

Street smarts

UVic research helps drive community-based solutions to homelessness in Greater Victoria

by Kat Eschner

A sleeping bag in a car, an unpadding perch on a cold piece of cement, a nylon shell at a local park—this is no place like home. Yet this is the reality for an estimated 1,500 men and women who live on the capital region's streets.

Dr. Bernie Pauly, a registered nurse and community-based researcher at the University of Victoria, wants to help change that. She's one of a core group of university researchers and community partners who are working together to reduce homelessness in Greater Victoria.

"Shelters and mats are short-term solutions and there is a desperate need for affordable housing," says Pauly. "When you're without a home it's a constant struggle to meet the basic needs of food and shelter. It's very hard on your physical, emotional and mental health."

For Pauly, homelessness is as much an ethical issue as it is a health and social issue. While doing her PhD at UVic, she began to question what it would take to maintain the health of people living on the streets, instead of treating preventable illnesses over and over again.

"I went from looking exclusively at access

to health care services to looking at other things that impact health, like housing, food and income," she says. "Homelessness is an extreme form of poverty that limits access to nutritious food and adequate sleep. It exposes people to chronic stress over and over, resulting in preventable health problems and even early death.

"I want to deal with the root causes of these problems, instead of managing them over and over."

Pauly spends a lot of time in the community, asking what information is needed, whether existing knowledge can help, and what new research might be useful.

"On the front lines, there isn't always time to draw key insights from the most recent research or develop new questions," she says. "As researchers, we can translate what is known and undertake new research that helps to fill the gaps and inform action."

In one study, Pauly and fellow UVic researchers are working with community groups to communicate research on promising ways to alleviate homelessness, and to build capacity within the community for evaluating the effectiveness of these approaches.

"For some people, safe and affordable hous-

ing and an adequate income is the answer," says Pauly. "But for others, housing alone does not address decades of poverty, trauma, mental illness or addiction. Pathways into and out of homelessness are complex and varied."

In a related study, Pauly co-leads a team of university and community-based researchers from the Victoria Cool Aid Society and the Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria to evaluate the effectiveness of transitional shelters in breaking the cycle of homelessness.

Early findings suggest that transitional shelters have important benefits, partly because the level of care helps people deal with multiple health concerns. Transitional shelters also provide support during the often difficult search for more permanent housing, especially in cities like Victoria where affordable housing is in short supply.

Pauly says her research is propelled by one overarching belief—"that everyone deserves a home and that as a community we all have a role to play in making that happen."

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An estimated 150,000 to 300,000 people are homeless in Canada, living in shelters or on the streets. On any given night, 40,000 people are staying in homeless shelters.

Families with children living in poverty, street youth, Aboriginal people, the working poor, people with mental illness and new immigrants are disproportionately reflected in Canada's homeless population.

Bernie Pauly co-chairs the research and evaluation working group of the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness, which aims to end homelessness in the region by 2018. Without action, the coalition says, the homeless population would increase four-fold within five years.

Field work helps bring Pauly's teaching to life. She's pioneering a graduate-level course on housing and homelessness with UVic anthropology professor Margo Matwychuk. Students will work directly on finding information and resources on housing and homelessness issues of interest to the community.

UVic researchers were awarded more than \$104 million in outside research grants and contracts in 2008/09—more than double the research support of five years ago.



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