

Coli: The shelter “almost feels like you’re in prison. Kind of. And I expect there to be rules. But, you know, I’m 40 years old, if I want to go out at one in the morning, I think I should be able to, and from midnight to 5am to stay there or you lose your bed. I think that the rules are a little harsh, for you know what I mean? Like, for example, if you leave, and they don’t see you out front, you lose your bed, you lose your bed, you lose your bed. You know, I need that bed. [laughs]”

Jasmine: “You got to be in by 11:30. Lights out by 12. And there is no eating after a certain hour. There’s no food allowed in your bedrooms. You weren’t allowed to share each other’s stuff. They told me no sharing each other’s things ... Weren’t allowed to have a boyfriend on property and stuff like that ... guys, period ... No guys were allowed.” Mikey: “I’ve watched a girl one time get questioned by the [security], okay. And she was like, 15 or 20 minutes late checking in, and they wouldn’t let her have a bed and she was like crying, you know.”

**“It either feels like jail or it feels like home ... it depends ... on the workers and the people there.”**

- Tiffany

Angus: “I felt like maybe perhaps we would be considered higher needs people [by Safe Beds and allowed to stay]. As I mentioned, we’re marginalised. On the 30th of May, I was literally raped, like, we were both fleeing domestic violence. Like, I felt like we were high enough priority that places would take it a little bit more seriously, maybe, or something. But it just didn’t work out that way.” Derek: “Apparently, there’s a program you can call after 12 o’clock and they’ll put you in a hotel room with somebody else. But I never went that avenue because basically by the time you got back to the hotel room, it was 2:00, 3:00 in the morning. And then you had to be back up at 6:00 and out of there.” Keith: “It’s crazy. The shit that goes on in those places ... food could be a bit better. They do serve lunch. There’s Cheetos Kraft Dinner that they would serve 3 days in a row. The third day that I ate it, I got sick.”

**Warning:**  
**This zine contains**  
**strong language and**  
**distressing content**



# Park Stories

Issue Three: Shelters

# Park Stories

## Issue Three: Shelters

Data collected by the City of Peterborough shows that there are more people experiencing homelessness in our community than there are shelter beds in the municipal system. One result of this disparity has been an increase in people tenting. The United Way's most recent Point In Time Count found that there was a 350% increase in the prevalence of unsheltered homelessness between 2018 and 2021.

Peterborough's emergency shelters are often operating with over 90% capacity. While the data we have access to doesn't provide a complete picture of shelter bed availability, it does appear that a small number of beds occasionally go unused.

So why do people choose to sleep outside when they might be able to access a shelter bed? It seems unintuitive, but through our conversations with 48 people with experience of homelessness in the summer of 2022, we learned about why some people make that choice.

Some of the people we spoke with said they didn't like how crowded the shelters are. Shelters can be chaotic places, making it hard to sleep and potentially triggering people's mental illness. Busy shelters also pose challenges for neuro-diverse individuals who are vulnerable to overstimulation. The proximity to drug use in shelters can be a challenge for people practising abstinence. Some people said they were banned from shelters. Others described the system for signing into shelters as too complicated and said the hours-long waiting period to get in is a barrier.

The aim of this zine is to help people understand what it's like to stay in an emergency shelter and why people may choose to be outside instead.

It's important to remember that emergency shelters aren't a solution to homelessness. Housing is. But our community doesn't have housing to offer to everyone experiencing homelessness right now. In the absence of sufficient housing options, we should provide the best emergency services we possibly can. And we should respect people's decisions about what shelter options are best for them.

*In the summer of 2022, the Research for Social Change Lab set out to learn: What is it like to experience homelessness in Peterborough, Ontario? And what are people's experiences seeking services from Peterborough's homeless-serving system?*

*Over about a month, we interviewed 48 people who were experiencing homelessness or had a history of homelessness in Peterborough. Most of these interviews took place in Victoria Park, a popular hangout and sometimes camp site across the street from the One Roof Community Centre. Participants were given a \$25 honorarium to thank them for their time.*

*We are sharing what we heard in a series of zines called Park Stories. When the series is complete, we will collect them into a larger volume. Every individual quoted in this zine has been given a pseudonym to protect their privacy.*

*This zine and the research it draws on was supported by Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy and United Way Peterborough & District.*

## “Housing-Focused” Shelters

Over the last decade or so, there has been a shift in the way many providers of emergency shelter services in Canada understand their role. The shift has seen shelter providers embrace what’s known as a “housing-focused” approach. This national trend helps us understand what is happening in Peterborough’s shelters. Housing-focused shelters design their services with the goal of minimizing the length of time people use them. This approach emerged from the recognition that shelters are supposed to be a short-term emergency response, and that housing is the real solution to homelessness.

In a community where there are enough adequate housing options and support services to go with them, a housing-focused shelter might make sense. We should endeavour to move people from shelter to housing as quickly as possible.

But in a community like Peterborough, where the vacancy rate is one percent and the stock of housing dedicated to people experiencing homelessness is insufficient, a “housing-focused” approach might involve practices that feel disrespectful to service users.

For example, residents in some “housing-focused” shelters are required to spend most of their time searching for housing.

“It’s so far-fetched to expect us to look for housing all day long,” said Julia, one of the people we interviewed. “It’s tiring. It’s exhausting just to look at the visual on the computer, let alone setting up viewings every

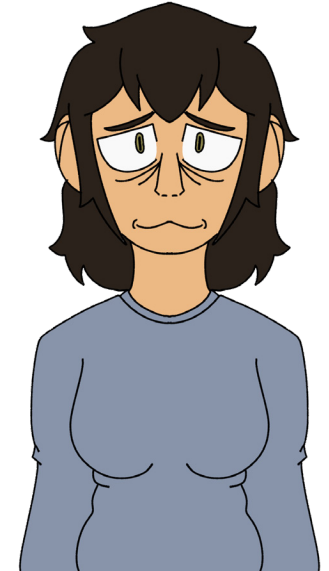
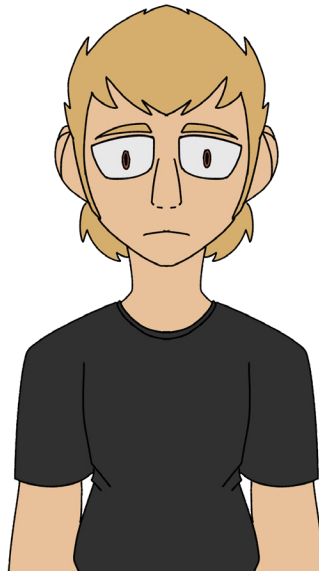
day. I’ve been to quite a few and none of them worked out ... I get my hopes up and something happens. It’s just too competitive.”

Another person, Pablo, described how frustrating it was to be forced to attend a viewing for an apartment he knew he couldn’t afford. Pablo was staying at the YES Shelter with his children, and he didn’t like the idea of getting their hopes up for an apartment that was out of their price range. “It’s going to take us three to four hours out of our day to get down there ... for an apartment I’m not going to take or get approved for and I can’t afford.”

Even though there is so little housing in town, shelter users told us they are punished if they don’t try hard enough to find a place to live. Kendra, a service provider we interviewed, said they’ve supported clients who have been banned from local shelters because they haven’t looked for housing hard enough. One client was “locked out” of a shelter, Kendra said, “because they weren’t replying to their Kijiji ads.”

Some homelessness consultants also coach “housing-focused” shelters to make their facilities as uninviting for guests as possible. The rationale for this is that shelters that are too comfortable won’t motivate people to look for housing.

Many of the people we interviewed had been homeless and staying in shelters or outside for more than a year. There are too few affordable and suitable rental options for people, and so people cannot move out of the shelter. In a situation like this, it’s worth asking whether it’s possible for a shelter to be “housing-focused” when there is so little housing to focus on.



## Shelter experiences: Brock Mission

Here's what shelter users told us it's like to stay at the Brock Mission.

Jake described the Brock like this: "It's two floors of dorms and a bunch of private rooms that they rent to individuals ... And then they have a very large dining room where you can sit all day if it's cold outside or raining outside... They built a canopy at the back of it with benches. So, you can sit at the back when it's raining or snowing, and you can smoke your cigarette without getting all soaked."

Gary appreciated being able to shower whenever he wanted — something he missed while staying at the Overflow shelter. "The showers were available all the time when you were up there in the dorm," he said. "You could have a shower anytime."

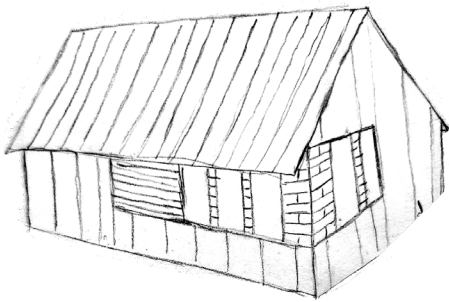
Derek also pointed out some ways that the Brock was better than the Overflow shelter. "At Brock Mission, you have a locker, so if you have something valuable you can lock it up," he said. "The food's a little better there. The showers are a lot cleaner."

Ron expressed dissatisfaction with the seating area: "There are no comfortable chairs," he said. "Everything is hard plastic."

We asked people who had stayed at the Brock what kinds of help they receive to look for housing, and we heard that there are limited supports offered on site.

As Quinn said, "There's a computer there, but they don't really help you." Similarly, Julien shared: "I didn't really receive any help from the people there trying to find the place." And Nathan explained, "You have to help yourself unless you have mental handicaps."

But there were some success stories. John said people at the Brock connected him to programs that eventually got him housed. Here's how he described the process: "Through the staff of the Brock Mission, I got affiliated with FourCAST ... They had a rapid housing programme ... So, ten months at the Mission. And then I got into a rooming house."



*The Brock Mission is a purpose-built facility offering emergency shelter beds and transitional housing units for men. It was opened in 2020.*

## Shelter experiences: Cameron House

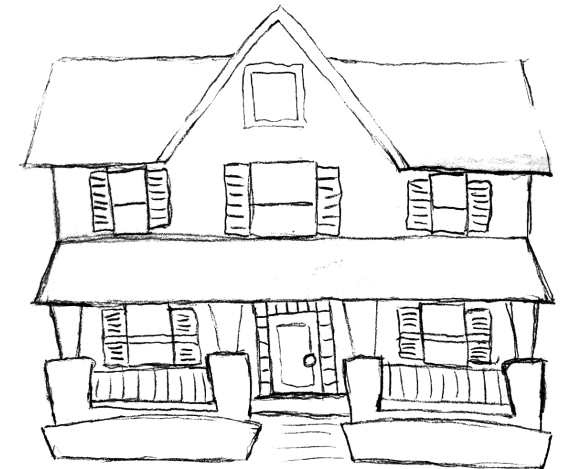
Here's what shelter users told us it's like to stay at Cameron House.

This is how Lois described what it's like to come to Cameron House: "You'd show up here. You're only allowed two garbage bags. They just ask you a little bit about you, what brought you here. They show you around, they show you what there is. The living room—well the couch-less and TV-less living room ... we don't get to sit down on the couch or anything. We sit in chairs. You can only use the computer for housing searches. So you can't even watch TV or anything in here."

Comfy chairs and couches make a shelter feel welcoming, which is not recommended for a "housing-focused" shelter.

Cameron House was one of the shelters that required people to spend their days looking for housing, but residents found this expectation unreasonable: "It's kind of unrealistic for us to look for housing 10 hours every day. You get to access your things in your room like once a day, at one in the afternoon, and not before it not after. Like if you forgot, like your tampons or something, you're fucked." (Coli)

Jasmine described Cameron House as "pretty strict," recalling that all her stuff was searched during intake and some things had to be relinquished to staff: "They would go through all of our stuff ... You had to hand in your lighters and razors. And you had to ask for those when you went out for a smoke and stuff."



*Cameron House is a shelter for women. It is run by the same organization that runs the Brock Mission.*

## Shelter experiences: Overflow

Here's what people said it's like to stay at the Overflow shelter.

Lois painted a picture of the Overflow shelter for us: "There's just beds, loads of beds ... there are different rooms, because it's the old lumber place." Lois went on to describe an extensive facility with an office, kitchen and dining area, showers, and many rooms with anywhere from three to 10 beds in them.

Some people appreciated the more "laid back" vibe (Stan) at the Overflow, while others described it as chaotic and de-stabilizing. "People are screaming all night," Derek said. "You can't sleep, people getting into your shit and then there was very little food at overflow all the time, especially for breakfast ... So we always starve there, or you have to come up here [to One Roof] for the one meal a day."

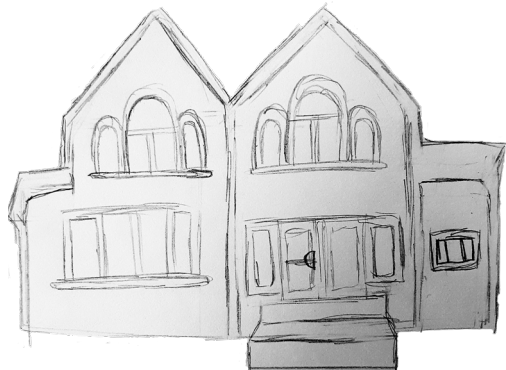
Officially, drug-use on the premises is not allowed, but people found ways to use drugs in and around Overflow anyway, which poses problems for people trying to practice abstinence. Gary indicated the Overflow wasn't a good place "for a guy like me ... there was drugs - rampant drugs and stealing. And people keeping me awake. Coming in all hours of the night and partying there."

Rae described it as "disgusting. It's a shooting range," going on to explain that she hadn't "touched a needle in almost four years."

And a lot of people expressed concerns about theft. For example, Cherry said she won't go to the Overflow because she's "worried to get stuff stolen."

People told us that the Overflow shelter has limited food, restricted access to showers, and security searches upon entry that can make it feel unwelcoming - even though they understand the reasons for the searches.

And they told us there's minimal help with housing searches. As Rae observes: "They don't help you do nothing."



*The Overflow Shelter is located in what used to be the City of Peterborough's Social Services offices on Wolfe Street. It is intended for people who cannot use the other shelters in the municipal system.*

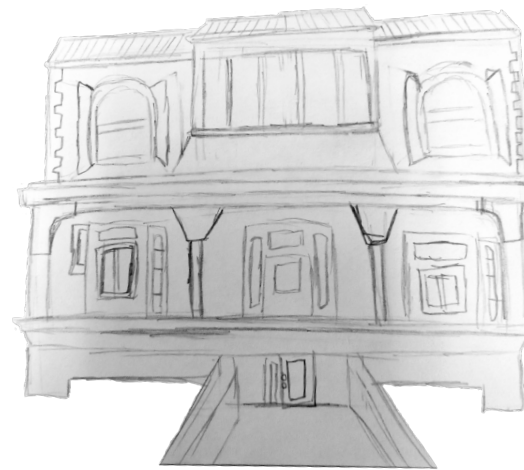
## Shelter experiences: YES Shelter

Here's what people said it's like to stay at YES.

Pablo, a father we interviewed, told us YES has been a stabilizing force in his life since he lost his housing. He is grateful for the range of donations provided to YES families that have benefited him and his children: "As far as the YES Shelter overall, I'm amazed."

Amber described arriving at YES as "scary," because she had "never been in a shelter before." But Amber said the intake process was "very comforting." Amber said the rules at YES were "pretty simple." Still, she was eventually evicted from YES for self-harming. She said she was "banned ... for burning myself. Catching myself on fire."

Other youth affirm that the rules at YES were reasonable, even though almost everyone we interviewed had been kicked out. Andrea notes, "I didn't follow a lot of the rules, I guess. So. I got kicked out of it a few times." And although he rhymed off the rules during our interview, Daniel explained that he "was kicked out numerous times." Daniel described the rules: "No drugs on the property. You have to be in by a certain time. You have to do all your chores. You have to be there for a certain amount of days before you can stay at a friend's house. And you have to maintain hygiene. And you have to - they do this programme that helps you so you can eventually live on your own. I didn't do any of that, I ended up getting kicked out."



*YES provides emergency shelter for youth and families.*

## Avoiding shelters because of sexual or gender-based violence

The people we interviewed had stayed in homeless shelters in the past, but not everyone was staying in one at the time of the interview. People expressed a range of reasons for not wanting to stay in emergency shelters, particularly related to gender and gender-based violence or exclusions.

**Rae:**

**"We need like a fuckin' one [women's shelter] that like you can be your fucking self."**

**Andrea:**

**"I was raped at one of the shelters here when [my boyfriend] wasn't there."**

**Tiffany:**

**"All the other girls threw food at her [a trans woman], called her 'man,' told her 'you're not supposed to fucking be here. You have a fucking dick, you pig.' And you know what? Instead of reprimanding them, [staff] kicked her out."**

**Jasmine:**

**"[Staff and residents] were really pushed off and standoffish about [transwomen]."**

Because of exposure to sexual trauma, people want to stay with someone they trust. Unfortunately, people can often only stay together at the Overflow shelter – a shelter that is only available if the other sex/gender segregated shelters are full.

Shelter eligibility restrictions can prevent people from staying with people they trust. For example, Rose wanted to stay with her partner at YES, but that wasn't possible. "What we were sort of hoping is that they would be able to classify us as a family unit," Rose said, "but they weren't willing to do that."

## For some people we interviewed, shelters are not accessible

People also explained that shelters are not accessible for people with physical or mental health challenges or those who are substance dependent.

**Harry:**

**"As soon as I got there, the new Brock Mission, they just sat me in a wheelchair, took me up to my bed and dumped me on the bed. And that was it. I never moved all night. I got up the next morning ... I just barely made it to the bathroom."**

**Angus:**

**"I live with a disability. I usually get around in a wheelchair. A lot of places aren't accessible to me."**

Drug dependence also makes shelters inaccessible. People who are dependent on drugs or alcohol cannot simply stop using substances because it is against the rules. Alcohol withdrawal can be fatal. Drug-withdrawal makes people very sick and vulnerable.

When asked what results in a person being kicked out of a shelter, Keith quickly answered, "Definitely using drugs on the property." Keith went on to explain that even suspicion of drug-use can result in a restriction: "[my friend] ended up getting a 5-hour restriction for being suspected of using drugs."

Kicking a person out for using substances will not limit substance use; it simply makes substance use riskier.

Stan received a year-long restriction for repeatedly overdosing at the shelter. "I overdosed a few times at the facility, so I got kicked out ... And then eventually they kicked me out for 90 days the one time, the last time actually, and every time the 90 days expired, it automatically renewed itself in the system. The staff would tell me 'okay, you come back on Monday, your ban's up.' That's what it said on the computer so I'd go back on Monday and the exact same staff that told me to come back on Monday would look at the computer and all of a sudden, it's 90 more days. This happened 4 times in a row ... so I spent a year sleeping literally outside. Wherever I could find somewhere; it was horrible."

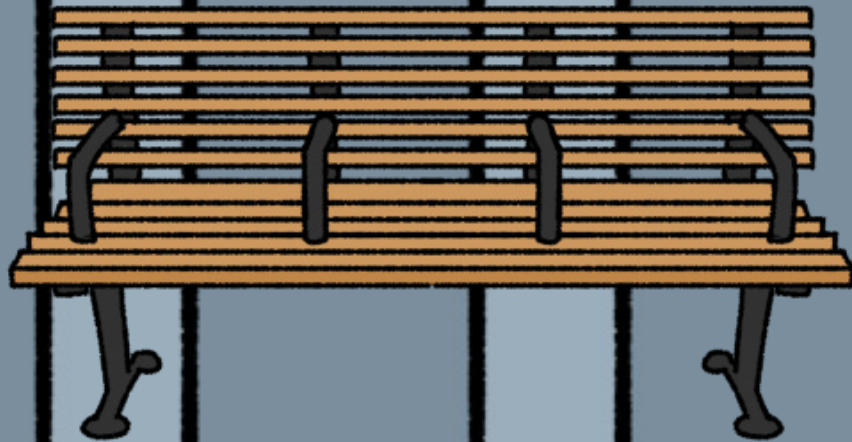
## Loss of autonomy in shelters elicits comparisons to jail

Eight of the people we spoke with compared the local shelters to jail. In both jails and shelters, people lose the capacity to sleep when and where they want, decide who they live with, or how they want to spend their time. People experience shelters as a punishment for being poor.

Devin was kicked out of a shelter for breaking curfew: “I got kicked out of the Brock Mission because I was 15 minutes late for curfew,” he said. “Like I showed up a quarter after midnight.” Devin felt that this rule undermined his status as a grown up, and he never went back to the shelter.

Bill expressed a similar concern about a loss of autonomy. “You can’t do your own laundry at any given time,” he said. “You can’t own the bathroom and close and lock the door; you’re sharing. The plates and trays – it’s like being in jail.”

Others felt similarly. Daniel explained that he wanted to be treated with respect: “With me, most of the times I got kicked out was for getting high in the shelter or being disrespectful to the staff. I wasn’t really being disrespectful ... I’m a grown-ass person. If you tell me to do something, I’m not going to do it. If you ask me politely to do it, I’ll do it.”



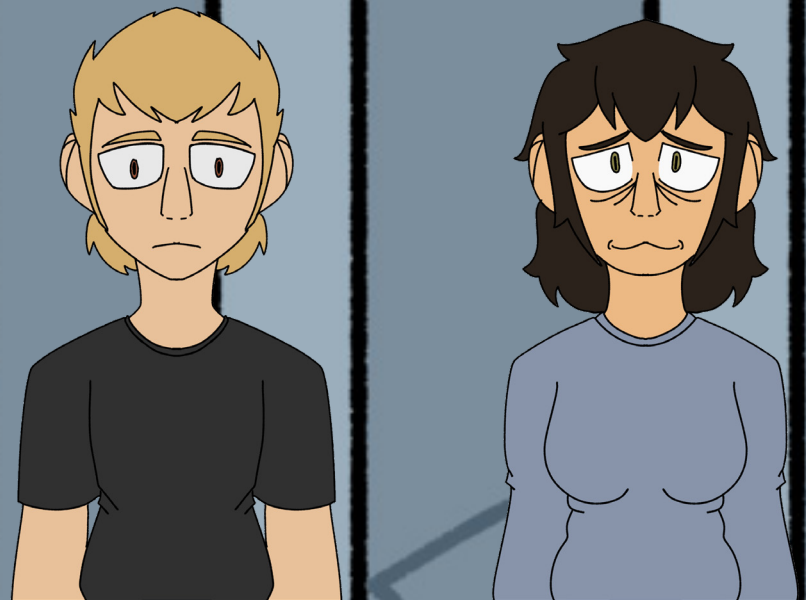
Steve said, “Well pretty much you can’t do nothing.”

People told us about the following rules: no substances on or near the property; no drug-use paraphernalia; no fighting or aggression; no sharing beds; no touching; no stealing; no swearing; rules for curfews, waking up, and rules dictating what people must do during the day.

Some people we interviewed saw these rules as reasonable expectations for a congregate living situation with strangers; others shared stories that illuminated how seemingly obvious rules get broken in shelters. Carl said he got kicked out of a shelter “because this kid, Lee, he’s not very right in the head. He spit on Patsy, one of the social workers. Let’s just say he got a lot of punches to the face.”

After Carl was kicked out for punching Lee in the face (a move he viewed as reasonable, since he was protecting the social worker), he explained, “I never came back after that.”

Others talked about similar challenges self-regulating in the face of prolonged and acute stress. For instance, Owen was also restricted for fighting. “Someone who puts their hands on me ... I do the right thing and I go outside and go away from him. And then he follows me outside, and he starts to shit on me, and I blow a gasket and I stop, and I smash him ... I get banned for 3 months, but they don’t ban the guy that follows me outside and still shoots his mouth off.”





## People get kicked out of shelters

Most of the people we interviewed had been kicked out of one or all of the shelters for breaking rules. This is called getting a service restriction. A person can be restricted for anywhere from two hours to permanently.

Dusko was told that he was “banned for life” after he had an altercation with a shelter staff person. The staff would “push you, push you, push you,” Dusko said, so he would finally “get up and say something to him, [and] he’d kick you out.” According to Dusko, the staff person said, “You’re kicked out for life. You’re banned for life.” Dusko never went back to the shelter after this.

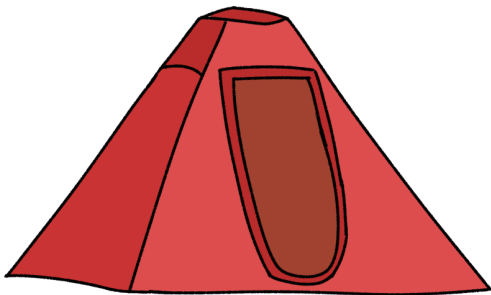
Lois received a Level 5 restriction (the most severe level) for fighting on shelter property. This meant she had to spend 30 days outside during the winter. When you have a level-5 restriction, you’re banned from all shelters. “I couldn’t go to any shelters,” said Lois. “I couldn’t access the after hours, like the hotel. I couldn’t access any of that.”

A surprising number of people talked about being kicked out of shelters for overdosing onsite or for self-harming. Amber explained that she’s been restricted from several shelters. She got “kicked out of because I tried to kill myself,” she said.

Andrea watched her partner get kicked out as he was overdosing. “Literally when he was on the verge of overdosing, they put him out on the street, into a snowbank, literally,” she said. “You’re not giving that person enough time to actually get their bearings back together.”

People also explained they had been threatened with a discharge from shelters for refusing to take the housing options offered, even when they knew the housing would not meet their needs. For instance, some people need housing with onsite supports (e.g., for health reasons); others need a sober house or housing near a medically assisted treatment clinic to manage

substance dependence. Moving into housing that is not adequate to your needs often results in tenancy loss and a return to homelessness.



## People get turned away from shelters

Even when people are eligible to use shelters and aren’t banned, they might still get turned away. The shelters in Peterborough do not track and disclose how many people they turn away each night, but many people we spoke with described being turned away.

When an interviewer asked Steve if he’d ever stayed at the Brock Mission, he replied: “I’ve tried. Honestly, I’ve tried it a million times. But I can’t do it because it’s always either packed or like one bed left and I just won’t get it ... they say they don’t have [a bed] or they’re full.”

Mikey expressed similar difficulties accessing a bed: “It’s really hard! Since COVID hit, the Brock Mission – well, they tell you that to come back. It’s very hard to access, I find.”

After many nights wandering outside during the winter because there were no beds available, Keith went to the Overflow Shelter and begged to be let in, “Yeah. And I would tell the Overflow this, like, I really need a place to stay. You gotta get in line, [and] you could wait there ‘til 9:30 at night. And if you don’t get a bed, then you wait ‘til midnight.”

Some people wondered whether the shelters were actually full when they were turned away. People noted a pattern of differential treatment in the shelters that could be interpreted as evidence of discrimination.

Jasmine talked about watching others get turned away from Cameron House even though there was a bed available, before admitting this had happened to her too: “I was actually one of those people that were told no, there was no beds. And then my girlfriend actually called me and said, they’re lying to you. They have beds.”

Rick had the opposite happen: “I phoned the Brock, they were busy, or they didn’t have any beds, so they sent me down there [to the Overflow].” But within a day, a manager at Brock found out he was there, and had him moved back to Brock Mission:

“they got me out of there pretty quick. Bullshit down there [at the Overflow].” When we asked Rick whether an exception had been made, he responded: “That would be biased of them to do that. Like I know them. I know the workers there and stuff. I know a lot of people I got a good name. I got family that are cops here in town ... My old man was in the Masons.”



## Concluding reflection

We conducted this research to better understand people's experiences with Coordinated Access — the intervention through which housing resources are prioritized and allocated in a community. Shelters are key sites of entry into the local Coordinated Access system. This zine was created so that people understood what it's like to use the shelters in Peterborough.

We were also interested in how the shelters served as potential pathways to housing. Our research suggests that the shelters seldom serve as viable pathways to housing, where people are reliant on market-based housing. It is impossible to rent a room with the housing allowance that Ontario Works provides and challenging with a minimum-wage salary

Most people will require several other resources (e.g., rent supplements and/or access to housing programs) to exit homelessness. To qualify for these supports, people must generally progress through the Coordinated Access process, including participating in an in-depth assessment of their housing histories and needs. In some cases, people are eventually prioritized for housing programs — such as the transitional housing units at the Brock Mission or several operated by Fourcast — but the process is lengthy (i.e. requiring several months or a year of shelter-use).

For these reasons, ensuring that people have access to suitable and adequate “emergency” sheltering options is essential. Although shelters are not the solution to homelessness, they are presently a key component of our local response, and it's important that they are experienced as accessible to everyone who finds themselves without access to adequate and secure housing. Creating inhospitable or unwelcoming shelters does not motivate a person to find housing in a context where there is an acute lack of affordable and suitable housing to be found.

Check out the other zines in this series:

- Issue One: Jail
- Issue Two: Possessions
- Issue Three: Shelters
- Issue Four: Navigating the System
- Issue Five: Losing Housing
- Issue Six: Encampments
- Issue Seven: Coordinated Access

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*This zine's lead author was Naomi Nichols, the RSCL's director. It relied on contributions from Thamer Linklater, Jimmy Frickey, Samantha Blondeau, Marisa Mackenzie, Will Pearson, and Joey Lavictoire (who did all the illustrations).*

*Thanks for reading!*

[www.socialchangelab.ca](http://www.socialchangelab.ca)



Stan: “I’ve been to Safe Beds, Safe Beds is really good, too. But it’s very temporary, so temporary that it’s pretty much useless. What good’s 5 days? 5 days is not enough time for anything.” Tiffany: “I get [a service restriction] once every 2 months at least ... not getting a bed at the Cameron House was my latest one [service restriction]. I’m on one right now ... I refused to go up to the Cameron House. Because A) I work downtown, it’s too far for me to walk. B) I don’t feel comfortable there. C) I don’t know anyone who’s up there right now. I don’t feel comfortable.” Lois: “They told me I had to go [from Overflow to Cameron House]. Well doesn’t make any sense, because I just got a job, and I work downtown. I get picked up at the Staffing Connection. I said ‘I have my methadone downtown. Everything is downtown. Why are you shipping me to the north end. Why don’t you ship somebody else there? ... I don’t want to go.’ [So the shelter worker said:] ‘Well then, you’re restricted for 14 days.’” Josie Lewis: “[I was] only banned once [from Cameron House] ... Well, it was for a year. But, I think it was longer than that. It’s just officially it’s only for a year. Like I’d call and they’d say, ‘No, you’re banned. You need to talk to the manager.’ And of course, it was so hard to get a hold of the manager.”



**PARK STORIES** is a series of zines produced by BfE SuperCrew at Trent University’s Research for Social Change Lab. The zines document the stories and observations that people with experiences of homelessness shared with us in Victoria Park in 2022.

You’re holding Issue Three — Shelters.

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