexpected bright spot to trumpet: significantly more people were able to find affordable housing in Ottawa in 2011, which earned the capital its first A grade since the Alliance to End Homelessness began producing this report card eight years ago.

There was bad news, lots of it: more families and single women are homeless than last year, the use of shelter beds continues to rise year over year and people are staying in shelters longer. There were speeches and statistics and slide shows, and later, a formerly homeless man named Brian spoke to reporters about the galvanizing effect of having a home to call his own after years of living on and off the streets as his addictions to drugs and alcohol got the better of him.

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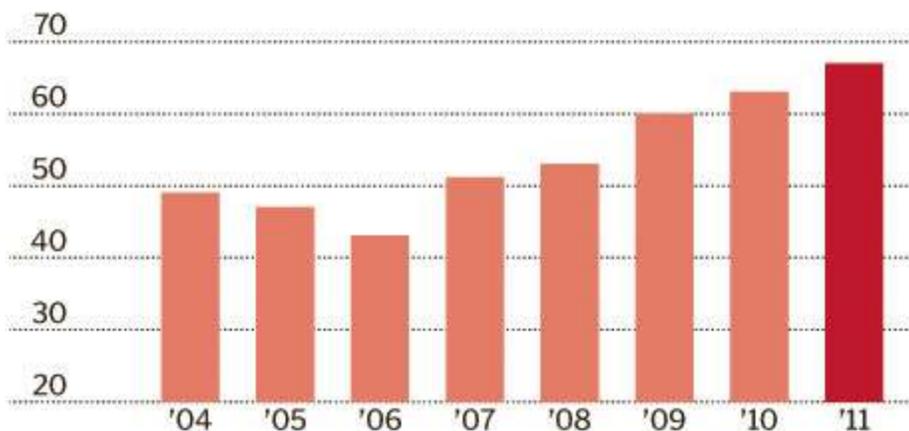
## More people are using shelters ...

Number of times homeless shelter beds were used in Ottawa:



## ... and they're staying longer

Average stay in days:



Source: Alliance to End Homelessness

DENNIS LEUNG, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

After the cameras, laptops and microphones had been packed away and the Mission returned to the business of feeding and counselling and sheltering, an unexpected sound floated down the hall from the chapel. Outside the chapel door, several men sat slumped, eyes closed, while inside, the Mission's choir sang John Lennon's Imagine. "People say I'm a dreamer ... but I'm not the only one."

The Alliance's dream is to end homelessness in Ottawa by 2020. The Alliance defines homelessness as living on the streets, in shelters or "couch surfing" (moving continuously among temporary housing provided by others). By "end homelessness," the Alliance means reducing homelessness to a temporary state caused by an emergency — a fire or family breakdown, for

example — as opposed to a persistent, ongoing way of life, as it is for approximately 7,000 people living in Ottawa every year.

To reach that goal, in 2009 the coalition of more than 70 local agencies serving homeless and low-income people set yearly targets for the coming decade in four areas: reducing the number of people in emergency shelters, reducing the amount of time people spend in shelters, creating more housing that people on low incomes can afford, and making housing more affordable in general.

For affordable housing, the goal is to house people by either building new, affordable apartments and houses, or providing financial help for those in the private rental market, along with supportive services for those with complex physical, mental or social problems. The Alliance calls for increased spending by all levels of government on specific measures to help people stay in their homes or help people find housing they can afford, beginning with a national housing strategy.

“The message, which has been consistent across the eight report cards, is our belief that the primary issue at play with homelessness is poverty and the lack of affordable housing,” says Tim Aubry, University of Ottawa psychology professor and a member of the Alliance’s research and evaluation team. “The idea is that if we can reach that target of 700 to 1,000 a year and do it over 10 years, we believe it would essentially wipe out homelessness.”

The A grade in the area of affordable housing for 2011 was the direct result of a new commitment from the City of Ottawa to provide \$14 million for housing and anti-poverty programs. By the end of 2011, for example, the city had helped 536 households with their housing costs, primarily rent supplements. Another 203 families were housed in new affordable apartments or houses built with money from the federal, provincial and municipal governments, helping a combined total of 739 families in Ottawa. There are plans to build another 264 new units in 2012, including 26 units in the Carsons Road project recently started on the city’s east side.

“I was thrilled with the A,” says Marion Wright, chair of the Alliance to End Homelessness. “It really demonstrates what additional, targeted funding can do to move us toward ending homelessness. We actually have a chance to move forward.”

Someone else who’s pleased with the top grade is Mayor Jim Watson, who made it part of his election platform to spend the \$14 million freed up by the province on housing and anti-poverty efforts.

“It’s now built into the base budget, it’s not one-time money,” says Watson. “It strengthens our hand when we push the province and federal government for additional funding, because we’ve put our money where our mouth is. We recognize that housing and anti-poverty initiatives are important and I’m proud that our council voted for that program.”

Still, the report card suggests the community is losing ground in just about every other indicator. Even with the extra investment by the city, by the end of 2011 there were 250 more homeless

people in the city than in 2010, for a total of 7,299 — leading to a D+ grade for size of the homeless population. Data from the City of Ottawa’s shelter system show that the number of families staying in shelters has increased by 24 per cent since 2004 and the average shelter stay has risen from 59 days in 2009 to 67 in 2011.

As for affordability, while the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation suggests people should not spend more than 30 per cent of their income on housing, the Alliance says someone earning minimum wage and living in a bachelor apartment in Ottawa spends on average 44 per cent of his or her income on rent, while someone receiving Ontario Disability benefits spends 68 per cent.

“If you look at the people staying in our working men’s dormitories, you see many of them have two jobs, and they still can’t afford housing for a variety of reasons,” says Wright. “When we help people to have a home, we’re giving them greater stability, so they’re not only not using shelters anymore, they’re not using emergency rooms and other services.”